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“Us versus them”: Sensemaking and identity processes in skilled migrants’ experiences of occupational downgrading

Abstract

We examine how a group of highly-skilled migrants from Sri Lanka made sense of occupational downgrading associated with their career transition to the UK. Our findings highlight three distinct sensemaking narratives that enabled the migrant employees to develop a more positive identity in the face of occupational downgrading. While all the narratives followed a similar cognitive pattern, one that represented the occupational world in terms of a cultural opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the choice of a particular sensemaking narrative was shaped by the organisational context in which the migrant employees were embedded. In particular, the migrant workers’ emotional experiences within their new organisation influenced the way in which they discursively framed the ‘us versus them’ relationship. We contribute to the international migration literature by theorising how sensemaking links identity to migrants’ occupational experiences in new organisational contexts.

Key words: migrants, occupational downgrading, sensemaking, identity, emotion.

1. Introduction

Recent studies in the international migration literature have highlighted an array of challenges faced by highly-skilled migrant employees in new host country work settings (Cranston, 2017; Fang et al. 2013; Winterheller & Hirt, 2017). Unlike self-initiated expatriates who originate from developed economies (Crowley-Henry, 2012) work on temporary job assignments (Feldman & Thomas, 1992) and derive career benefits from international mobility (Al-Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013), skilled migrants who come from developing countries (Carr et al., 2005; Syed, 2008) and need and intend to settle in the host country (Cerdin et al., 2014; Hajro, 2017) are typically seen as a disadvantaged category of employees (Berry, 2009; Sayad, 2004). Although they usually have internationally recognised professional qualifications and work experience in multinational organisations, this category of migrants often encounters situations in which employers devalue their skills (Annisette & Trivedi, 2013; Ramboarison-Lalao et al. 2012) and classify them as foreign-trained, or not up to the required standard (Dietz et al 2015; Thomson and Jones, 2014; Turchick-Hakak et al. 2010). As a result, these highly-skilled individuals are often compelled to accept new positions that fall below their qualifications and experience – a phenomenon known as occupational downgrading (Akresh, 2006; Lene, 2011; Voitchovsky, 2018).

Occupational downgrading entails a loss of occupational status between the last job in the home country and the first job in the host country (Crollard et al., 2012). It can call an individual's sense of worth into question and pose a challenge to a person's identity – his or her subjective interpretation of self as shaped by personal attributes, occupational roles, and group affiliations (Brown, 2015; Caza et al. 2018). The status of being downgraded provides an important occasion for sensemaking, which is defined as the process by which individuals concerned with maintaining coherent identities in the social context of others develop retrospective understandings of their circumstances based on extracted cues (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009; Weick, 1979, 1995). By rationalising their experience of occupational downgrading, individuals can impose a sense of coherence on what is happening to them and in the process mitigate, deflect, capitalize, and/or defend against its impact on their sense of self (Brown & Coupland, 2015). Occupational downgrading thus illuminates the critical link between sensemaking and identity in the context of migrant workers. An understanding of this link is important in order to appreciate how migrants adjust to new occupational experiences in their host countries and re-establish a sense of worth around their new occupational status.

Research on migration has addressed the various macro-level challenges skilled migrants face in the labour market: for example, when dealing with discrimination and ethnocentrism

(Al-Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Al Ariss et al. 2013; Inal & Özkan, 2011), adapting to host country cultural contexts (Berry, 1997; Carr et al., 2005; Cerdin et al., 2014), and navigating local institutional frameworks such as labour laws and policies and professional requirements (Richardson, 2009; Syed, 2008; Zikic, 2015). However, scholars are yet to examine in detail how skilled migrants make sense of their occupational experiences *after* they enter a labour market and *within* their work organisations. The need for sensemaking is particularly acute for skilled migrant workers who experience occupational downgrading because they are not only forced to confront the elements of novelty, ambiguity, and unconfirmed expectations associated with entering any new work setting (Louis, 1980), but must also justify their new occupational status, which is lower than it had previously been, to themselves and others. Making sense of occupational downgrading therefore entails the creation of positive or esteem-enhancing self-definitions that allow people to reconcile themselves to the disparaged aspects of their occupation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Levi, 1981).

