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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The plural professional: How UN human rights experts construct their independence*

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Abstract

Independent experts are routinely appointed by international organisations for specific short-term assignments. Existing scholarship has studied their career trajectories, accumulation of resources, and mobility across occupational settings to explain their power and capacity to pursue their own agendas. However, it has neglected the fact that many transnational professionals not only move between professions but also practise them simultaneously. By using the example of the United Nations special rapporteur, an independent human rights expert, this article addresses this under-theorised feature by theorising them as plural professionals, or actors who practise multiple professions simultaneously. This multiple positioning in several professional settings at once can create tensions in how they approach their work. But, as I argue, it is also the source of their expert independence, rooted in a transnational social space connecting multiple professional identities, resources, and skills. Independence viewed through this lens is a socio-historical category which is made up of the combination of professional, biographical, and institutional resources as embodied and strategically mobilised by plural professionals. This argument builds on my original dataset of the professional biographies of 122 thematic special rapporteurs and 30 biographical interviews.

Keywords: expertise; global governance; human rights; sociology of professions; United Nations

Introduction

United Nations (UN) special rapporteurs appear to be unusual human rights actors in world politics. They enjoy similar immunities to diplomats and international civil servants at the UN but are unpaid and appointed for a fixed period of three or, if renewed, six years. They fulfil a fact-finding and monitoring function on a country or thematic human rights issue, with 46 thematic and 14 country mandates as of 2025. Institutionally known as 'special procedures', they grew out of a series of ad hoc UN human rights fact-finding missions in the 1960s and 1970s, and the first individual rapporteur was appointed on the human rights situation in Chile in 1979.[1] What is officially described as a three-month commitment per year is quickly revealed to be an additional full-time job. Many experts enter a setting in which diplomatic skills need to be quickly developed on the job.

* The article has been updated since original publication. A notice detailing the change has also been published.

[1] For insightful institutional histories of this position, see Elvira Domínguez Redondo, *In Defense of Politicization of Human Rights: The UN Special Procedures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Aoife Nolan, Rosa Freedman, and Thérèse Murphy (eds), *The United Nations Special Procedures System* (Leiden: Brill, 2017). On Chile, see Max Lesch, 'Contested facts: The politics and practice of international fact-finding missions', *International Studies Review*, 25:3 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad034.

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At the same time, special rapporteurs represent a familiar class of actors in international relations where independent expertise on global issues is in high demand.[2] Carraro analyses the independence of such actors in global governance through the politics of their appointment by states, produced through institutional group dynamics outside the control of states.[3] In Sending's work, however, independence of the international civil service is both 'self-stylization' and an authoritative claim over the international which 'is independent of procedural matters, vested in the capacities of the actor'.[4] For Barnett and Finnemore, the independence of international organisations is rooted in the embodiment of rational-legal authority and their control over expertise and information held by the professionals they employ.[5] These accounts of expertise highlight not only conceptual tensions between legal-rational and charismatic forms of authority that construct independence, but also the socio-historical specificity in which independence is produced within the bureaucratic structures of international organisations.

Acting in their personal capacity and on short-term assignments, UN special rapporteurs have an ambiguous positionality in the UN, especially compared to international civil servants.[6] A mapping of their career trajectories shows that they practise multiple occupations at the same time, a phenomenon described as 'polyoccupationalism'.[7] Existing scholarship on transnational professionals tends to neglect this in favour of theorising their mobility across occupational settings. This under-theorised characteristic of independent experts highlights the need for a different approach to expert independence.

To this end, I develop the concept of 'plural professional', bringing Bernard Lahire's sociology of the individual to bear on the study of expert bodies. By practising several professions at the same time, I show how over the course of their career, a plural professional can embody very different professional dispositions at the same time, as expressed in their skill sets and worldviews. This can create tensions, even contradictions in how they approach their work and independent status. For example, UN human rights experts come from professional settings that span academia, civil society advocacy, litigation, international organisations, diplomacy, and other professional fields such as medicine. This heterogeneous body can exercise a diverse set of strategies depending on the skills they master and believe to be the most effective ones. Paired with their ambiguous status at the UN, this allows them to construct their independence in a transnational social space.

Through this analysis, independence becomes a situated, socio-historical category which emerges through the combination of different types of biographical, professional, and institutional resources which 'plural professionals' mobilise. Social contexts interact with their plural professional identities, bringing to the fore different professional dispositions at various times while others remain dormant or are even annihilated. This explains why the constitution of independence among experts varies across contexts as different resources interplay in historically specific ways. This also influences how such experts experience their independence, ranging from individualist to collective and interconnected understandings, as something that is worked for, built through unorthodox coalitions across a diverse range of actors, or as being simultaneously criticised by conservative or progressive forces.

[2]Christina Boswell, 'The political functions of expert knowledge: Knowledge and legitimation in European Union immigration policy', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15:4 (2008), pp. 471–88; Ole Jacob Sending, *The Politics of Expertise: Competing for Authority in Global Governance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[3]Valentina Carraro, 'Electing the experts: Expertise and independence in the UN human rights treaty bodies', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:3 (2019), pp. 826–51.

[4]Sending, *The Politics of Expertise*, pp. 47 and 57.

[5]Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, 'The politics, power, and pathologies of international organizations', *International Organization*, 53:4 (1999), pp. 699–732.

[6]Thomas G. Weiss, Tatiana Carayannis, and Richard Jolly, 'The "third" United Nations', *Global Governance*, 15:1 (2009), pp. 123–42.

[7]Léonie Hénaut, Jennifer C. Lena, and Fabien Accominotti, 'Polyoccupationalism: Expertise stretch and status stretch in the postindustrial era', *American Sociological Review*, 88:5 (2023), pp. 872–900.

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This argument builds on my original dataset of the professional biographies of 122 thematic special rapporteurs appointed between 1979 and 2020, focusing on their nationalities, gender, multiple professional occupations, and education. The results of this prosopography are presented in a network analysis of plural professionals, tables and intertwined with accounts from 30 biographical interviews.[8] Biographical methods help retrace how special rapporteurs construct a transnational space of social action on human rights by combining resources from their professional backgrounds and the UN. This makes visible the links between a porous institutional realm and the broader social, professional, and cultural ties among transnational experts on human rights.

While Donnelly acknowledges their 'value' and 'aggressive' efforts, especially compared to the Human Rights Council,[9] there is no sociological analysis of this transnational human rights body yet. Recently, international law scholarship has paid more attention to the system of UN special procedures, analysing their contributions to international human rights law standards, methods of work, and institutional histories. This scholarship has also drawn attention to the role of state geopolitics and the increasing proliferation of mandates which potentially weakens the system.[10] While it provides an insightful analysis of the UN institutional environment that special rapporteurs operate in,[11] it focuses less on the professional social spaces outside the UN. As Freedman et al. note, 'relatively little is understood about [special procedures] outside the system'.[12] This article seeks to contribute to this empirical gap.

In the following, I develop the plural professional approach by transposing Bernard Lahire's work to the context of transnational professionals, followed by a discussion of my methodology and research strategy and the results of my prosopography, intertwining collective biographies with individual biographical trajectories as captured in interviews.

Understanding professional dispositions through Lahire's dispositionalist-contextualist sociology

Transnational professionals have multiple footings in national and transnational contexts and across occupational settings. Dezalay and Garth call transnational legal elites 'double agents', unpacking professions which tend to be portrayed as unitary with clearly delineated loyalties and interests.[13] Double agents are invested in several professional spaces with often quite different interests at stake: the world of law firms, universities, and politics. Wedel calls them 'flexians' as they move seamlessly between occupational settings while advancing their own agenda.[14] Such actors thrive in interstices and operate within close-knit professional networks which are built over the lifetime of a career.[15] Knowledge and resources flow between what Seabrooke and Henriksen call 'issue professionals', or actors who seek control over issues in a transnational space by acting as bridges between actors, drawing on career experience and networks rather than vocational training or their employer.[16]

[8] See Supplementary Materials for more details.

[9] Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 163–4.

