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**MAKING SENSE OF FOREIGN CONTEXTS: SKILLED MIGRANTS'  
PERCEPTIONS OF CONTEXTUAL BARRIERS AND CAREER OPTIONS**

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## **Making sense of foreign context: Skilled migrant's perceptions of contextual barriers and career options**

### **Abstract**

This study amplifies understanding of the occupational marginalization of skilled migrants by elaborating the role of cognition in skilled migrants' perception of contextual barriers and career options. Our qualitative analysis of interviews with thirteen Filipino engineers who migrated to Canada revealed that migrants' perceptions are influenced by their mobility frames. We identified three cognitive mobility frames: migrant, migrant professional, and mobile professional. We found that migrants accessed local interpretations of contextual barriers through interactions in the situational context and that migrants' mobility frames focused their attention on particular individual resources and characteristics of context, suggesting potential career options.

### **Keywords**

Skilled migrants, occupational barriers, sensemaking, situated cognition, international career mobility

## **Making sense of foreign contexts: Skilled migrants' perceptions of contextual barriers and career options**

Globalization, outsourcing, and liberalization of immigration policies, among other factors, have led to an increase in international mobility, which has become an important topic in organizational and cross-cultural management studies. Increasingly, nations are turning to skilled migrants to fill labor market needs (Al Ariss et al., 2012; Al Ariss and Ozbilgin, 2010; Ozbilgin et al., 2011). Despite nations' need for skilled professionals, many skilled migrants end up in low-skilled positions, leading to downward career mobility and talent waste (Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss, et al, 2012; Richardson, 2009). These skilled migrants are occupationally marginalized as they do not become full participants in their occupations and do not make full use of their skills (c.f. Pearson et al., 2012).

Considerable research has noted the presence of contextual barriers to skilled migrants' occupational integration (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Inkson and Myers, 2003; Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012; Richardson, 2009; Syed, 2008; Zikic et al, 2010). Despite long held acknowledgment by researchers of organizations that cognition and context jointly exert a strong influence on action (DiMaggio, 1997; Elsbach et al., 2005; Lant, 2002; Ocasio, 1997; Weick, 1979, 1996), critics of cross-cultural research argue that most studies of barriers facing skilled migrants implicitly assume that contextual barriers are uniformly perceived (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012). Research on barriers to skilled migrants' occupational integration has thus left the role of skilled migrants' cognition, that is migrants' perceptions of the host country professional context and their career opportunities, largely unexplored. A few recent studies are exceptions (e.g. Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss and Syed,

2011; Person et al., 2012). These studies have noted migrants' different reactions to similar contextual barriers and critiqued the implicit assumption of uniform perception. We build on these studies and develop a more nuanced understanding of the role of cognition in skilled migrants' reactions to contextual barriers to career development.

There has been an increasing focus on the role of cognitive processes in organizational research on careers. Research shows individuals' beliefs about themselves and their environments influence career behavior and outcomes such as, career choice (Lent, 2005), occupational commitment (Brown and George-Curran, 2003), and career trajectories (Saks, 2005). We address two primary objectives: 1) better illuminate cognitive processes that influence skilled migrants' perceptions of career options and thereby, their interactions with and within organizations, and 2) better connect cross-cultural research on contextual barriers faced by skilled migrants with organizational research on cognition. We analyze interviews describing the experiences of thirteen engineers from the Philippines who migrated to Canada to explore how cognition and context influenced skilled migrants' perception of their career options. We find that as migrants made sense of the foreign environment, their cognitive mobility frames focused their attention on particular individual resources and characteristics of the professional context, which suggested potential career options.

Our study addresses recent calls for research on how skilled migrants face and cope with contextual barriers (Al Ariss, 2010, Pearson et al., 2012; Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012), on skilled but less privileged migrants (Al Ariss, 2010; Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Al Ariss et al., 2012; Ramboarison-Lalao, et al., 2012; IJCCM cross ref paper), and adopting a more relational and context-specific approach to the study of

skilled migrants (Al Ariss et al., 2012; Scurry et al., 2013; Syed, 2008). Our findings amplify understanding of the occupational marginalization of skilled migrants by elaborating the cognitive processes through which migrants form perceptions of career options. Our study suggests that future research should adopt a more nuanced, interpretive definition of skilled migrants and more deeply consider the role of situational context in migrants' professional experiences.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly review studies of international career mobility and skilled migrants that motivated this study and present a conceptual framework derived from organizational research on cognition and careers. We next describe our research approach and the environment facing skilled migrants in Canada. We then present our analysis and findings. We conclude by discussing the implications of our study for the practice and research of cross-cultural management.

### **International career mobility and skilled migrants**

Research on international career mobility has primarily focused on organization-initiated expatriates (Scullion and Brewster, 2002; Suuturi and Brewster, 2000). Since Inkson et al. (1997) began the discussion of expatriate assignments versus individually initiated overseas experience, now widely called self-initiated expatriation (SIE), research has proliferated. Despite considerable progress, Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry (2013) noted gaps in their review of the literature. Most research on SIEs has studied the most privileged expatriates, from developed countries, moving between culturally similar developed countries (e.g. Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010), with a focus on their agency and ability to act (Doherty et al., 2011). Research on expatriates from less-developed countries has emphasized barriers in the macro-context and given less attention to the

agency of migrants, their abilities to (re)act and their career experiences (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013).