In this paper, we examine how sensemaking links identity to migrants' occupational experiences in new organisational contexts. In order to do this, we integrate sensemaking and migration research to study how a group of highly-skilled management accountants from Sri Lanka made sense of occupational downgrading in UK employment settings. Our findings highlight three distinct sensemaking narratives that enabled the migrant employees to develop a more positive identity in the face of occupational downgrading. These narratives were inscribed within a broader identification with the migrants' ethnic group, which elevated the individual experience of occupational downgrading to a collective level, and led the migrants to frame their occupational world in terms of 'us versus them'. While all the narratives followed a similar cognitive pattern that represented the occupational world in terms of a cultural opposition between 'us' and 'them', the choice of the particular sensemaking narrative was shaped by the organisational context within which the migrant employees were embedded. In particular, migrants' emotional experiences in their new organisation influenced the way they discursively framed the 'us versus them' relationship. Our findings suggest new theoretical understandings of the link between sensemaking and identity in the context of migrants' occupational experiences.

2. Highly-skilled migrants, sensemaking and identity

In typically ambiguous or unfamiliar situations such as new occupational experiences, people seek to clarify what is happening by extracting and interpreting cues from their environment and using them as a basis for making sense of what has occurred (Louis, 1980;

Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking occurs as people create explanations for extracted cues through narratives (Patriotta, 2003; Vough et al., 2015). This is because a narrative is ‘the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful’ (Brown et al. 2008: 1039; Polkinghorne, 1988: 1). Furthermore, cognitive and emotional processes direct attention towards certain cues, thereby influencing how experiences are interpreted (Bartunek et al., 2006; Catino & Patriotta, 2013).

Research has found that the process of narrativizing novel or unsettling experiences can help individuals cope with these experiences (Gabriel et al. 2010; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In particular, scholars have examined how individuals construct sensemaking narratives in order to maintain a positive sense of self in situations of identity devaluation in work settings (Dutton et al. 2010). For example, research has provided insights into sensemaking narratives that cognitively reframe a person’s experience (Ashforth et al. 1999; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), distance that person from the central point of devaluation (Ashforth et al. 2007; Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006), construct devaluation as a temporary experience (Grandy & Marvin, 2012), or derogate and shift blame to another in order to maintain self-esteem (Vough et al. 2015). In a similar vein, downgraded skilled migrants may experience devaluation with regard to how they see themselves as occupational beings, thereby triggering the need to engage in sensemaking in order to maintain continuity of the self. By constructing sensemaking, skilled migrants are able not only to rationalise their experience of occupational downgrading, but also to convey important messages about who they are and how they understand themselves in relation to occupational downgrading.

Most studies on international migration have considered migrants’ new occupational experiences in terms of the societal and career-related challenges they face before finding adequate employment in the host country (Annisette and Trivedi, 2013; Al Ariss, 2010; Fang et al., 2009; Zikic and Richardson, 2016). Zikic et al. (2010) have explored the specific psychological orientations that skilled migrants in Canada, France and Spain adopt in response to objective barriers encountered during international career transitions. They show how skilled migrants respond to these barriers by either embracing, adapting or resisting the new institutional requirements of the host country in order to manage their career efforts. Zikic and Richardson (2016) have similarly assessed how different groups of professional migrants respond to profession-specific pre-entry scripts when trying to re-enter their professions in Canada. Their findings demonstrate how different professional domains and institutional requirements may generate unique forms of identity threat and as a result give rise to different forms of identity work – involving, for example, identity customization, identity shadowing,

struggle and enrichment. Al-Ariss (2010) has analysed the strategies of internationally mobile professionals in managing barriers to their career development. He found that skilled migrants managed institutional influences on their career trajectories using four ‘modes of engagement’: maintenance, transformation, entrepreneurship, and opt out.. Finally, the literature on acculturation – operating at a social identity level – has highlighted the degree to which migrants identify with their original culture and host culture shapes their orientation towards acculturation in the host country (Berry, 2005; Sam & Berry, 2006; Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008). Overall, these studies share a focus on the interplay between macro socio-cultural barriers and skilled migrants’ responses to these barriers, be it in the form of career orientations, identity work, modes of engagement, or cultural identification strategies. Importantly, scholars acknowledge that skilled migrant workers are often compelled to accept positions they are significantly overqualified for when they do manage to secure employment (Al Ariss & Ozbilgin, 2010).