[10] Rosa Freedman and Jacob Mchangama, 'Expanding or diluting human rights? The proliferation of United Nations special procedures mandates', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 38:1 (2016), pp. 164–93.

[11] See Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, *The Politics of Expertise in International Organizations* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[12] Freedman and Murphy (eds), *The United Nations Special Procedures System*, p. 5.

[13] Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, *Dealing in Virtue: International Commercial Arbitration and the Construction of a Transnational Legal Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[14] Janine R. Wedel, 'Rethinking corruption in an age of ambiguity', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 8:1 (2012), pp. 453–98.

[15] Leonard Seabrooke and Lasse Folke Henriksen (eds), *Professional Networks in Transnational Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 5, 12.

[16] Lasse Folke Henriksen and Leonard Seabrooke, 'Transnational organizing: Issue professionals in environmental sustainability networks', *Organization*, 23:5 (2016), pp.722–41 (p. 723).

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Scholarship in this tradition has uncovered patterned career trajectories to map resources, such as education, social networks, or other forms of distinction through biographical methods.[17] Collective bodies of transnational professionals are usually located in fields, networks, or around similar practices, in communities of practice[18] centred on shared values or as transnational guilds[19] with a sense of solidarity around their craft and knowledge. These conceptual tools have different trade-offs. Fields are structured spaces of social relations which exert a centripetal force on actors who are drawn in by its stakes and who have internalised the rules of the game in competing over resources with other actors. Networks foreground social connections between actors and highlight the power of brokers. Despite clear theoretical differences, these approaches share a commitment to analysing the power of transnational professionals beyond the state or organisations.

Moreover, transnational professionals are highly mobile and accumulate a variety of resources, social networks, and professional skills.[20] Seabrooke et al. have captured some of these aspects through the notions of 'identity switching' and 'revolving doors'.[21] They analyse how such actors develop the capacity to build relations and knowledge across these domains as leverage to increase their influence in a particular issue area.[22] This helps them explain actors' mobility between careers and of skills and knowledge, and 'multi-professional transnational interaction and its characteristics'.[23] Transnational professionals are often less institutionalised within an organisational structure, which offers them both 'limited organizational capacity but also more autonomy to engage selectively in making their own issue distinctions that are independent of formal mandates'.[24] This approach decouples the interests of an employing organisation or professional association from an actor to explain how elites reach consensus on policy knowledge and exert jurisdictional control over issues as they move between careers.

Tsingou advances the concept of club governance in her analysis of global financial rules, defined as 'held together by elite peer recognition, common and mutually reinforcing interests, and an ambition to provide global public goods in line with values its members consider honorable'.[25] Distinct from epistemic communities or a transnational class of elites, the club model shows how, based on a sense of solidarity and peer recognition, actors validate each other's skills and expertise and build common goals in line with their values. Operating in this transnational social space gives transnational financial actors more autonomy in their work.

The notion of 'plural professional' as I advance it here proposes a slightly different analysis. Often, transnational professionals practise several professions at the same time – and not necessarily harmoniously – which not only offer resources and networks but might also create tensions.

[17] See Mikkel Jarle Christensen, 'State Nobility in the Field of International Criminal Justice: Divergent Elites and the Contest to Control Power over Capital', *Social Forces*, 102:2 (2023), pp. 753–70); Didier Georgakakis and Jay Rowell (eds), *The Field of Eurocracy: Mapping EU Actors and Professionals* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); David M. McCourt, *The End of Engagement: America's China and Russia Experts and US Strategy since 1989* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[18] Maren Hofius 'Community at the border or the boundaries of community? The case of EU field diplomats', *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 939–67.

[19] Didier Bigo, 'Sociology of transnational guilds', *International Political Sociology*, 10:4 (2016), pp. 398–416.

[20] Yves Dezalay and Mikael Rask Madsen, 'In the "field" of transnational professionals: A post-Bourdieusian approach to transnational legal entrepreneurs', in Leonard Seabrooke and Lasse Folke Henriksen (eds), *Professional Networks in Transnational Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 25–38; Leonard Seabrooke and Eleni Tsingou, 'Revolving doors in international financial governance', *Global Networks*, 21:2 (2021), pp. 294–319.

[21] Leonard Seabrooke, 'Identity switching and transnational professionals', *International Political Sociology*, 8:3 (2014), pp. 335–7.

[22] Leonard Seabrooke, 'Epistemic arbitrage: Transnational professional knowledge in action', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 1:1 (2014), pp. 49–64.

[23] Leonard Seabrooke and Eleni Tsingou, 'Professional emergence on transnational issues: Linked ecologies on demographic change', *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 2:1 (2015), pp. 1–18 (p. 6).

[24] Ibid., p. 7.

[25] Eleni Tsingou, 'Club governance and the making of global financial rules', *Review of International Political Economy*, 22:2 (2015), pp. 225–56 (p. 226).

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I concur with Seabrooke and Tsingou that the transnational social space in which these actors operate provides both an opportunity for novel projects or alliances to emerge, and an obstacle due to its potential fragility 'since identity coherence, task allocation, and resources to fund work are all on a more insecure footing' if resourced poorly.[26] To understand how these resources are built and sustained, we need to attend to the multiple professional dispositions that these actors have acquired throughout their professional biographical trajectories.

Typically, the sociology of transnational professionals studies actors' professional backgrounds and education. My focus on multiple dispositions expands this analysis by considering the socio-historical and political context in which actors came of age, their representational dispositions, which explain what drives them, and how context and time shape the intensity and transformation of dispositions. The UN special rapporteur is an excellent illustration of these points. Their lack of full institutionalisation within the UN allows them to occupy an ambiguous position around the UN and their professional spaces from which they claim their independence. The 'multi-professional' characteristic is not merely one shared by the body as a whole but is embodied by each actor. The concept of the plural professional, which I will develop in the following, helps to capture the theoretical stakes of this empirical reality.

Lahire's dispositionalist-contextualist sociology offers insights into how the individual and the collective relate, here transposed to the context of transnational professionals. He argues that any actor's plural or singular character is rooted in specific social conditions. It is exceptional to find conditions in which only one singular disposition is displayed.[27] By centring on individuals, Lahire analyses how biographical trajectories are made up of diverse contexts of socialisation which deposit multiple dispositions in individuals, combining 'internal (dispositional) and external (contextual) constraints that weigh permanently on their actions, feelings or thoughts'.[28] Actors develop a repertoire of actions which are adjusted to specific contexts.[29] To illustrate this point, over time UN special rapporteurs have constructed a new context of socialisation for actors who enter into this space and have generated forms of social action outside their familiar professional repertoires. Many special rapporteurs find themselves practising 'legal diplomacy', intertwining legal and political practices by drawing on their legal expertise and building diplomatic relations with actors such as civil society or state representatives.[30] As a former special rapporteur noted: 'You don't write a report for the special procedure in the way you would write for Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch. You're a lot more diplomatic, you can be very precise and accurate, and still be diplomatic.'[31]

This creates a more complex understanding of individuals that cannot be subsumed into one homogeneous collective, understood for example as an elite, specified by their social class or professional identity. Instead of 'aggregates, groups, organizations, fields, interaction frameworks' as the central units, Lahire reclaims a sociology of the individual which is usually subordinate to such units.[32] He defines an individual 'sociologically by the multiplicity and complexity of his/her socializing experiences'.[33] These experiences can be harmonious or contradictory, more or less lasting and intense, and varying in degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity. An individual is made up

[26] Seabrooke and Tsingou, 'Professional emergence on transnational issues', p. 5.

[27] Bernard Lahire, *The Plural Actor* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 18.

[28] Bernard Lahire, 'Sociological biography and socialisation process: A dispositionalist-contextualist conception', *Contemporary Social Science*, 14:3-4 (2019), pp.379–93 (p. 379).

[29] Ibid.

[30] Mikael Rask Madsen, 'Legal diplomacy: Law, politics and the genesis of postwar European human rights', in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ed.), *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 62–82; see also Sending, *The Politics of Expertise*, p. 42.

[31] Personal interview, 2019.