There is a growing agreement among researchers that SIEs are not a homogenous group, equally endowed with human capital, and therefore likely to have similarly successful career outcomes (Howe-Walsh and Schyns, 2010; Suutari and Brewster, 2000). Within the population of SIEs, skilled migrants from developing countries form a distinct category with some unique characteristics. These migrants typically have sought-after skills, but often face administrative complexities and occupational barriers that are incongruent with many nations' professed desire to facilitate migration of skilled professionals (Al Ariss et al., 2012).

Most studies of barriers facing skilled migrants implicitly assume that contextual barriers are uniformly perceived (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012). A few recent exceptions, however, have identified and explored migrants' different reactions to similar contextual barriers and critiqued the implicit assumption of uniform perception. For example, Pearson et al. (2012) find that a key driver behind some Polish migrants' inability to fully use their skills in Ireland was the migrants' perception of Ireland as a temporary stop to make money regardless of the type of employment. This perception influenced their reactions to contextual barriers to their career development.

Al Ariss (2010) identified four dominant modes of engagement migrants adopted for dealing with contextual barriers to their occupational integration: maintenance, transformation, entrepreneurship, and opting out. In the maintenance mode of engagement, migrants recognize career barriers and work within them to reach their

desired career outcome. In the transformation mode of engagement, migrants identify barriers to career advancement and try to alter them. In the entrepreneurship mode of engagement, migrants start their own businesses to avoid barriers to career, while migrants simply give up their career development in the opting out mode of engagement. Similarly, Al Ariss and Syed (2011) explored strategies used by skilled migrants to overcome contextual barriers to international mobility. The skilled migrants in their study deployed social, cultural, economic and symbolic forms of capital to undertake international mobility.

These studies suggest that migrants' perceptions of contextual characteristics vary, and further, suggest the potential of a perspective that acknowledges the influence of context and cognition on action for increasing understanding of skilled migrants' career trajectories. These studies do not, however, explicitly explore the cognitive processes that influence migrants' career actions and thereby influence their career trajectories. We contribute to this research by exploring the cognitive process that result in skilled migrants' reactions to contextual barriers.

## **Cognition and career transitions**

Although many types of career transitions are difficult, the challenges that skilled migrants face are exacerbated by uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in a foreign context. To establish a stable and functional relationship with the foreign environment (Sobre-Denton and Hart, 2008), skilled migrants must adjust to work and non-work conditions in the host country (Farh et al., 2010). Skilled migrants undergo disruptions to existing roles, identities and social networks (Adelman, 1988; Mikal et al., 2013). Skilled migrants may lack the resources required to re-create these roles, identities and social



networks in the foreign environment, which can result in uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety (Nardon et al., 2015). The mismatch between many host nations' stated desire for skilled migrants' professional acumen and the contextual barriers that prevent their integration and use of their skills poses a discrepancy, which migrants must make sense of in order to assess and decide upon appropriate career actions. This discrepancy results in a heightened experience of ambiguity.

Individuals employ cognitive schemas to filter and organize ambiguous information and facilitate decision-making and action (Walsh, 1995; Weick, 1995). Cognitive schemas are “knowledge structures that represent objects or events and provide default assumptions about their characteristics, relationships, and entailments under conditions of incomplete information” (DiMaggio, 1997, p. 269), that is, cognitive schemas organize categories of information and the relationships between them. Goffman (1974) argues that individuals draw on cognitive frames to create schemas that guide interpretations and influence actions (Leonardi, 2011). Cognitive frames “contain relational conceptual information...that link[s] situations with actions and outcomes (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014, p. 192) and thereby act as templates for action, directing attention and guiding individuals to select certain aspects of context as important (Leonardi, 2011). To resolve the ambiguity in the foreign context and make sense of their surroundings, migrants must access local interpretation schemas (Glanz et al., 2011; Nardon et al., 2015). Migrants' sensemaking of job market discrepancies is thus highly susceptible to influence by agents within the foreign situational context. By agents, we refer to instruments through which an intelligent actor achieves a result, which could include for example people and technological interfaces representing organizations.

Career exploration can be understood as “a process of reflecting or making sense of one’s career and considering...diverse options” (Zikic and Richardson, 2007, p. 60). Individuals explore career options from past, present and future orientations, reflecting on what they are doing in the present, what they have been doing in the past, and what they hope to do in the future (Zikic and Richardson, 2007). They collect information about themselves and the environment relevant to their potential courses of career action (Blustein, 1997; Zikic and Richardson, 2007).

Sensemaking of self and the external context are intertwined. The self is a “dynamic interpretive structure that mediates most significant intrapersonal and interpersonal processes” (Erez and Earley, 1993 p. 26). Individuals attempt to make sense of situations in ways that preserve their self-identity (Gilland and Day, 2000; Mills, 2003). Thus, who we think we are shapes how we interpret our environment and the actions perceived to be available given our interpretations (Weick et al., 2005).

Individuals trace together accounts of their experiences in self-narratives; storied ways of knowing (Gergen and Gergen, 1997), which account for how individuals select from stimuli and experience and interpret and assess meaning (Scurry et al. al., 2013). Migrants’ construct self-narratives of mobility and opportunity to explore the nature and implications of their experiences in the foreign context (Scurry et al., 2013).

We conceptualize foreign professional contexts as multilayered (Syed, 2008), consisting of a situational context embedded in one or more organizational contexts, which in turn are embedded in an institutional context. The situational context is the circumstances surrounding the point of contact, the point where entities intersect (Shenkar et al., 2008). The situational context includes structural positions, physical

settings and social-dynamics (Nardon and Steers, 2014). The organizational context includes organizational rules, procedures and behavioral norms (Smircich, 1983) and can provide individuals with a framework from which to interpret behavior and directs attention, making some barriers and opportunities more salient than others (Ocasio, 1997). The institutional context is constituted of the macro-environment in which an organization operates. It imposes a set of constraints, representations, and logic principles on individuals (DiMaggio, 1997) and may influence the availability and attractiveness of courses of action (Elsbach et al., 2005).