While current migration literature has substantially advanced our understanding of the macro-level occupational challenges that skilled migrants face in the labour market, less attention has been paid to how skilled migrants make sense of and respond to the organisational contexts in which they are embedded. More specifically, studies do not address how specific organisational factors shape skilled migrants’ experience of underemployment, both cognitively and emotionally. From an individual perspective, migrants may draw on cues in their organisational environment to make sense of themselves in the context of new occupational experiences (Gabriel et al. 2010; Vough et al. 2015). In turn, the meaning that migrant workers attach to their new roles and selves at work may be shaped by the cues they receive from others in the course of their employment (Moore & Koning, 2016; Patriotta & Spedale, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al. 2003), and their sense of membership of an organisation may be created through their daily interactions with others (Bartel & Dutton. 2001). At a broader level, migrant workers’ experiences may be embedded in identification with groups or collectives that provide the cultural material for making sense of workplace situations (Sonenshein et al. 2013). As migrant workers tend to be marginalised in host country work settings, they are likely to develop a strong collective identification with their ethnic group (Bagchi, 2001; Syed, 2008). Identifying with individuals from similar ethnic minorities, who are perceived as being treated in the same way, can operate as a significant source of strength (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In particular, ethnic identification can provide valuable discursive resources to be drawn upon when making sense of occupational downgrading in new host country settings, especially during the initial stages of migration.

When taken together, prior studies indicate that skilled migrants can encounter a plethora of occupational challenges in new host country contexts that encompass social, physical, and psychological dimensions. Occupational downgrading in particular can call into question migrants' sense of worth and trigger sensemaking aimed at rationalising what is happening to them and finding their place within the organisation. However, we know less than we should about how the sensemaking-identity link plays out once migrant workers enter new organisational contexts to do skilled work. In particular, because of its primary focus on macro-level dynamics, current research on international migration does not sufficiently account for the challenges migrants face within the specific work settings in which they are embedded. There is therefore a need to develop a fresh understanding of global migration that sheds light on how migrants make sense of new organisations, and how this sensemaking affects their identities.

In this paper, we analyse the retrospective accounts of a group of migrant management accountants. We consider how these skilled migrant workers make sense of their occupational experiences after entering new organisational contexts and attempt to re-establish positive identities in the face of occupational downgrading. Understanding the sensemaking-identity link in this context is important in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges migrants encounter in their new workplaces.

3. Research design

Our fieldwork looked at 38 management accountants of Sri Lankan origin who were resident in the UK and working in their first job in this country. At the time of data collection, the respondents had been employed in the UK for between two and six years in positions including management trainee, management accountant, financial analyst, senior accountant, senior analyst, and finance manager. All the participants reported that they had been offered positions that were not commensurate with their qualifications and experience. All the respondents spoke English fluently. Eighteen were women and twenty were men, and they ranged in age from 28 to 48. The majority had migrated to the UK between 2004 and 2007 under the highly-skilled migrant visa system, while a few had come to the UK for postgraduate study and obtained a work visa later. All the respondents were fully-qualified chartered accountants, having completed the UK Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) qualification in Sri Lanka. In addition, most had university degrees, and some had completed postgraduate courses (see table 1 for further demographic details).