[32] Bernard Lahire, 'Sociology at the individual level, psychologies and neurosciences', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 23:1 (2020), pp. 52–71 (p. 53).

[33] Ibid., p. 55.

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of their 'heritage of dispositions', which can be observed empirically through behaviours and their expressed beliefs.[34] Individuals are 'products of pluriform social processes'.[35] He calls this the 'plural actor', which inspires the concept of the plural professional developed in this article.

This sociology of the social world is attuned to variations, not only between individuals and the kinds of profiles they inhabit, but also within an individual. For example, human rights actors often express both saviourist and defeatist understandings of their work which are in clear tension. They are simultaneously driven by humanitarianism and the belief in their capacity to help victims and express deep frustrations with the structural conditions of international diplomacy which stifle their ability to get anything done. A sociology at the level of the individual avoids the imposition of one overarching principle on all actors turning them into a collective which supposedly shares a habitus, a set of behaviours or values.

Dispositions as such cannot be observed but are expressed in practices, behaviours, social interactions, or representations once they become activated in specific contexts.[36] Throughout their lives, individuals pass through numerous institutions, social networks, or fields. Lahire distinguishes between dispositions to act and dispositions to believe, which come in multitudes.[37] Gaps between such dispositions produce 'illusions, frustrations, feelings of guilt',[38] which can explain possible tensions or contradictions in actors' representations and practices. Dispositions are also socio-historical phenomena which could 'gradually tone down' if not actualised, or even be annihilated through counter-socialisation.[39] For example, human rights actors who came of age during an era of transition to democracy from military dictatorships or totalitarian regimes like the USSR note this profound effect on their dispositions of belief.

Nevertheless, my analysis of a body of human rights experts at the UN, who come together under the title of 'special rapporteur', points to some shared patterns and often pre-existing connections between these actors. These connections within a broader social space outside the bureaucratic structure of the UN arise, for example, through academic or professional collaborations on similar issue areas, in relations of mentorship, through national human rights commissions, or by occupying high positions in their respective states. Such links tend to be stronger if they are forged in academic spaces or through a history of human rights advocacy or litigation in important NGOs or organisations.

The notion of the plural professional seeks to capture actors' multipositionality through an emphasis on the multiple dispositions that they embody. This offers a different dimension to Dezalay and Garth's prominent field theoretical analysis of lawyers as 'double agents' who have one foot in their national setting while exercising a transnational, often imperial, project at the same time. Lahire provides a critical engagement with field theory, treating it as a historical and social concept in which actors participate over the long term. However, fields do not cover 'all possible cases of relevant contexts of action'.[40] Actors spend a considerable amount of time outside fields, which in turn influences their understandings of in-field practices. They move 'between the field in which they are producers, the fields in which they are simple consumer-spectators and the multiple situations that cannot be described as fields'.[41] Given the fixed-term nature of the mandates of

[34]Ibid., p. 56.

[35]Bernard Lahire, 'From the habitus to an individual heritage of dispositions: Towards a sociology at the level of the individual', *Poetics*, 31:5–6 (2003), pp.329–55 (p. 329).

[36]Ibid., p. 332. See also Emma McCluskey, 'Bourdieu the ethnographer: Grounding the habitus of the "far-right" voter', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 59:1 (2024), pp. 23–46.

[37]Lahire, 'From the habitus', p. 336.

[38]Ibid., p. 337.

[39]Ibid., p. 335.

[40]Lahire, 'Sociological biography and socialisation process', p. 447.

[41]Bernard Lahire, 'The limits of the field: Elements for a theory of the social differentiation of activites', in Mathieu Hilgers and Eric Mangez (eds), *Bourdieu's Theory of Social Fields: Concepts and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 62–101 (p. 75).

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special rapporteurs, and their varying degrees of involvement, we cannot speak of a unifying field of special rapporteurs.

The plural professional adds new dimensions to the study of transnational professionals. The concept helps unpack skills, practices, and representations of the self and social world in embodied attributes that become activitated in particular socio-historical contexts. These dispositions to act and to believe are always multiple, as are the socialising contexts in which they are forged, not necessarily harmonious, and at times in conflict with each other. Some remain dormant, change, or can be annihilated. They can be captured in biographical interviews through questions about skills acquired in different career settings, daily strategies and interactions, what particular appointments or achievements meant to the professionals, and their motivation for working on human rights issues. In their responses, interviewees often acknowledge their plural professional identity, by describing their professional trajectories as unfolding 'in between' different institutional spaces, or as never fully being part of something, or as engaging in parallel trajectories. All express a sense of fatigue when exercising their mandates, which end up being full-time jobs in addition to their other professional and personal commitments.

This concept allows the connection of two literature strands. First, it furthers International Relations (IR) scholarship on transnational human rights advocacy and lawmaking.[42] This research covers a wide range of empirical and theoretical ground, analysing how international law and authority become transformed through key actors at the intersection of national and international scales, how institutional mechanisms are deployed strategically and creatively by actors to innovate international law, and how practices of international law have evolved over time. This paper goes a step further by providing a systematic biographical analysis of human rights actors, developing a sociological footing for research in this vein. Second, it advances socio-legal scholarship on international lawyers and human rights.[43] This body of scholarship focuses on regional institutional actors such as the European Union or courts, or professionally cohesive actors such as international lawyers or judges.[44] Special rapporteurs are an interesting case as they share neither one cohesive professional trajectory nor clear institutional investments. Vauchez's 'weak fields' approach comes closest to this analysis. He employs Bourdieusian field theory to make visible struggles between actors, their biographical and professional trajectories, and other forms of capital in transnational settings.[45] He theorises transnational fields as 'weak fields', foregrounding the 'perennially hybrid structure' created by their 'extensive interdependence and overlap of transnational settings with its neighboring fields'.[46] However, by building on Lahire, I demonstrate the limitations of field thinking in analysing the career trajectories of human rights actors due their varying investments in fields.

[42]Tanja Aalberts and Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, *The Changing Practices of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jason Sharman, *Vigilantes beyond Borders: NGOs as Enforcers of International Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022); Nina Reiners, 'The power of interpersonal relationships: A socio-legal approach to international institutions and human rights advocacy', *Review of International Studies*, 50:2 (2024), pp. 252–70.

[43]Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, 'Droits de l'homme et philanthropie hégémonique', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 121–2 (1998), pp. 23–41; Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, *The Internationalization of Palace Wars: Lawyers, Economists, and the Contest to Transform Latin American States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Yves Dezalay and Bryant Garth, 'From the Cold War to Kosovo: The rise and renewal of the field of international human rights', *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 2:1 (2006), pp. 231–55; Antoine Vauchez, *Brokering Europe: Euro-Lawyers and the Making of a Transnational Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Mikael Rask Madsen, 'Reflexivity and the construction of the international object: The case of human rights', *International Political Sociology*, 5:3 (2011), pp. 259–75.

[44]Georgakakis and Rowell (2013); Niilo Kauppi and Mikael Rask Madsen (eds), *Transnational Power Elites: The New Professionals of Governance, Law and Security* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[45]Antoine Vauchez, 'Interstitial power in field of limited statehood: Introducing a "weak field" approach to the study of transnational settings', *International Political Sociology*, 5:3 (2011), pp. 340–5.

[46]Ibid., p. 342.

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Notes on methodology: Capturing dispositions through biographical methods

In order to attend to the multiple dispositions of the plural professional, this article combines collective biographical analysis, or prosopography, with 30 biographical interviews. Biographical methods help capture multiple socialisation frameworks embodied by individuals. Based on an original dataset, a prosopography of 122 thematic special rapporteurs appointed between 1979 and 2020 identifies general patterns, social relations, shared characteristics, and differences between these actors. It provides insights into how social spaces have been formed, loosely institutionalised, and transformed over time.[47] My prosopography focuses on education, nationalities, diversity profiles, professional trajectories, and cultural capital such as prizes and membership in prestigious committees (see Supplementary Materials). This is the first dataset on the professional biographies of thematic UN special rapporteurs which scholars can build on to generate new insights on the politics of the appointment of independent experts, the constitution and transformation of expert bodies and valued expertise, and the effectiveness of UN human rights mechanisms.