## **Research approach**

The qualitative, inductive study reported here was instigated in the course of a broader research project seeking to understand how migrants' home country professional experience and cultural resources influenced their career experiences after migration. We adopted a reflexive approach to data collection and analysis and allowed our research design to emerge and evolve through our analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Locke, 2001). We identified participants through our personal networks and through contacts with organizations that support immigrants, such as the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) and the Canadian Immigrant Integration Program (CIIP). We interviewed 31 migrants from 7 different countries in face-to-face and telephone interviews, collecting their first-hand accounts of their work and life experiences before and after migration. We observed differences in migrants' perceptions and career outcomes. Some participants were occupationally marginalized while others were successful and their reactions to similar barriers varied. This

observation led us to more deeply consider the influence of interaction between cognition and context on skilled migrants' career actions.

We suspected that some differences were influenced by the diverse characteristics of the 31 participants including their cultural background, professional background, and the amount of training they received prior to immigration. We subsequently focused on a subset of the data; interviews of 13 engineers from the Philippines who at the time of the study, had been in Canada for two to five years. Selecting these participants, who migrated from the same country and had similar occupational training allowed us to focus on other influencers of participants' perceptions of their career options.

Each of the final 13 participants had also attended a pre-arrival training program sponsored by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). The purpose of the CIC program was to prepare migrants for economic integration while they were still in their country of origin and to facilitate their settlement in Canada. Potential migrants were informed of the processes to gain accreditation of their education and recognition of their credentials, knowledge of language and skill requirements, and challenges they could expect to face. They gained information about Canada's regions, referrals to other supporting organizations and connections with potential employers. Through the program, participants were also privy to testimonials from Filipinos who had already migrated to Canada.

## **Researchers**

The research team included three researchers. Two of the researchers reside in Canada. One of those is a native of Canada, the other a native of Brazil and immigrant to Canada who was pursuing Canadian citizenship at the time of the study. The third researcher is a

native and resident of the U.S. We recognize that our own experiences influenced our interest in this topic and interpretation of the data. Our mix of experiences allowed us as a team to view the data through the lens of migrant, home country national and outsider and to probe each other's interpretations.

### **Data collection and analytical approach**

We conducted telephone interviews with each of the 13 engineers. One of the two researchers residing in Canada conducted each interview in English. The interviews lasted from thirty minutes to one hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed. We were interested in learning about participants' perceptions of contextual barriers and interpretations of potential courses of action. We asked participants to describe their career circumstances and relate how the circumstances had come about. We inquired about what had influenced their actions during their employment search, exploring participants' motivations for migrating to Canada, their expectations and initial observations and their perceptions of barriers and their qualifications.

We began our analysis by preparing a memo describing the education, work history and employment search experiences of each participant. Table 1 summarizes this data. We included in each memo participants' own descriptions of key events. We coded the transcripts using Dedoose qualitative data analysis software, beginning with broad categories suggested by the literature including, discrepancies and barriers, expectations, career actions, and participants' rationale for their actions. We added to and refined the categories through successive iterations of coding and theorizing.

We then developed an initial model and reengaged the literature. We conducted another round of coding focused on participants' stories of their experience of migration,

which we refer to as a *mobility self-narrative*. Following Scurry et al. (2013), we prepared a mobility self-narrative summary for each participant by organizing extracts from the interview transcript in chronological order, including participants' accounts of how they selected from stimuli and experiences and interpreted and assessed meaning. We then explored the summaries in relation to the two Scurry et al.'s (2013) central themes, structural constraints and patterns of adaptation. Table 1 summarizes participants' mobility self-narratives.

We identified three mobility frames, described subsequently. We identified a dominant focus, priorities and logic of action for each frame and explored links between each type of frame and participants' migratory decisions, expectations, their assessment of barriers and career options. Over several months, we communicated at a minimum weekly via video call and several times a week to several times a day through email. We critiqued and added to each other's thoughts and made successive additions and revisions to the model depicting our explanation, until it accounted fully for the data.

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Table 1 about here

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### **Study setting: immigration in Canada**

For many industrialized countries such as Canada, immigration is considered critical for economic competitiveness and innovation. Today, approximately 20% of the Canadian population was born outside of Canada, (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013).

Canadian immigration policies are aimed at attracting highly skilled migrants, as

evidenced by the fact that the proportion of recent immigrants with a university degree is twice that of native-born Canadians (The Conference Board of Canada, 2014).

Canada is perceived as "...a model nation for highly skilled immigrant policies, offering all potential newcomers access through human capital-based evaluations of their immigrant applications" (Zikic et al. 2010 p. 672). Despite this, the low rate of recognition of credentials and prior work experience are major impediments to skilled migrants gaining fulfilling employment in their field of study (Guo 2009).

Foreign credential recognition is "the process of verifying that the education and job experience obtained in another country are equal to the standards established for Canadian workers" (Parliament of Canada 2008). In Canada, although the Government of Canada has established the Foreign Credential Recognition Program, licensing trades and professions is the responsibility of the provinces and territories and credential recognition is the purview of provincial government (Parliament of Canada 2008). This can exacerbate the challenges of credential recognition (Guo, 2009).