Insert table 1 about here

The CIMA qualification programme is taught and tested in English in Sri Lanka, and Sri Lanka has the largest pool of CIMA qualified accountants after the UK. The UK is a popular destination for Sri Lankans who choose to migrate, which is a reflection of the influence of the country's colonial past. We saw management accountants as a particularly interesting migrant group for our study because they have British professional qualifications and experience in multinational companies in Sri Lanka. From this perspective, one might expect their career prospects in the UK labour market to be better than those of migrants who do not have internationally recognised qualifications or experience. The respondents were recruited through a snowball sampling method (Saunders, 2012). The first author was born and grew up in Sri Lanka, has many links to the Sri Lankan diaspora in Britain, and drew on her personal networks in order to recruit participants.

3.1 Data collection

We conducted 38 semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are suitable for recording episodes of sensemaking as participants are encouraged to reflect upon their experiences and articulate their thoughts discursively. Our interviewing procedure was informal, and was designed to encourage meaning-making by narrative recounting rather than the more categorical responses that are typically obtained in standard interviews (Bruner, 1990: 123). We therefore tried to keep interruptions to a minimum to let the respondents develop their narratives. In using this approach, our aim was to represent migrants' occupational experiences as they understood them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes. Most took place in quiet cafés close to the respondents' workplaces. Six participants were interviewed in their offices after working hours, while four were interviewed in their homes. All the interviews were recorded digitally. A pre-prepared topic guide steered the interview. The questions were typically open-ended, and were not asked in any particular order. The respondents often introduced their own topics, but the interviewer also ensured that all the topics in the interview guide were covered. Commencing with biographical information, the respondents were invited to reflect back on their careers. We asked them about their occupational choices, their experiences at university, and their career history and experiences at previous organisations in Sri Lanka. We explored their decision to migrate to the UK and how they made sense of the transition. The respondents described how they experienced the labour market, how their skills, credentials, and experience

were discounted, and how they were eventually compelled to downgrade by accepting positions that were not commensurate with their qualifications and experience. We prompted our respondents to reflect on how they felt about having to accept lower positions, paying attention to the cues they used to explain this. We specifically asked them why they thought they had to downgrade, how they perceived and experienced their new organisations, and about their hopes for progress in the future.

3.2 Data Analysis

Our analysis followed a narrative approach: that is, we tried to identify meaningful storylines in the accounts given by our respondents. Nvivo 11 software was used to facilitate data coding and to establish frequency relating to the topics. We first sought to build a comprehensive database of the smaller units of meaning in the interviews with migrant workers via open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Our main purpose here was to construct a broad list of codes, as we did not have a clear idea at that stage of what data would prove to be the most relevant. As the research progressed, we started seeking similarities and differences among the initial codes, which resulted in a list of 27 first order codes. We gave those codes phrasal descriptors that retained the informant terms (Gioia et al., 2013).

Once the initial codes had been defined, we allocated sections of data notes to the appropriate themes. As we inductively developed first order codes, we noticed that the respondents systematically compared their new occupational experiences in the UK context to previous occupational experiences in their home country. This comparison between previous and present circumstances encompassed features of work contexts, *modi operandi*, relationships with fellow workers, and cultural discourses among other things. Informants narratively articulated the differences between home and host work in the form of “us vs them” statements. As this pattern was pervasive across the narratives we examined, we considered it as a meta-narrative

We then developed second order conceptual codes and noticed that the respondents enacted the “us vs them” meta-narrative according to three distinct patterns: ‘they don’t care about us’, ‘we can learn from them’, and ‘this works for us because we are different from them’. The significance of the ‘us vs. them’ meta-narrative is that it formed the basis of three sensemaking narratives, which we labelled as ‘disregard’, ‘opportunity’ and ‘fit’ (see tables 2-4). These sensemaking narratives conveyed both perceptions and felt experiences of the workplace, which we leveraged to develop our second order conceptual themes. We coded the three sensemaking narratives in terms of ‘accounting for’ and ‘felt experience of’ disregard,

opportunity, and fit. Finally, we noticed that the migrant workers' understanding of occupational downgrading informed the tactics they adopted in order to re-establish a sense of self-worth in response to their downgraded status. This was reflected in a further group of second order codes, which we labelled as 'deflecting the stigma of occupational downgrading', 'shifting emphasis to the positives of downgraded occupational status', and 'reassessing one's priorities as an occupational being'.