This structural analysis shows that all special rapporteurs are plural professionals. They include lawyers, with the majority specialising in international human rights lawy, academics in human rights law or international law, professionals of advocacy from the world of NGOs, experts and advisors for international organisations, and to a lesser extent state diplomats, medical doctors, judges, or the UN bureaucracy. About three-quarters have studied law, one-quarter did not. Given their multiple professional duties, and as they normally continue in their main jobs since the UN mandate is unpaid, the intensity of investment in the position of special rapporteur varies and is limited to three or six years. This prosopography offers insights into the multiple professional worlds and resources special rapporteurs draw on to increase the effectiveness of their work, as UN financial and institutional sources are minimal. At the same time, this UN role can offer significant symbolic rewards. To offer a recent example, former special rapporteur on arbitrary killings Agnès Callamard, who served in this capacity between 2017 and 2021, became secretary general of Amnesty International after her appointment. Previously she worked as director of the Columbia University Global Freedom of Expression project and other NGOs.

I combined this prosopography with 30 biographical interviews to analyse special rapporteurs' own understandings of this space of social action, their careers, and the development and adjustment of skill sets as they entered new professional spheres. Interviews were conducted online, in two periods, from 2019 to 2020 and in 2024, and typically lasted between one and two hours. The questions were devised on the basis of publicly available data, such as professional websites and their application forms for the position as special rapporteurs. Questions would begin with enquiring about their choice to study a particular subject, which prompted reflections on their family background as well as the broader political context in which they came of age. Subsequent questions followed their professional trajectories and enquired about reasons for career moves and what skills they acquired and were able to use in various professional settings. This lay the groundwork for detailed questions on their motivation to become special rapporteur, how they approached their mandate and the opportunities and challenges presented to them, how they understood their independence, and how they engaged with the broader space of UN human rights. Biographical interviews add nuance to a prosopography, teasing out representations, meaning making, and tensions in actors' trajectories. It helps retrace how multiple dispositions have been built over time and translated into actors' practices and representations. Prosopographical patterns and individual narratives of biographical trajectories are thus put into dialogue with each other, so as not to lose sight of individual nuances or contradictions in a patterned analysis, or on the contrary, of shared characteristics and connections between a group of actors.[48]

[47] Donald Broady, 'French prosopography: Definition and suggested readings', *Poetics*, 30:5–6 (2002), pp. 381–5.

[48] The notion of 'intertwined biographies' as developed by Yves Dezalay is central in this regard. See Didier Bigo and Antonin Cohen, 'Investigating the internationalisation of state nobility: A reflexive turn to double game strategies. An interview with Yves Dezalay', *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences*, 1:1 (2020), pp. 103–16 (p. 105).

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Table 1. Diversity: Gender and geographical origins by UN geographical groups (1979–2020).

	Female	Male	Total
Africa	10	21	31
Asia/Pacific	10	12	22
Eastern Europe	5	1	6
Latin America/Caribbean	7	16	23
Western Europe/Other	14	26	40
Total	46	76	122

Biographical methods are employed by a rich scholarly tradition in history, sociology, socio-legal studies, and political science to study how individual trajectories are entwined with collective trajectories in a transnational social space.[49] Individual biographies can be employed as powerful, personified tools to construct a self-representational narrative of an otherwise-disembodied institution. At the same time, as Beerli notes, biographical interviews are a distinct entry point to understand the inner dynamics of international organisations and field dynamics of transnational actors, which often disrupt dominant framings or carefully crafted self-representational discourses.[50] The emphasis is usually on shared patterns in the 'construction of a collective biography'.[51] In my analysis of the plural professional and in putting prosopography in dialogue with biographical interviews, I centre multiple dispositions, which can conflict with each other. To conduct such an analysis, a predefined universe needs to be constructed which is then usually represented in Bourdieusian fields, social networks, or career trajectories. In this case, the actors around the title of thematic special rapporteur have been selected. This boundary specification is a key issue.[52] This is not merely a methodological question of concern to the researcher but can be a contentious issue for special rapporteurs themselves. As will become apparent, for some, especially those who were chosen before the appointment structure was changed to allow people to apply, the position is an honour which is conferred. I have also included actors who acted in a slightly different capacity, under the title of independent expert or special representative to the Secretary-General before their mandates were transformed into the title of special rapporteur, as they are 'officially' listed under special procedures. The former tends to be seen as subordinate to the special rapporteur title, and mandate-holders almost always seek a change towards this title, whereas the latter has more powers in reporting directly to the Secretary-General.

A prosopography of UN special rapporteurs: Patterns and differences

Who are special rapporteurs? In terms of diversity, Table 1 points to male dominance, corroborated in interviews with older special rapporteurs who saw this position as 'an old boys' club', especially in

[49] Daniel Krcmaric, Stephen C. Nelson, and Andrew Roberts, 'Studying leaders and elites: The personal biography approach', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23:1 (2020), pp. 133–51; Tsingou, 'Club governance and the making of global financial rules', p. 233; Lasse Folke Henriksen, Leonard Seabrooke, and Kevin L. Young, 'Intellectual rivalry in American economics: Intergenerational social cohesion and the rise of the Chicago School', *Socio-economic Review*, 20:3 (2022), pp. 989–1013; Pedro Araujo, Eric Davoine, and Pierre-Yves Donzé, 'Banking elites and the transformation of capitalism in Switzerland: A prosopographic analysis (1890–2020)', *Business History*, 66:7 (2024), pp. 1862–87.

[50] Monique Beerli, 'Biographic interviews', in Fanny Badache, Leah R. Kimber, and Lucile Maertens (eds), *International Organizations and Research Methods* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023), pp. 94–101.

[51] Jacob Aagaard Lunding, Christoph Houman Ellersgaard, and Anton Grau Larsen, 'The craft of elite prosopography', in François Denord, Mikael Palme, and Bertrand Réau (eds) *Researching Elites and Power: Theory, Methods, Analyses* (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 57–70 (p. 58).

[52] Lunding et al., 'The craft of elite prosopography', identify three ways to choose actors for elite prosopographies: the first is a positional approach which chooses actors from the top of hierarchies where they accumulate significant resources that merit their inclusion; a second approach is centred on reputation, which relies on actors themselves to identify who merits inclusion; and third, a decisional approach which centres on actors that have significant political decision-making power.

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its early days. The Western Europe/other bloc is most dominant, while experts from Eastern Europe are under-represented. However, this 'official' representation of diversity from the perspective of UN geographical groups hides that many special rapporteurs hold dual nationality and does not offer a full picture of national and geographical diversity.

To unpack this body of experts further, a collective biography, juxtaposed with biographical narratives, identifies shared patterns and differences pertaining to professional occupation, education, and prestige. It reveals the professional resources, skills, and dispositions that these actors mobilise outside the institutional setting of the UN. Such resources are seen by some as complementary, arguing for more UN support, while for others accumulating resources outside UN institutional settings is key for building their independence from the UN bureaucracy. I will expand on this point in a separate section.

The following example of what drove two actors to become UN special rapporteurs illustrates the web of relations such actors are embedded in to be either nominated or 'asked to do it'. Both are primarily human rights law academics, but with experience of work in international organisations and human rights litigation, while representing an older and newer generation of special rapporteurs. Their footing in multiple professional worlds was a clear asset towards their appointment.