To practice as a professional engineer in Canada a migrant must be licensed by a provincial engineering association, such as Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO), or the Order of Engineers of Quebec (OIQ). These engineering regulatory bodies have exclusive authority for licensing engineers. To apply for foreign credential recognition through the PEO, for example, international engineering graduates must provide their academic documents, detailed course descriptions and an experience record for assessment. Following the assessment, PEO advises the applicant on examinations that will be required. In addition to the academic requirement, individuals must demonstrate at least 48 months of verifiable, acceptable engineering experience, at least 12 months of which

must be acquired in a Canadian jurisdiction under a licensed professional engineer.

Finally, candidates must complete PEO's Professional Practice Examination, an exam on ethics, professional practice, engineering law and professional liability. PEO has set up a bridging program in collaboration with selected Ontario universities to assist internationally educated engineers to meet its requirements.

At the time of the interviews, one participant had completed the accreditation process to have his engineering degree recognized in Canada, six were in the process of accreditation and six had elected not to pursue accreditation. None had become licensed professional engineers. One participant was unemployed, six were in positions that required less skills or education than had their previous employment in the Philippines, and six had secured employment commensurate with that of their employment prior to migration. Nine of our participants report taking menial jobs at some point in their career trajectory in Canada.

### **Analysis and findings: Mobility frames and perceptions of career options**

We identified three cognitive mobility frames: *migrant*, *migrant professional*, and *mobile professional*. We found that participants drew on their cognitive mobility frames to make sense of barriers and career options in the foreign professional context. Participants' mobility frames focused their attention on congruent cognitive resources, including repertoires of schemas, skills, identities, values, beliefs and interpretations (represented by 'Rs' in the model) and characteristics of context, including barriers in the institutional, organizational and situational context (represented by 'Cs'). Participants' different mobility frames focused their attention on some courses of action while directing attention away from others. Figure 1 depicts our findings, which we explain subsequently.



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Figure 1 about here

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### *Context, self-narratives and resources*

The migrants in our study faced two primary contextual barriers to establishing themselves as engineers in Canada. The most salient barrier in the institutional context derived from degree accreditation and licensure requirements. Each of the participants learned that they would be required to complete additional courses and pass examinations to be licensed as professional engineers in Canada. One participant explained, *“Before coming here I thought with my education and experience it would be easier to find a job, because it’s quite similar, but once I got in here, it was not so...you have to study first and get some education certification or a degree here before you get a true job.”*

The most salient barrier in the organizational context was the requirement for Canadian experience. One participant noted, *“What really surprised me was the ‘looking for the Canadian experience,’ ...which is very illogical, because how can you have Canadian experience when you were born and working in the Philippines?”* Another explained, *“The first question that they always ask is what is your experience in Canada. Well, of course none.”*

Although, participants’ level of surprise when confronted with barriers varied, the mismatch between Canada’s stated need for skilled migrants and the barriers to the full utilization of their skills represented a discrepancy that required sensemaking. Self-narratives are means through which individuals organize and make sense of experience and evaluate actions. Self-narratives allow sensemaking “within the flow of experience”

(Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012, p. 5) and help individuals interpret their actions and connect themselves, their actions, and stories with history and biography (Gergen, 2005). Individual's self-narrative are closely intertwined with their interpretations of the external context, because "Depending on who I am, my definition of what is 'out there' will also change" (Weick, 1995 p.20). As explained in the subsequent section, participants' mobility self-narratives connected elements bracketed by their mobility frames, making a sensible history of their career trajectories, which could be communicated to others in the situational context. Participants accessed local information and schemas through interactions with agents in the situational context and used these resources to validate or refine their perceptions of barriers and career options, further influencing their actions.

### **Mobility frames**

Although all of our participants were professional engineers in the Philippines, the themes of their mobility self-narratives varied. Our analysis of participants' mobility self-narratives revealed three mobility frames as shown in Table 2. The self-narratives of some participants emphasized adaptation to the environment. These self-narratives included vignettes and justifications illustrating a higher attachment to the host country (relative to those drawing on other frames), lower emphasis on the importance of occupational integration, and an underlying logic of action of adjustment to local occupational barriers. These self-narratives revealed a *migrant* mobility frame. The self-narratives of other participants emphasized integration with the foreign environment. These participants' self-narratives included vignettes and justifications illustrating participants' mid-level attachment to the host country, mid-level emphasis on professional achievement, and an underlying logic of balancing social and professional

needs. These self-narratives revealed a *migrant professional* mobility frame. Finally, the self-narratives of some participants emphasized exploitation of opportunities in the environment. These participants' self-narratives included vignettes and justifications that illustrated participants' lower attachment to the host country (relative to those drawing on other frames), higher emphasis on the importance of professional achievement, and an underlying logic of capitalizing on professional skills.

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Table 2 about here

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### ***Migrant mobility frame and perceptions***

Our analysis revealed that three participants drew on a migrant mobility frame when making sense of contextual barriers and career options in the foreign environment. The self-narratives of these individuals emphasized their desire to live in Canada and willingness to adapt by compromising their career progression if necessary. These participants focused on objective occupational barriers and social rather than professional skills, identities, values and beliefs. One participant explained<sup>2</sup>:

*I find here in Canada that you are paid of what you work for, I like the type of the government... the corruption is very minimum, I like the safety board and all the conditions here in the working place the way it's managed it. I like it here...I'm seeing my children, my oldest son is now in University and*

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<sup>2</sup> We have made small modifications in the text to preserve the anonymity of participants.