At a subsequent stage, we amalgamated the second order conceptual codes into three theoretical aggregate themes, which enabled us to inductively develop a conceptual framework linking the concepts that emerged from the data (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). We labelled the three aggregate dimensions 'cognitive sensemaking', 'emotional sensemaking', and 'creating positive identities'. Figure 1 shows our coding structure.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Insert Tables 2-4 about here

As we attempted to account for the variations in the three sensemaking narratives of disregard, opportunity, and fit, we realised that the narratives changed depending on the organisational contexts the respondents were attached to. While we did not gather our sample with the intention of distinguishing between organisational contexts, it became clear to us in the course of our analysis that the organisational context played a part in shaping the way the respondents interpreted what occupational downgrading meant to them. For instance, the disregard narrative was articulated by respondents who worked in large public sector organisations, which were portrayed as being generally unwelcoming to foreigners and having limited formal and informal support structures. The 'opportunity' narrative was evoked by the respondents who worked for FTSE 100 and 250 organisations. These individuals described their organisations in terms of opportunities to learn and develop and a diverse environment. The fit narrative was constructed by respondents who worked for small unlisted organisations, where a low-pressure environment, a good pay structure, and flexibility appear to have led to respondents appreciating their lot, despite the career compromises involved. While we recognise that individuals' sensemaking may develop and change over time, at the time of our data collection, a single, dominant perspective prevailed among the respondents attached to each individual type of organisation (Hajro et al. 2017). Overlapping views were only offered

by a tiny minority of the respondents, and on further investigation we found that a single perspective (mediated by the organisation) dominated their accounts.

As we assessed the trustworthiness of our interpretations, we reflected on how we conducted the study and why we analyzed the data in the way we did (Pratt et al. 2019). Our claim to trustworthiness is based the grounds of authenticity, plausibility and criticality (Pratt, 2008; Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997). First, we suggest that the migrants' accounts should be trusted based on how a rapport was established with the interviewees: the fieldworker was accepted as a peer, showed genuine interest in understanding the interviewees' views and experiences, and guaranteed confidentiality. Second, in line with sensemaking theories (Weick, 1979, 1995), we focused on the plausibility rather than the accuracy of the respondents' accounts. As suggested by Miller and Glassner (1997) and Silverman (2000), we did not treat the respondents' accounts as potentially 'true' versions of a fixed 'reality', but rather as 'narrated realities' that reflected the migrants' collective sensemaking and shared constructions of the social world. Viewed from this perspective, for example, contradictions, hyperbolic statements, exaggerations, and extreme representations of work life were particularly interesting as they provided insights into the motives and meanings of the migrants' narratives and behaviours. Third, we systematically reflected on the assumptions and potential biases underpinning our fieldwork. The fieldworker's status as a migrant raised the possibility of 'going native'. This was mitigated by the different (complementary) roles of the two authors with respect to fieldwork and by the work patterns they established during the data analysis process. The first author was close to the data and had a first-hand picture of the empirical setting. Conversely, being detached from the field, the second author was in a position to refute emerging interpretations and to provide alternative views of the phenomena under review. Owing to their different empirical stances, the two authors had repeated discussions on the nature and meaning of the data set and gradually constructed a joint interpretation of the empirical evidence.

In the next section, we present our data. We have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the respondents.

4. Findings

All our respondents stated that they had encountered occupational downgrading due to being offered positions that were not commensurate with their credentials and experiences:

No one would ever have expected this – I was a senior manager in a multinational company but no one is willing to offer a management position here to a person who has no UK experience. It was finally down to accepting an analyst role or being unemployed
(Parakrama)

Occupational downgrading posed a challenge to individual identity, especially because it implied a decrease in occupational status and a diminished sense of worth:

We had to apply for positions that were way below our experience. You feel you have less status than before, that you are not so important any more (Mal)

Your job designation is a central part of you so it is not easy to downgrade yourself
(Sisil)

Individual respondents constructed three distinctive sensemaking narratives to explain their experience of occupational downgrading, which we labelled as ‘disregard’, ‘opportunity’, and ‘fit’. These narratives were grounded in identification with the Asian ethnic collective, and took the form of a pervasive ‘them versus us’ pattern whereby the individual respondents explained occupational downgrading in terms of a stereotypical opposition between Asian and Western cultural values. Through narrativizing their experience in new organisations, skilled migrants sought to construct a more positive understanding of themselves in relation to occupational downgrading. Their interpretations varied according to their overall emotional experience within their new organisation, particularly in relation to their new colleagues. We explain the sensemaking narratives in greater detail below.