> Special rapporteur 1:
>
> My story is not very sort of prosaic … I worked on the African system and then I got the opportunity to work a little bit for Mary Robinson and … then I spoke to the South African government, I was Dean of Law at the time, when I asked them if they would consider nominating me for a treaty body … it was still a time of faxes, so they sent me a fax with the different treaty bodies and also at the bottom special procedures. […] And I thought, well, the chances are, to put it very bluntly a white Afrikaans South African being appointed, are zero, so might as well just say yes. And I ticked the box and the South African Mission I believe did some lobbying […] I had very little idea of the workload […] I was in Washington staying in a place next to Manfred Nowak [a special rapporteur] at the time, we were teaching in the same course. And so I knocked at his door late at night and said: 'How much work is this?' It was a Thursday and they were going to decide on the Friday. So, he said, 'it was too late anyway, you can't pull out now'.[53]

> Special rapporteur 2:
>
> Well, this is going to sound a bit strange, but it's essentially because some people asked me to do it. Some colleagues were in different delegations at the Human Rights Council, or were following on these issues … they told me … sometimes we have difficulty filling in some positions with young experts who you know … are dynamic and so forth. So, there's been also a kind of a change in the profile the people they were looking at. So, I guess … they're looking more at people who have a background in human rights and who have, you know, experience and academic expertise and less … I guess there was a time when there were older former ministers or former ambassadors […], very important people in policy jobs. … So basically, I got a few calls where people were telling me you should apply and I said, well no, I'm too young … They said no, on the contrary, we need people who are dynamic … So, I applied and it worked.[54]

Both emphasise their expertise and reputation among key actors, while displaying no apparent intention of their own to apply for a position. They also point to a shared social space with incumbent or former special rapporteurs, which I will locate in more detail in the following section.

[53] Personal interview, 2020.
[54] Personal interview, 2020.

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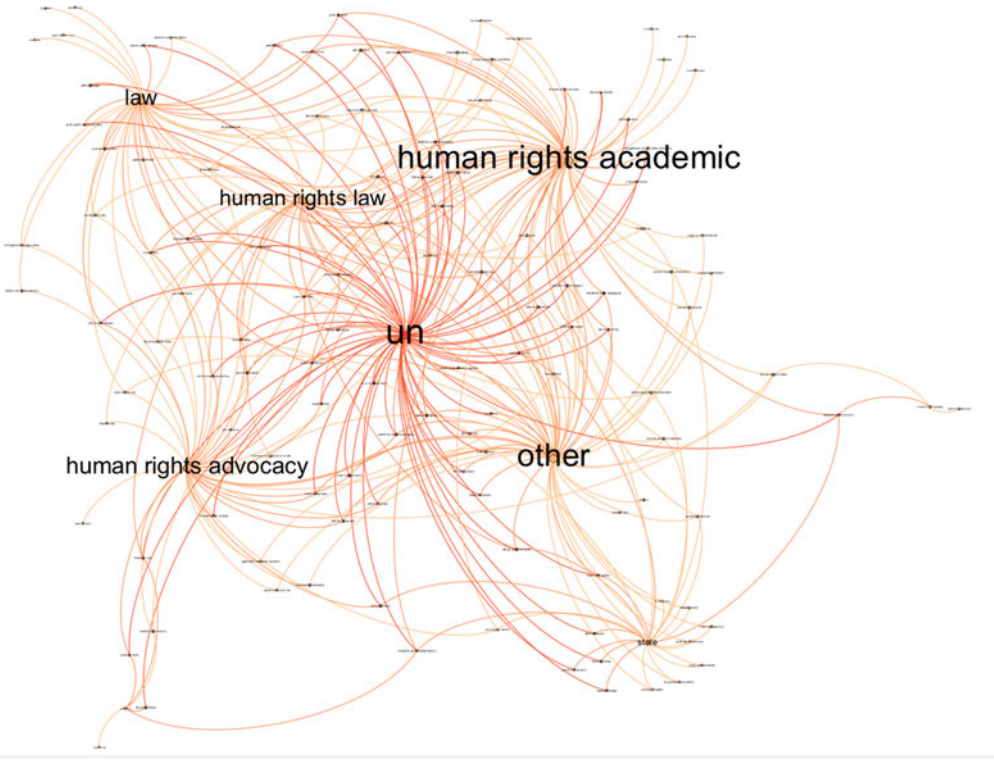


Figure 1. Special rapporteurs as plural professionals: networks of occupation (1979–2020).

Patterns in multiple professional occupations

Special rapporteurs are connected in a transnational social space that links professional occupations through their multiple footings. Figure 1 depicts all 122 thematic special rapporteurs between 1979 and 2020 as plural professionals in a simple network visualisation using the software gephi, which makes visible networks and connections between nodal points. These spatial visualisations are created from my dataset (see Supplementary Materials, Figure 4), which documents the professional profiles of all special rapporteurs over time until their appointments. Positions at the UN (other than special rapporteur mandates) appear at the centre of the network, connected to the social worlds of human rights law, academia, state law, human rights advocacy, and other forms of expertise. The font size of the network labels (law, human rights law, human rights advocacy, human rights academic, un, other, state) is proportionate to the number of connections to the nodes. The small nodes are the names of UN special rapporteurs.

To visualise how the special rapporteur position has become transformed through new professional occupations over time, Table 2 captures the main occupations held at the time of appointment for each five-year period.

Four broad types of professional profiles can be identified: lawyers or state representatives (such as supreme court justices, members of the bar, former ministers, and politicians), human rights academics (who initially specialised in international law but later became academics of human rights law as this discipline was established as separate from law), professionals in human rights advocacy (a group of people heading human rights NGOs or national human rights centres), and finally other experts with subject-specific knowledge (such as medical doctors). It shows a broadening of profiles over time, which mirrors the development of human rights law as an academic discipline,

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Table 2. Main occupation at time of appointment.

Occupation	State lawyer/representative	Human rights academic	Human rights activist	Other expert
1978–84	2	0	0	0
1985–9	2	0	0	0
1990–4	3	2	1	1
1995–9	3	0	1	1
2000–4	3	4	2	7
2005–9	2	5	1	5
2010–14	8	10	6	6
2015–20	6	17	14	10
Total	29	38	25	30

the professionalisation of human rights advocacy,[55] and the growth of specialised mandates in the UN human rights system, such as on leprosy or water.

This footing in multiple professions has forged a number of dispositions as manifested in concrete skills and perceptions of this professional plurality. Taken together, the skill set spans academic competencies, legal knowledge, litigation, the capacity to engage with a variety of audiences and specifically with victims of human rights violations, diplomatic skills, knowledge of the UN system, and managerial skills. In the UN setting, these skills often become blended, requiring special rapporteurs to practise 'legal diplomacy'. This can take many forms, and most mention that they acquire diplomatic skills on the job upon their appointment.[56] In some instances, legal diplomacy means practising secret diplomacy to solve individual cases in closed-door meetings, something that would have been unimaginable in a different professional context for one rapporteur:

> you'd be surprised with who we've been talking sometimes […] we're very careful not to close doors […] If you look at the types of cases that we've clarified recently. I never thought we would be talking to some of these actors.[57]

Others use reports to craft what is in their view a balanced legal analysis with specific state actors in mind. This is a central skill in negotiating access to places of detention and prisons. For example, former special rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights Fionnuala Ní Aoláin negotiated access to Guantánamo Bay during her technical visit to the United States in June 2023, a historic first for a UN human rights expert.[58] Another example is former special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer, who used his decade-long field experience during his work for the International Committee of the Red Cross to negotiate restricted access to rebel-held prisons in eastern Ukraine during his visit in 2018. Having negotiated access at checkpoints and in prisons numerous times has left him 'prepared' and with 'a good sense of security'.[59] He contrasts this with an academic disposition 'with no field background', which he embodies too. For Ní Aoláin, constructive engagement and

[55] See also Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, 'Professionalizing protest: Scientific capital and advocacy in trade politics', *International Political Sociology*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 233–55.

[56] At the same time, it is worth noting that some enter the system equipped with diplomatic skills, having worked as diplomats or civil servants prior to academic appointments. While drawing on these skills comes naturally to them, they are obliged to develop relations with civil society and NGOs who provide key support to mandates.

[57] Personal interview, 2020.

[58] United Nations, 'Expert welcomes historic visit to United States and Guantánamo detention facility and affirms rights of victims of terrorism and victims of counter-terrorism', press release (26 June 2023); available at: {https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/06/expert-welcomes-historic-visit-united-states-and-guantanamo-detention}.

[59] Personal interview, 2019.