*my daughter, my second kid, she is in college and yeah, I'm so happy. Because that's one of my purposes, not only my career here in Canada, but it's for my children and that they would have the best education that Canada can offer ... So, I'm happy with it and I feel myself successful, I'm enjoying my social life, my church life, I'm encouraging a lot of people, especially Sunday when I'm seen and I'm playing the piano, I could see the face of the people ... it's so much happiness.*

Similar to others drawing on a migrant mobility frame, he did not perceive prioritizing his career as an option when assessing and selecting among action alternatives. He felt he must adapt to the constraints of the external environment:

*... the first concern is how you are going to feed your family. My first priority was to find a job, whatever type of job, to secure food on the table, so I focus minor energy and time for this examination...I'm tied up with other things, proving with my job, providing food for the family, other concerns here. So, it takes you time and money to prepare for the examination and I didn't have the luxury and time to prepare for those subjects...*

These participants' perceptions of barriers, career options and action alternatives emphasized providing opportunities for their families over career advancement. They argued that migrants should be ready to adapt by accepting low skill jobs. As one participant explained:

*The main reason why I immigrated was for my two children, to give them that opportunity ... I was hearing form most of the people with high level of education or professionals in their home country and when they do arrive here they have to look for jobs that are completely way way below their professional qualifications I think that's one of the reasons why immigrants find it frustrating if they are not prepared to accept it. Here you have to*

*relearn everything. Cleaning up the table.... Something that I never imagined even doing in my home country. You really have to learn how to accept how to do things that you are not trained to do.*

Similarly another participant drawing on a migrant mobility frame explained:

*I don't mind working in a low paying job, for me it's a nice experience, to get the Canadian experience. While working [at low level job] I sent applications again to continue working for the designing jobs ... and my options would be to look for other related jobs, I mean, the management side of business, or accounting, and my last option was also to look for lower jobs like a cashier, or staff, or a server at Tim Hortons or Starbucks. Because, companies really ask for Canadian experience. So, I don't mind it, I accepted it. I have to face the reality that in Canada you can't really be picky about the job, I mean, right now the economy and even the employment status so you have to be realistic so sometimes I feel that I'm lucky enough, because I have a job, because I see a lot of people that don't have a job.*

These participants perceived barriers to their full occupational integration as insurmountable – one can't be picky about jobs. They expressed that they were willing to forego career advancement to make a life in Canada. Each of these participants remained in low-skilled jobs at the time of the interviews. We view these outcomes as a representation of occupational marginalization and talent waste.

### ***Mobile professional mobility frame and perceptions***

Our analysis revealed that four participants drew on a mobile professional frame. The self-narratives of these individuals emphasized their professional selves and intent to exploit opportunities in the external environment. These participants focused on their

mobile professional skills and experience and their potential value to Canadian organizations. For example, one participant said:

*Since the very beginning [I thought that] what I experienced in the Philippines was good enough ... because we were working for [large multinational] and I came to the interview and ... showed our interviewers that we were ready to work in their environment ... we showed that we are confident and our experience in the Philippines is good enough and in some cases it's exactly what they are looking for. That's what I told myself, with many years in [large multinational], with all the process and systems that I learned from there I could really make a significant contribution here in Canada...The fact that I worked for [large multinational] meant a lot for my career here, even more than the fact that I was from the Philippines. I was not framing myself as an immigrant, but as a [large multinational] professional that could make a contribution to [Canadian organization]. I worked for a company that's one of the biggest in the world. I also think it's because the way I explained my experience they didn't even care if I had any Canadian experience.*

Participants drawing on a mobile professional frame seemed convinced they could contribute to Canadian organizations and expressed that they would not consider employment they perceived to be below their qualifications. This is apparent in the explanation below:

*We arrived in Canada ... and we meet people there, you need a job? I have an odd job in the kitchen or something like that... it is too early, thank you. I was so determined, even when I look at the ads, I only chose those ads that were related to my field, that's why it took me 7 seven months, but I didn't send even 20 resumes. I did not send it anywhere, I really picked the jobs that were in my field and that I thought I would excel in.*

*I was really looking for a job that was related to my degree, to my work experience, I was so determined that I was going to get a job related to what I was doing back home. And never crossed my mind that I wouldn't be doing an odd job. I guess that self-confidence that I can make it. So, I pursued in that field.*

Participants drawing on a mobile professional frame expressed feeling content with life in Canada but also a willingness to keep their geographic options open. They explained that they were attempting to establish themselves in Canada, but at the same time were considering positions in other countries. One kept his job in the Philippines while working to establish himself in Canada. As he explained:

*I didn't even resign from my job in the Philippines yet and they still told me that I could go back and that they would hold onto my position there. So there was a possibility for me to get there back. Somehow it affected my frame of mind in terms to be looking for a job here, I was not so pressured.*

Another discussed how being in Canada opened the door for additional career possibilities. He said:

*I have seen that employees assigned to the Philippines have higher salary than me, a local employee, even though we were doing the same job and yet they were getting more compensation... So, I started thinking is it because I'm local, if I had a Canadian or American passport maybe the compensation would be the same? That's what comes in my mind, I experienced working with this multinationals in the Philippines. So I asked myself perhaps if I have enough money, experience, I can probably immigrate to a first world nation and that was my plan...[I chose Canada because] Canada is very open to immigrants and second it's an industrial country and thirdly it's close to the USA. The US is more technological in*

*terms of advancement so it's like a neighbour...if you go further south you have the US, and then Mexico and further South Argentina.*

Participants drawing on a mobile professional frame prioritized their professional role, focused on their professional resources and stated that they would have investigated moving to another country before they would have considered taking a low-level position. For these participants, then, the contextual barriers of accreditation, licensure and Canadian experience requirements proved less salient. These participants focused on locating professional level opportunities that did not require recognition of their engineering degree or licensure as a professional engineer and on demonstrating the relevance of their skills to these positions. Each of these participants accepted a professional position at a level equivalent to their previous position and was able to utilize the skills developed in his home country.