4.1 Disregard

According to what we have termed the disregard narrative, respondents explained their occupational downgrading in terms of host country organisations refusing to acknowledge and integrate migrant employees. This narrative was conveyed by ten of our respondents who worked for large public sector organisations. Given that public sector organisations are heavily embedded in the country’s national culture and less accustomed to internationalisation, we might expect new migrant employees to find it difficult to negotiate acceptance in these settings. The disregard narrative conveyed an explicit threat to the value and worth of skilled migrant workers, as they perceived and felt that the organisation attributed little significance

to them. In response, individuals attempted to create a positive identity by adopting an antagonistic stance towards their British co-workers. Self was positioned in more positive terms as the organisation was derogated (Vough et al. 2015).

4.1.1 Accounting for disregard

Respondents drew on the lack of Asian role models in senior positions, a lack of direction and limited support on day-to-day tasks as sensemaking cues to demonstrate how migrant workers are disregarded in host country work settings. Ronak, who was only able to secure a senior analyst post in the UK despite substantial senior management experience in Sri Lanka, made sense of his occupational experience as follows:

They never tell you exactly what you need to do – everything is so indirect, so vague – we are not comfortable in vague situations, that’s our culture. To progress, it is important for me to know what exactly I need to do. Everybody I reported to in Sri Lanka gave me direction as well as support. But here they just leave it to us to figure everything out. There is no support whatsoever. Even when it comes to a simple task, they never tell us what they want exactly. The vaguer they are, the more the people who report to them will inevitably struggle, and they can therefore inhibit others’ progress. When I only see very few Asians at the top, I know that it is probably not going to happen to me either.

Ronak makes adverse comments about his colleagues’ behaviour and intentions. He accuses them of being deliberately vague in order to hinder his career progression. His sensemaking conveys antagonistic interactions with colleagues (I vs they), which are then elevated to an ethnic level (us versus them). He notes that it is a cultural trait of Asian people to feel uncomfortable in vague situations. Antagonism is conveyed through a stark contrast between the support and sense of direction provided in home work environments and the deliberate withdrawal of information in his current workplace. Antagonism provides a justification for Ronak’s current status.

Mal, a treasury accountant who was previously a finance manager in Sri Lanka, made similar comments in relation to his colleagues’ deliberate disregard for him:

Over here they didn’t lift a finger to make things easier for me – I had to second guess and figure everything out myself. How much do we do to help new people over there? Anyway, I eventually figured everything out. But whatever we do they couldn’t care less

and there is nothing we can do to change their bias. They have issues, so there is no point.

Here disregard is expressed by the allegation that ‘they didn’t lift a finger to make things easier for me’. The attitude of disregard in the current workplace is contrasted with the helpful attitude ‘over there’. At this point, the sensemaking narrative escalates to an ethnic level to encompass Asian people. Mal relates his personal circumstances (a lack of support at work) to the more general condition of Asian migrant workers. The individual ‘I’ is inscribed in the collective ‘us.’ Occupational downgrading is therefore explained in terms of a bias towards Asian workers, (*they couldn’t care less; they have issues*), which makes it pointless to react. The ethnic generalisation of individual circumstances provides a justification for the status quo: Mal implies that Asian people – including himself – are compelled to downgrade because the ‘other’ dislikes them.