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relationships with key actors in the global counterterrorism structure was an intentional strategy to increase the effectiveness of the mandate.[60]

Another dimension of legal diplomacy concerns victims and their perception of UN special rapporteurs as official UN representatives. One rapporteur noted that they have clothes they only wear at the UN for two reasons: 'You need to show respect' to the officials who themselves are dressed very formally.[61] But even in meetings with victims, they 'expect us to be the UN and embody some form of formalism'.[62] Another special rapporteur similarly reflects on this perceived representativity but has a less optimistic view as 'special rapporteurs are relatively irrelevant to most people's lives'.[63] They explains this as follows:

> The danger is that you walk in, what they see is the UN badge […] and they think that that badge protects them. And it doesn't. […] And so that's a real challenge because you brought attention to them in a regime that doesn't want attention brought to it. […] But that is an enormous burden in doing this work. Because you cannot offer your interlocutors any protection once you leave the state.[64]

These narratives are also representative of the vastly under-resourced office that supports the work of the special rapporteur. Many refer to the mandates as a 'fig leaf', with governments 'happy to set this position up, but then to provide no resources and so, nominally something is done, but in reality nothing can be done'.[65] From this starting point, special rapporteurs are compelled to draw on resources outside the UN.

Many special rapporteurs are aware of their plural professional identities. They capture this in different ways, as being located 'in between' professional worlds, never fully institutionalised, or as following 'parallel trajectories'. One former special rapporteur described his experience in academia and working as a director of a national human rights institute as 'worlds that do not share much with each other'.[66] Nonetheless, experiences in both provided necessary skills to approach the mandate. This notion of parallel, simultaneous trajectories adds a different dimension to Wedel's 'flexians' who, in her usage, operate in interstitial spaces between professional and organisational settings. Rather than being a seamless move, the notion of plural professional shows that it takes significant labour to acquire the necessary skills and develop strategies in new professional settings.

University education, social movements, and political transformations

The educational backgrounds of special rapporteurs showcase not only their subject expertise but also the broader context in which their education took place, such as the effects of family backgrounds, changing political contexts, and involvement in social movements. Table 3 summarises the type of education acquired by 116 of the 122 experts who had public information on their educational background.

While this data underlines the importance of legal training, it also reveals that a quarter of thematic special rapporteurs do not have any legal training. Almost one-third hold a research doctorate while over 40 per cent hold either LLB/LLM degrees, a JD, or a master's in law. This distinction between lawyers and non-lawyers can be quite meaningful in terms of the perceived status such experts enjoy. One former special rapporteur without legal training had the impression

[60] Alvina Hoffmann, 'Counter-terrorism and human rights at the UN Security Council: Blurring boundaries in a social space', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:3 (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae054}.

[61] Personal interview, 2024. See also Ann Towns, 'Gendered labor: Appearance management and the unequal extraction of effort and time among ambassadors', *Cooperation and Conflict*, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367241251628}.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Personal interview, 2019.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Personal interview, 2019.

[66] Personal interview, 2024.

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Table 3. Legal education by type of degree.

	Number
Research doctorate in law	38
Bachelor and Master's degrees in law	33
JD (professional degree in law, professional doctorate)	13
Master's in law (without prior law degree)	2
None	30
Total	116

that the UN setting only respected international law, while his non-legal disciplines were 'barely relevant'. In turn, as he noted, some lawyers felt empowered to speak on behalf of the whole body of special rapporteurs as 'we lawyers'. This points to a tension within this expert body, where some pursue multiple appointments to different mandates by virtue of their universal human rights expertise whereas others see themselves as dedicated to a particular theme.

Biographical interviews allowed me to contextualise university education during formative years. Questions about choosing a particular subject, usually law, invited reflections on the broader context in which their time at university unfolded. Some connected their choice of subject to their family: a parent practised law, sometimes in their own practice, and the special rapporteur-to-be observed them in their professional setting. For others, choosing law was connected to fighting for social justice. For example, special rapporteurs who studied in Latin America,[67] Africa, Asia, or the former Soviet Union often noted that their education coincided with a transition from military dictatorships or totalitarian regimes towards democracy, which created some openings for human rights law education.[68] A selection of biographical trajectories below illustrates these broader points.

Gay McDougall's biography reflects how early expertise in human rights law emerged out of involvement in rights struggles. As a Black American woman born in 1947 in Atlanta, she grew up during segregation and became the first Black student to attend Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia. She was also part of the US civil rights movement, fighting for the rights of African Americans, 'the fight that [she] knew of'.[69] When this fight reached 'the end of its arc', she became involved with the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa through her organisation. This experience led her to pursue an LLM in international human rights law at the London School of Economics. As she notes, this was a subject which was 'not taught in many places at all in the US at that time, and that sort of propelled me into the Southern African Struggle because all of the people involved in the liberation movement were headquartered in London at the time'.[70] Through this, she began working directly with lawyers in South Africa and Namibia to free political prisoners. When she then headed the International Human Rights Law Group, since 2003 known as Global Rights, she used what she learned from her involvement in the South African movement to shape the work of this organisation.

Another former special rapporteur, Ariel Dulitzky, worked with Gay McDougall between 1999 and 2001. He emphasised how she shaped his thinking, teaching him how to articulate the same

[67] Dezalay and Garth, 'From the Cold War to Kosovo'.

[68] See also Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and the Politics of Global Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). However, this account is mostly focused on the end of the Cold War, the role of the United States, and international institutions such as the World Bank. Special rapporteurs and their biographies offer a more heterogeneous reading of transitions towards democracies and their own commitments towards rights, justice, and pro-democracy movements.

[69] Personal interview, 2020.

[70] Ibid.

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message for different audiences.[71] Dulitzky studied law in Argentina in the 1980s, as part of the first year after the country returned to democracy. The law curriculum had just changed, with human rights law becoming mandatory. Human rights law at the time was taught from the perspective of public international law, constitutional law, administrative law, and criminal law, a diverse approach that also combined the philosophy of human rights. He recalls 15 classmates from this time, all of whom ended up specialising in international human rights law and working for regional or international organisations. During their education, they were thrust into a period in which a democratic society was rebuilt and accountability for past crimes sought in truth commissions and trials through the language of rights and law. This filled a generational gap of 7 to 10 years, as people engaged in human rights work had been killed, disappeared, or exiled. For Dulitzky, these developments were also closely linked to his family biography, as two of his mother's cousins were disappeared by the regime, inspiring his commitment to human rights. He served on the Working Group on Disappearances between 2010 and 2017.

Similarly, Magdalena Sepúlveda grew up during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. Her first year studying law coincided with the country's transition to democracy. Some of her family lived in exile, and from a young age she was actively engaged in social justice issues.[72] For her, the main challenges during Chile's transition to democracy were closely linked to economic inequality and poverty. These issues became the focus of her mandate from 2008 to 2014. Her interest in economic and social rights led her to pursue a PhD in Spain and the Netherlands, where she collaborated with leading experts in these fields.

Others mention the influence of a parent on their choice of career. Pakistani human rights lawyers and sisters Asma Jahangir and Hina Jilani credit their father's commitment to law and democracy in inspiring a sense of the importance of law.[73] Growing up in the context of military dictatorship, their father, a politician, had often been in court and sent to prison due to various statements, which familiarised them with the court system even before they became lawyers. Asma Jahangir, then known as Asma Jilani, filed a watershed case against the Government of Punjab and later appealed to the Supreme Court in 1972 for the release of her father, which paved the way towards democracy in Pakistan, all before she had begun her legal studies. Combined with this family background and deep familiarity with the courts, the sisters went on to become high-profile figures in the fight for human rights regionally and internationally, becoming involved in the women's rights movement and founding their own legal practice for women.

In a different context, Nigerian former special rapporteur Obiora Chiendu Okafor also comes from a family of lawyers. His father, whom he described as a good lawyer, was engaged in labour activism and pro-democracy politics; he helped his son gain legal skills and took him to court with him.[74] This inspired an early interest in law. His legal education took place in a context of struggle against military rule in Nigeria. He became part of the student movement, provided legal advice, and chaired the constitution review committee.