#### ***Migrant professional mobility frame and perceptions***

The largest group, including six participants, drew on a migrant professional mobility frame. These participants emphasized balancing a desire to stay in Canada with recognition that contextual barriers make career advancement challenging. These participants perceived a need to retool and reconstruct their careers, accepting that some compromise must be made, including the option of taking a non-professional, technical job or enrolling in courses to gain accreditation of their engineering degrees. These participants were not willing to either relocate to another nation or fully abandon their career aspirations.



The focus of these participants vacillated between their social and professional resources. For example, one participant explained that he moved to Canada for a *“better life for my family... and here in Canada there are a lot of opportunities for skilled workers like me. Opportunity for advancement, and also, a lot of my relatives are here.”* Another justified his need for professional advancement by relating it to his family, *“The main reason why we go here it’s for our children. To have a good example for our children is to have our own field to be recognized here and to have a good work as well so we can provide with our kids.”*

Unlike participants drawing on a migrant mobility frame, participants drawing on a migrant professional migrant had taken low level jobs but were dissatisfied and frustrated by the career option. One of them explained, *“Yes it is harder than what I expected, it really brought me down to my lowest position in terms of... as a professional. I had to take an odd job. Four months after failing to be employed and with my cash eroding very fast... I had to have a job, so I took an odd job.”*

Participants drawing on a migrant professional mobility frame found structural barriers frustrating. One said, *“I have been to assessment and stringent qualification from the Embassy getting all of my diploma, transcripts, certifications, training and experience certified and now here it’s nothing. It’s like, they are requirement only for your visa, not to be integrated here as a professional. So, you know, it’s kind of frustrating.”*

These participants emphasized the need to move forward and remain hopeful. One suggested migrants *“...should always continue applying for their specific fields and based on what happened to me, if they experience hardship, [they should not] be ashamed to work at any job...it’s just temporary, until [they] find the job that [they] are*

*looking for.” Another echoed this sentiment describing his own situation, “I’m still working my way up, I will not stop working on that. Because I believe that I have all the skills, education and experience and it’s a matter only of the employer will know; that they will recognize my skills.”*

The self-narratives of these participants emphasized their desire to establish themselves as professionals in the future, and also their personal accomplishments, external to their careers. One of them said, *“I have this goal to attain my professional engineer status here in Canada and I have not attained it yet. So, I will be successful when I become a PEng. But I would say I’m already successful because I was able to sponsor my siblings to move here and sponsor my parents. I bought a house, a car.”* Similarly, another recounted his progress since arrival, *“Well, if I were to compare... I mean the job that I started from here in Canada and the job that I’m doing right now, I think that I’m pretty successful, and considering the timeframe and I think that’s what I’m aiming for.”*

These participants perceived barriers to their full occupational integration as potentially surmountable in the long term. They were frustrated by barriers and ashamed when they accepted low skill jobs. Nevertheless, they perceived low skill jobs, technical non-professional positions and additional education as possible requirements for career advancement. Each of these participants accepted a low-skilled job temporarily. At the time of the interviews two of these participants were in jobs similar in level to those they held in their home countries while four were in lower-level but technical positions. We view these outcomes as an under utilization of talent.

## **Situational context and mobility frame**

Our analysis suggests that participants accessed information and interpretation resources through agents within the situational context. Information resources include facts and advice whereas interpretation resources are schemas that help individuals make sense of facts and situations (Nardon et al., 2015). These resources suggested refinements to or validated participants' perceptions of their career options.

Participants who drew on a migrant frame accessed and relied primarily on information resources accessed through interaction with agents in the situational context. One such participant explained, *"I just applied online. I subscribed to this website which alerts me every time there is a job related to production planning."* Another commented similarly, *"I just used the internet to find this job."* These participants did not take advantage of mentoring programs provided by immigrant support associations. One participant described his experience with an employment agency, which suggested a low skilled job. He said, *"I was interviewed by a consultant...so he asked me if I was interested to work temporarily, like a survival job as a laborer, and I said yes."* These participants relied on information provided through interaction with agents in the situational context, such as job search websites and recruiters to assess their career options. They perceived the information resources they accessed as objective facts, which did not require or invite interpretation.

Participants who drew on a migrant professional mobility frame relied to a greater extent on interpretation resources accessed through their interactions in the situational context. These participants reported seeking support from individuals with experience in the local environment to better understand their career options. One explained, *"[other immigrants] said you have to study first and get some education certification or a degree*

*here before you get a true job.” Another said, “My distant relatives [living in Canada] already informed about what to expect when I got here... so I imagined myself doing survival jobs.” Yet others seek help from mentors and immigration associations. One said, “[The immigration association] helped us a lot. We enrolled in a professional mentoring system, and it helped us a lot.” These participants sought local interpretation schemas to make sense of their career options.*