4.1.2 Emotional experience of disregard

The disregard narrative comprised a significant emotional dimension through which people explained how devalued and angry they felt in the context of their overall experience in the organisation. This felt experience had a significant influence on shaping an antagonistic interpretation of the workplace. Mesith explains:

It’s very hard to explain. It’s about how you feel – you feel that they think that you are nothing. It’s all very subtle, but you are made to feel like an outsider, like you don’t matter..... It is difficult– you have to control yourself or you would burst out and say that something’s really bad – to me it is particularly irritating because it is all very subtle which I intensely dislike. I have no hesitation in saying that they don’t like us – I have felt it.

Mesith’s felt experience in his new work setting conveys anger at not being acknowledged by his colleagues. He constructs himself as ‘an outsider’, and uses this characterisation to develop an antagonistic interpretation of the workplace. Antagonism is expressed at both an individual and collective level. The individual experience of interaction with colleagues (*I have felt it*) is inscribed within a broader antagonistic view of the occupational context based on the juxtaposition of two collective entities (*they don’t like us*).

Kasun also constructed an antagonistic interpretation of disregard on the basis of felt experience:

I boil alive in many instances because they side-line me – we don't do that to new people. But then we are different – we are more concerned about others than they are. It is not obvious but you can feel it and this obviously will affect your progression. But that is what they want to do, they don't want us to progress

Like Mesith, Kasun draws on his individual emotional experience of being side-lined by the organisation. He highlights that he is angry due to his overall experience (*I boil alive*). His present circumstances are contrasted with the warmth with which newcomers are treated back home. This contrast is eventually used to develop an antagonistic interpretation of the workplace in terms of collective entities (*they don't want us to progress*).

4.1.3 Crafting a positive identity by deflecting the stigma of occupational downgrading

Interpretations of disregard based on an antagonistic stance formed the basis for individuals to deflect the stigma associated with their lowered occupational status. Advocates of the disregard narrative emphasised the fact that they downgraded due to the host organisations' disregard for migrant workers rather than a lack of skill or competence on their part. By externalising the responsibility for occupational downgrading and discounting self-blame, individuals attempted to re-establish their sense of self-worth. In Parakrama's words:

In my case, I know that I did not downgrade because I lacked something. They just didn't want to consider any experience outside the UK. I am not bitter – this is the way the world works, and I have learnt to accept it.

Stressing that he bore no hard feelings towards an organisation that did not care about him, Parakrama takes a further step to put himself in a noble light.

Ronak also attempted to deflect the stigma associated with his downgraded status by contextualising his condition within the broader fate of his fellow migrant workers:

There are many others like me. These people are very bright but they don't get the support they need to progress. I should not take it too hard.

In Ronak's view, the lower occupational status of his fellow Asian workers is not related to their factual worth (*These people are very bright*), but stems from a lack of adequate support on the part of the host organisation. Shifting the blame to the organisation allows him to justify his own status and maintain his sense of self-worth. Furthermore, by stating that he would not let this negative situation affect him, he is able to maintain a positive attitude in the face of blatant disregard.

While condemning his organisation for its devaluation of migrant workers, Mesith also argued that he did not resent anybody for this:

Maybe they (the organisation) feel threatened by them (migrant workers) because there are a lot of talented people. I have now detached myself from this organisation. I don't resent anybody though. I have grown as a person and understand the real world.

By implying that the organisation is reluctant to advance the careers of talented migrant workers because it feels threatened by them, Mesith inscribes his individual circumstances within a broader attitude towards migrant workers. This allows him to justify his own occupational status and deflect the stigma attached to occupational downgrading. Furthermore, he reflects on his own experience in terms of a progressive detachment from the organisation, which has allowed him to avoid being resentful, grow as a person, and gain an understanding. These bold claims allow him to create a positive identity by constructing himself as a wise person.

4.2 An opportunity

In terms of what we have called the opportunity narrative, respondents talked about occupational downgrading as an opportunity to learn new skills and develop their careers. These individuals were employed in FTSE 100 or 250 companies, which typically operate internationally and employ a multicultural workforce, and appeared to be more likely to integrate new migrant employees into their organisation. Those who leveraged the opportunity narrative constructed positively distinctive interpretations of the workplace as a way of advancing themselves.