Education in human rights as a process of socialisation and counter-socialisation played a crucial role in the biography of Henrikas Mickevičius. He grew up in the Soviet Union, where he was appointed the youngest judge in Lithuania in the 1980s. He describes having a feeling that something 'was not right' during the final year of his legal studies and when working as a judge.[75] A trip to Western Germany in 1989 had opened his eyes to 'how he had been lied to'.[76] He became convinced that what happened to him and his generation should not repeat itself. As the Soviet Union fell apart, he looked into opportunities to re-educate himself in a Western university, learning about human rights at the Central European University in 1992 and later on

[71] Personal interview, 2024.
[72] Personal interview, 2024.
[73] Personal interview, 2024.
[74] Personal interview, 2024.
[75] Personal interview, 2024.
[76] Personal interview, 2024.

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a scholarship in the USA. He became, in his own words, a 'fanatic of human rights' and 'didn't see any other alternative' than to work as a human rights lawyer and activist and to defend human dignity.[77] 'After discovering human rights and human rights law', he notes, 'I did not see myself as lawyering in any of the other areas, such as, e.g., commercial law or criminal law, anymore. I also felt the need to engage in human rights work in ways and forms other than lawyering.'[78] This narration of Mickevičius's educational background is a vivid demonstration of Lahire's description of counter-socialisation processes, in this case self-led, which can annihilate existing dispositions.

Prestige and hierarchies within the expert body

These biographical patterns and differences create an internal differentiation within the body of special rapporteurs, with varieties in distinction, reputation, and investment in the system as a whole, a view shared by prominent voices in the system. As twice former special rapporteur Philip Alston noted:

> In the totality, there is a very impressive bunch of people who are rapporteurs at any given time. And even if it's only 10 who are really making a big difference, those 10 taken together are a very impressive set of actors. And the advantage is that the cast of characters changes but renews, so it's not reliant upon any one of them, you don't say 'so and so has retired so now it's not gonna be as effective'. You're looking around to see who the new stars will be.[79]

An analysis of their cultural capital, such as international prizes, honorary doctorates, national titles, or a knighthood, reveals their international and cross-professional recognition as actors with prestige (see Supplementary Materials, Figure 1). For example, former special rapporteur Asma Jahangir was awarded 14 international prizes. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, as were special rapporteurs Frank La Rue in 2004 and James Anaya in 2014. In an interview, former director of the UN Human Rights Division and twice former special rapporteur Van Boven notes: 'The one I would single out as the most impressive rapporteur, was I think Asma Jahangir from Pakistan. She was really remarkable in her broad vision and in her independence and impartiality.'[80] Van Boven is a key UN institutional figure with deep roots in the advocacy world who profoundly shaped the development of the special rapporteur system during his tenure as director of the Human Rights Division between 1977 and 1982.[81]

Another form of differentiation between special rapporteurs are multiple appointments within the system. Seven special rapporteurs have been appointed more than once to at least one thematic mandate (see Supplementary Materials, Figure 2). This can highlight both their high standing among civil society actors within UN structures, but also, as some have observed, a perception that such actors see themselves as speaking universally for human rights due to their legal expertise and therefore seek multiple appointments. In the interviews, rapporteurs sometimes construct distinct 'types' that are attracted to the role: experts dedicated to the issue area, experts that see themselves as spokespersons of the universal, or actors that seek to boost their careers. There is an (implicit) understanding that some actors have more noble agendas than others in pursing their mandates and that some are more capable than others of resisting attempts by state actors or NGOs to exert influence on them.

Another marker of distinction used by some special rapporteurs is the change of appointment process. During the 2005 reform process, the Commission on Human Rights was replaced by

[77] Ibid.
[78] Personal interview, 2025.
[79] Personal interview, 2020.
[80] Personal interview, 2020.
[81] Theo van Boven, *People Matter: Views on International Human Rights Policy* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1982).

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the Human Rights Council. This also changed the appointment procedure. Before, the chair of the Commission on Human Rights, a state ambassador, appointed special rapporteurs, showing a much looser appointment structure reliant on existing social relations, friendships, personal recommendations, and cultural capital. In many cases, it was enough for would-be special rapporteurs to indicate their interest in taking over a mandate if they had access to the right person and state support. Since 2007, prospective rapporteurs have needed to submit an application and undergo a selection and interview committee headed by five ambassadors of the Human Rights Council from five regional groups, which rank the candidates and submit the choice to the Human Rights Council president who makes the final selection. Parts of the process are now public, with a report published online on all eligible candidates. A selection of these is invited for an interview and then ranked by each member of the group against criteria laid out in Human Rights Council Resolution 5/1.[82] In addition, gender and geographical balance as well as the representation of various legal systems are said to be considered.

This process was meant to introduce more transparency and meritocracy. We can now see the set-up of the selection and interview committee, the list of applications, and the outcome. But my interviews revealed a tension around this change. Regardless of whether they were appointed in the old process or applied after the change, for some rapporteurs this new process created openness and opportunities for new candidates to apply, replacing what one described as a 'Byzantine' appointment process. Yet other factors, such as the deliberation process or reasons for appointments, remain hidden. As the opening vignettes in this section showed, lobbying behind the scenes by civil society or supportive state ambassadors remains an important factor in the appointment. Some apply on their own initiative, sometimes several times before they are finally appointed. Nevertheless, one former special rapporteur who was appointed before the reform process noted that mandate-holders should be chosen based on their global reputation: 'I never even thought of applying to this position. It's an honorary position.'[83] This illustrates that peer recognition is no longer an overarching feature, unlike in, for example, Tsingou's theorisation of clubs which are held together by mutual recognition.

Exercising independence: Between individual and collective approaches

The distinct combination of biographical, professional, and institutional resources as well as a number of cultural and reputational distinctions situate the status of independence sociologically in a transnational social space. This affects how special rapporteurs understand their independence in the exercise of their mandates. There is an opposition between actors who espouse individualist understandings and those who work in a collective to bring 'coherence and solidity to doctrine'.[84] The latter set of experts would normally rely on joint communications[85] or reports[86] with other mandate-holders as a key strategy. Such understandings and practices of independence are closely linked with the various professional resources at their disposal. Some, however, see a conflict

[82]These include the application materials, qualifications, 'relevant experience, expertise, independence, impartiality, personal integrity, objectivity, availability and motivation' (Human Rights Council, 2023).

[83]Personal interview, 2024.

[84]Personal interview, 2024.

[85]A few recent examples with a long list of signatories: OHCHR, 'US proposal to "take over" Gaza would shatter fundamental rules of international order, warn UN experts', press release (11 February 2025), available at: {https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/02/us-proposal-take-over-gaza-would-shatter-fundamental-rules-international}; OHCHR, 'United States: UN experts condemn sanctions against the ICC', press release (10 February 2025), available at: {https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/02/united-states-un-experts-condemn-sanctions-against-icc}.

[86]Maina Kiai and Christof Heyns, 'Joint report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association and the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions on the proper management of assemblies', UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/31/1 (3 February 2016).

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between resources from different professional worlds and the UN. By actively distancing themselves from UN institutional resources, they seek to minimise the influence of the UN bureaucracy on their work. Others note that UN resources should be increased as the support is minimal.

Nonetheless, there are important institutional resources that all actors enjoy regardless of their assertion of complete autonomy from the UN and the level of support granted by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Righ and their human rights officers. One is the ability to define their own working methods, which dates back to the first special rapporteur Justice Abdoulaye Dieye of Senegal.[87] He insisted on his independence from the UN and states in defining methods of investigation for human rights violations. States tried to challenge his capacity to review individual communications concerning human rights violations, arguing that they should be handled exclusively via the 1503 procedure, a universal complaint mechanism at the UN.