Participants who drew on professional mobility frame also relied on interpretations accessed in the situational context, but in addition to seeking interpretation of the foreign context, they sought validation of their professional skills. Additionally, these participants did not attend to interpretations that were not congruent with their mobility frame. One of them said, *“My friends said it would take six months, a year or two years and I would have to go back to go school, get accreditation and get a certification... but I had another plan... I emailed my former boss who had contact in Canadian companies and my Australian boss was able to contact one of the Canadian managers that’s based here in Canada and he told me that I could submit my resume to this person and that’s the beginning of my Canadian dream...”*

These participants sought local contacts who could not only help them understand the Canadian labor market but could also assist in helping the Canadian market understand the participant in a manner that fit the participants’ mobility frame. For example, one participant explained, *“I enrolled in the Dixie Bloor neighborhood, I also attended a three week course on job search and indirectly the one that I attended in Dixie Bloor, my English instructor, I took that course for like three months, my English instructor is half Filipino, so she happened to send money to the Philippines so she went through that*

*company and she told me that maybe I could try that company for my co-op. Yeah just for experience and it ended up being made permanent.”*

Another related his experience, *“Back home when we were approved for Canada, I was hearing stories that maybe 80 or 90 percent of immigrants in Canada would end in odd job. Odd job? Is that so... and [CIIP trainer] said, ‘You are all professionals, and I strongly believe that you can land in your field.’ He really told us that.... Odd job is not for you... and that boosted my self-confidence.”* These participants sought validation of their own perceptions of career options through individuals in the situational context and relied on interpretation resources to assist other host country contacts make similar, favorable assessments of the participant’s qualifications.

## **Discussion**

We investigated the role of cognition in skilled migrant’s perceptions of contextual barriers and career options. We found that participants employed three different mobility frames – migrant, migrant professional and mobile professional, which focused their attention on particular contextual characteristics and individual resources. Participants’ self-narratives connected the elements made salient by the mobility frame such as skills, priorities and barriers, helping participants connect their perceptions to the foreign context and communicate them to others. We found that participants accessed local information and interpretations through interactions in the situational context.

Our study builds on recent research by elaborating on cognitive processes that influence skilled migrants’ reactions to barriers and providing insight on the precursors to career actions. Congruent with Scurry et al. (2013) we found that participants’ self-narratives provided a window into understanding their cognitive efforts to understand the

foreign context. Congruent with Pearson et al., (2012) we found that skilled migrants' perceptions influenced their career actions and trajectories. Mobility frames may influence migrant's selection of the modes of engagement Al Ariss (2010) identified.

Participants' mobility frames influenced their assessment of career options drawing attention to particular individual cognitive resources and aspects of the environmental context, suggesting some courses of action and discouraging others. Further, mobility frames were related to how participants used local information and schemas accessed through agents in the situational context. Our findings support the argument that action does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs within a context made up of an organizational reality, with specific actors involved, who have different levels of power, resources and interests and as such need to be understood at the point of contact (Nardon and Steers, 2014; Shenkar et al., 2008). Our study has important theoretical and practical implications, which we discuss below.

### **Migrant versus self-initiated expatriate**

Researchers use three terms to describe internationally mobile individuals: corporate expatriates, SIEs, and migrants. In this discussion we focus on distinctions between SIEs and migrants made in cross-cultural management research. Al Ariss (2010 and see also Al Ariss et al., 2012) describe uses of the two terms. They argue that researchers generally use the term migrant to refer to less privileged individuals, making categorizations based on ethnic and racial characteristics and use the term SIE to refer to white skilled migrants from more developed countries. Researchers exploring career processes and outcomes of those they categorize as SIEs tend to emphasize the role of individual agency and ability to act (Doherty et al., 2011), whereas researchers exploring processes and outcomes of

those they categorize as migrants tend to emphasize the role of barriers in the macro-environment (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013).

Although, the three mobility frames are similar to the conceptual categories delineated in cross-cultural management research, our findings suggest that participants' would group themselves into those categories differently than would much cross-cultural management research. The mobility frames of participants suggest that skilled migrants' self-categorizations are more flexible and nuanced than are the *a priori* conceptual distinctions made in much research. Researcher categorizations are often based on assessments of individuals' intended duration of stay, the type of employment they are engaged in and the occupational category to which they belong (Doherty et al., 2011). Among our participants, these factors (intended duration of stay, type of employment and occupational category) varied over the course of their experience. This suggests that research frameworks that are sensitive to individuals' own cognitive frames and self-categorizations may provide better means of accessing and understanding their lived work experiences than do *a priori* researcher categorizations. We concur with [Special issue cross-reference]'s argument that researchers need to include different types of expatriates in their studies and be mindful of the assumptions and implications associated with the choices of terminology used to define them.

Researchers should reflect upon their own frames and categorizations when investigating the career processes and outcomes of skilled migrants. By assigning skilled migrants to conceptual categories based on *a priori*, researcher-defined criteria, researchers may miss important information about the issues skilled migrants face. Because the way in which we see ourselves and our opportunities is likely to have

tangible effects on decisions and outcomes (Weick, 1995), migrants cognitive frames and self-categorizations may be more relevant than researcher-defined grouping for providing understanding of migrants or expatriates lived work experiences.

### **Importance of situational context**

Our findings support the argument that cross-cultural encounters need to be understood at the point of contact within the situational context (Nardon and Steers, 2014; Shenkar et al., 2008). While our data did not allow for an exploration of causal links between the point of contact in the situational context and the mobility frame on which participants drew, it is evident that participants accessed local information and interpretations of institutional and organizational context in the situational context and that participants' attention to and use of information and interpretations was related to their mobility frames.

Skilled migrants make action decisions in the situational context, suggesting that agents with whom skilled migrants interact in within the foreign context play an important role in their career trajectories. "To adopt a line of conduct, one needs an image of the kind of world in which one is trying to act, a sense that one can read reasonably accurately (through one's own feelings and through the responses of others) know how one is doing, and a capacity to choose among alternative lines of action" (Swidler, 1986, p. 275). In foreign contexts, heightened ambiguity and uncertainty may leave migrants unable to evaluate their perceptions on their own, thus necessitating external validation.

Participants reported that individuals in the situational context gave them confidence in their ability to secure commensurate employment. Participants imbued these



individuals with symbolic power, or the power to define participants' professional situation. Because individuals imbue others with legitimacy (Hallett, 2003), skilled migrants may exercise some agency by selecting those whom they imbue with the legitimacy to validate their perceptions and might also take actions to shape perceptions of others within the situational context. The structural positions and roles of officials of government agencies and training programs and representatives of hiring organizations, however, likely bestow legitimacy on those in these positions thereby giving them influence over migrants' perceptions and power to influence the situational context. Cross-cultural management researchers investigating the career processes and outcomes of skilled migrants should thus consider the extent and limitations of skilled migrants' agency within the situational context.

Additionally, when considering organizational context and influences on occupational marginalization, the tendency of researchers, administrators and even skilled migrants may be to focus on employing organizations. Our findings suggest, however, that organizations tasked with supporting skilled migrants may play a key role in the formation of skilled migrants' perceptions of occupational opportunities and thereby in their career trajectories. This suggests that researchers should consider the influences of many types of organizations, including those that support and administer migration as well as those that employ skilled migrants, when exploring the occupational marginalization of skilled migrants.

Finally, while most research on skilled migrants' occupational marginalization focuses on contextual barriers, our study suggests a more nuanced view of context and barriers. Considerations of context should include characteristics that support actions as

well as barriers, as some of our participants were able to use characteristics of the external context to help them overcome barriers. Further, although research on careers has noted that occupational barriers have both objective and subjective elements, most cross-cultural research has focused on the objective aspects. Our study suggests that the perceived aspects of barriers may have considerable influence. Thus, to develop a richer understanding of marginalized individuals' experiences at work, researchers should consider cognitive perspectives, and explore how marginalized individuals think about themselves (rather than imposing researcher-based categorizations) and also characteristics that may aid as well as present barriers to migrants.

### **Implications for organizations**

Our findings suggest that the occupational integration of skilled migrants might be facilitated through efforts focused on assisting individuals in immigrant support organizations to better understand the role of perceptions in skilled migrants' career outcomes. Those in official positions who interact with migrants should be aware of their potential influence of skilled-migrants' cognitive frames and perceptions of career options on their career trajectories and of the role of host country individuals in (in)validating and influencing skilled migrants' perceptions. Migrants also should be encouraged to consider the potential effects of cognition and the validation by host country agents on perception of career opportunities. As Hallett (2003, p.146) argues, "Understanding symbolic power also empowers those who do not have power. As important as the features of the structural and negotiation contexts are, in the end it is *people* who imbue negotiators with legitimacy and symbolic power, and, when facing

detrimental situations, people can - and do - *stop* imbuing negotiators with symbolic power.”

### **Limitations and future research**

As with all studies, this study has limitations. Our research was based on retrospective accounts, at a single point in time and limited to the perspective of the skilled migrants. Additionally, participants included only thirteen engineers from the Philippines migrating to the same country, Canada.

Our study was based on engineers’ accounts of the events that led to their career circumstances at the time of the interview. Our data is thus retrospective, focused on a particular point in a career trajectory that will continue to develop. We did not explore changes in participants’ cognitive frames or how self-narratives might influence changes, and thus perceptions of career options, over time. Future research should explore the direction of causal influence between mobility frames and engagement within the situational context, including the extent to which migrants’ cognitive frames versus their interactions with individuals in the foreign situational context influence migrants’ perceptions.

Our data does not include accounts of individuals with whom participants interacted. Further research is needed to fully understand how interactions with individuals in the foreign context influence micro-cognitions and occupational marginalization over time. Future research should follow immigrants’ career trajectories, interpretations and actions from past, present and future perspectives to explore how interpretations, actions and professional marginalization co-evolve. Applied research should assess if training and integration initiatives that attempt to provide information and set realistic expectations by

discussing barriers and unsuccessful stories limit immigrants' opportunities by prompting migrants and those with whom they interact to categorize skilled migrants as other than professionals. Additionally, we found intriguing the fact that occupational marginalized migrants relied primarily on job search websites in their career search. Future research could explore how different types of agents at points of contact in the foreign situational context, including recruiters, job search interfaces, and mentors, influence perceptions and outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

This paper contributes to a richer understanding of marginalized individuals' work experiences by elaborating the role of cognition and interaction in situational context on skilled migrants' perceptions of contextual barriers and potential career options. Because processes of occupational integration and marginalization begin before skilled migrants enter organizations as professionals, and possibly prevent them from ever doing so, explanations of occupational marginalization should include consideration of skilled migrants' job search experiences and career trajectories. Our study builds on recent studies of skilled migrants' reactions to contextual barriers by better illuminating cognitive processes that influence skilled migrants interactions with organizations and by connecting cross-cultural research on contextual barriers faced by skilled migrants with organizational research on cognition. We found that skilled migrants' cognitive frames focused their attention on particular characteristics of context and individual resources, thereby suggesting potential career options. We also found that participants accessed local interpretations of institutional and organizational contextual barriers in the situational context.

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