Another important resource is their diplomatic immunity and privileges, which are enshrined in a 1946 convention and a 2002 document by the Secretary-General.[88] These immunities are also entrusted to officials and representatives of the United Nations, allowing them to exercise their functions independently. The 2002 regulations stipulate that 'the responsibilities of … experts on mission are not national but exclusively international'.[89] In fact, these immunities and privileges are the result of a struggle against state obstruction which triggered two advisory opinions issued by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). *Mazilu*[90] and *Cumaraswamy*[91] concern the state governments of two special rapporteurs who interfered with their ability to exercise their work, freedom of speech, and travel. For *Mazilu*, an extensive dossier was assembled which for the first time analysed the work and institutional status of such experts to give the court a detailed picture of independent experts recruited for the UN. It showcased the reliance of the UN and its specialised agencies on the labour of experts who perform tasks and contribute research, fact-finding, and technical assistance on various issues. In both cases, the ICJ affirmed the immunities held by special rapporteurs but left open possibilities for state disagreement with the Secretary-General.

In interview questions about their independence, only two mentioned the Code of Conduct, which was adopted in 2007 in a resolution of the Human Rights Council. This contains various regulations on how independence is to be understood, such as not accepting instructions from actors and reporting financial support. Apart from this, there are basic shared understandings of what it means to exercise independence. Almost all mention that independence allows them to set their own agenda and to develop thematic priorities that may be 'uncomfortable' for states and the UN, and that no one can stop them from speaking out. For some, their independence is more concretely described as freedom from censorship by the UN Secretariat, while others see it as a rare power in international institutions and 'a luxury' to speak their mind 'without being executed'.[92]

Independence is also about perceptions. Many seek to express themselves carefully to be seen as balanced: 'you have to be balanced, neutral, objective and not appear as though you are

[87]Marc Limon and Hilary Power, 'History of the United Nations special procedures mechanism: Origins, evolution and reform', Universal Rights Group (2014).

[88]These privileges cover: 'immunity from personal arrest or detention and from seizure of their personal baggage'; immunity from legal prosecution 'in respect of words spoken or written and acts done by them in the course of the performance of their mission', which applies even after their mission has expired; and immunities concerning their documents, official communications with the UN, and personal baggage. As Section 23 clarifies, these immunities are not granted for personal benefit, and ultimately, it is the Secretary-General who can waive immunity where it 'would impede the course of justice' (United Nations, 'Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations' (1946), p. 18).

[89]United Nations, 'Regulations Governing the Status, Basic Rights and Duties of Officials other than Secretariat Officials, and Experts on Mission', ST/SGB/2002/9 (2002).

[90]International Court of Justice Written Proceedings, 'Applicability of Article VI, Section 22, of the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations', International Court of Justice (1989).

[91]International Court of Justice Written Proceedings, 'Difference relating to Immunity from Legal Process of a Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights', International Court of Justice (1998).

[92]Personal interview, 2019.

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necessarily pro-government or, you know, pro-left or right. Of course I'm pro-victim and I'm pro-human rights.'[93] For another former special rapporteur, independence had to be balanced against diplomacy.[94] It is also a matter of positioning, avoiding becoming 'too closely associated with one state, one NGO, or the UN', which would create 'a suspicion that you are the voice of something else'.[95]

However, there is a tension in the interpretation between an institutional-collective understanding of independence and an understanding that centres on individual autonomy, sometimes at all costs. For example, one rapporteur who sees himself as an 'institutionalist' argues that interaction with other experts brings consistency to the system, while some individuals would use their independence to challenge established doctrines. As they note, 'that's part of the independence I take issue with. When this is done as a matter of principle rather than as a consequence of good dialogue and good debates and good ways to go forward.'[96] In this understanding, independence must be worked out and negotiated, bringing institutional and personal professional resources to bear on each other. For example, there were recent disagreements on gender recognition laws between the special rapporteur on violence against women and girls and the independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity.

For another special rapporteur, however, independence was achieved by mobilising resources outside the UN. They explained this by contrasting their careers and positions as independent experts appointed for a fixed period with international civil servants who have a long career at the UN.[97] Each set of actors has different interests, which can give rise to tensions. By contrast, many argued that resources at the UN were so limited that the full range of expertise could not be fully deployed.

This collective, institutional understanding of independence contrasts with an individualistic one. As one expert put it, independence means becoming 'very lonely'.[98] As an independent expert, they were happiest when they were attacked from all sides. Another argued that as academics they were used to working alone and 'egotistically'.[99] These constrasting understandings of independence tend to translate into the working methods special rapporteurs choose. For example, collaboration across subject areas in joint reports, missions, or communications can become an important strategy to increase the effectiveness of their work. Some create WhatsApp groups and understand themselves as part of a friendship or peer group with other special rapporteurs, while others are seen as 'lone wolves'.

The institutional ambiguity of the independent status of special rapporteurs is an important source for their capacity to exercise their mandate, and it gains different meanings depending on how they leverage their multiple professional positionings and relations with UN staff, state representatives, and civil society. Understanding the social and professional worlds they inhabit outside the UN offers crucial insights into how plural professional dispositions acquired over a long period come to bear on the exercise of their mandates.

Conclusion

Independent experts are routinely appointed by international organisations for specific short-term assignments. Existing scholarship has studied their career trajectories, accumulation of resources, and mobility across occupational settings to explain their power and capacity to pursue their own agendas. However, it has neglected the fact that many transnational professionals

[93] Personal interview, 2020.
[94] Personal interview, 2024.
[95] Personal interview, 2019.
[96] Personal interview, 2024.
[97] Personal interview, 2024.
[98] Personal interview, 2024.
[99] Personal interview, 2024.

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not only move between professions but also practise them simultaneously, and often not harmoniously. By using the example of the UN special rapporteur, an independent human rights expert, this article addressed this under-theorised feature of independent experts by theorising them as plural professionals. Building on insights from French sociologist Bernard Lahire, I showed how plural professionals embody multiple and often very different professional dispositions at the same time, which can be captured in their skill sets and worldviews. This multiple positioning in several professional settings at once can create tensions, and sometimes even contradictions, in how they approach their work and independent status. At the same time, I argued that this is also the source of their expert independence, rooted in a transnational social space connecting multiple professional dispositions. Independence viewed through this lens is a socio-historical category, rather than status, which is made up of the combination of professional, biographical, and institutional resources as embodied and strategically mobilised by plural professionals.

This argument has been developed through biographical methods, bringing a prosopography of 122 thematic special rapporteurs, based on an original dataset, into dialogue with 30 biographical interviews and Lahire's sociology of the individual. This approach locates special rapporteurs' subjective sense-making of their career trajectories in interviews in the broader social structures and shared patterns with other actors within professional trajectories. In addition, it helps make visible links between a porous institutional realm and the social, professional, and cultural ties among these human rights actors. An important insight is that these actors have different views on how to best mobilise the UN's institutional resources. While for some if not most the institutional support is seen as minimal, which inhibits the full exercise of their expertise, others develop a conscious strategy of distancing themselves from UN bureaucratic structures by relying on their own resources to fully make use of their independence. This shows that various professional resources are not simply accumulated but need to be balanced against each other. Moreover, this analysis has shown that career mobility is not a seamless move but that it takes labour to acquire the required skills and develop a sense for useful strategies in new professional settings. Finally, these actors have different views on their independence, which translates into methods of work in their mandates. Some prefer to work collectively to solidify doctrine, whereas others work individually and sometimes create conflicts around norms.

Finally, this article opens up questions for further research. My analysis highlighted the elite status of special rapporteurs. Should we understand human rights uniquely as an 'elite-level contest'?[100] The protagonists of this article are highly distinguished individuals within their states or professional fields. At the same time, many enjoy a very high standing among civil society groups, who often suggest they run for the position of special rapporteur. A strong footing and good relations with NGOs is always mentioned as key for their work. While this article focused on one specific type of actor and their contribution to a transnational space of action on human rights, further research can theorise the multiple connections between such elite worlds of lawyering, professionals of advocacy in NGOs, and local forms of human rights activism. Another set of questions emerges from the discussion of educational backgrounds. Further research can uncover the global connections between actors who became professionals in the human rights space during times of political upheaval when regimes transitioned towards democracy. In this context, human rights experts from (South) Eastern Europe remain under-represented compared to other regions, an observation that was shared in interviews with these experts. This underlines the close connection of legal and human rights education with broader projects of democratisation and the emergence of civil society groups.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0260210525000117.

[100] Stephen Hopgood, *The Endtimes of Human Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 97.

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