4.2.1 Accounting for opportunity

The respondents drew on two or more of three cues (training and support for career development, sophisticated processes, and company reputation) to make sense of occupational downgrading as an opportunity for learning and development. Business partner Sean explains:

At least I got into a good company here. ABC is just so sophisticated. Everything they do is spot on. The latest software is used to analyse data, and the processes in place are incredible. I am learning things I didn't know and they train us so well and make excellent development plans for us. The way they conduct meetings – everything is so incredible. I am able to learn all these things. A company's reputation is very important for Asian people after all – for people over here it does not seem to matter so much but we always consider it.

Sean explains opportunity in terms of avenues for learning and development in a highly sophisticated new work environment. The condition of being occupationally downgraded, but with opportunities to learn and develop, is then elevated to the collective ethnic level to encompass fellow Asian workers. This move is expressed in the shift from '*I can learn from them*' to '*they train us so well*'. The positive experience of Asian migrants is conveyed through positioning company reputation as a highly valued phenomenon in Asian culture, in contrast to the West. Positive distinctiveness provides a justification for the current downgraded occupational status.

Nandadeva, an analyst who was previously a financial controller in a leading organisation in Sri Lanka, also explained his new position in the UK as an opportunity:

This is a very high-tech environment. Their planning processes are so advanced – I am learning so many different things. They teach everything – the training is unbelievable. Getting an analyst position here is an opportunity to develop further. The name of the company goes a long way in Asian circles. The name of everything matters for us – the name of the school you go to, the road you live on, the car you drive. It is not like here.

Like Sean, Nandadeva explains opportunity in terms of avenues for learning and development with a renowned high-tech FTSE 100 company. As he makes the point that, unlike people in the UK, reputation matters to members of his community (*The name of everything matters for us, the name of the school you go to, the road you live on, the car you drive. It is not like here*), his sensemaking escalates to the collective ethnic level to encompass

all Asian people. Individual self-worth is re-established by explaining occupational downgrading in terms of a positively distinctive experience for all Asian workers.

4.2.2 Emotional experience of opportunity

Interpretations of opportunity were significantly shaped by the individuals' overall emotional experience within the organisation. Individuals who constructed narratives of opportunity felt eager and enthusiastic about their new workplaces. Namal explains:

I am excited - everyday is an adventure. It doesn't feel like work. They are always helping you to develop. You feel that you are part of a big family because they want you to develop to take the organisation to great heights.

Namal expresses a positive view of his workplace on the basis of how supported he feels in his career development. His felt experience generates a sense of belonging to the organisation (you are part of a big family), which leads him to experience work as exciting and adventurous.

Nuwan also drew on his overall experience of excitement within the organisation to construct a positively distinctive interpretation of opportunity for migrants like himself:

I am ticking with energy when I come to work – there is something to look forward to.... People come to talk to you, they seek your opinion and try to give you opportunities to contribute..... You feel that they want us to develop within the organisation.....

Nuwan's comment highlights how positive interactions with colleagues and opportunities to learn from them generates an emotional experience of positive energy (*I am ticking*). In turn, this emotional experience produces a confident stance with regard to his future in the organisation (*You feel that they want us to develop within the organisation*).

4.2.3 Crafting a positive identity by shifting emphasis to the positives

Interpretations of opportunity grounded on the positively distinctive stance 'we can learn from them' formed the basis for individuals to enhance themselves by shifting their attention on to the positive features of their downgraded occupational status. The respondents emphasised that their scope for career progression was significant despite their current downgraded positions. In Nuwan's words:

I think this is a good outcome for me. I am growing as a professional regardless of the designation. But the designation will come later, too.

Nuwan distinguishes between professional growth and hierarchical progression in order to make the point that his new position enables him to achieve growth as a professional. He also suggests, however, that there is significant hope for progression up the hierarchy in the future. This distinction between professional and hierarchical progression allows Nuwan to create a positive identity by drawing attention to the substance rather than the form of his job. Likewise, Ali explained how he could see scope for progress in his downgraded position:

So maybe I am in a post that I am overqualified for, but I feel there is great potential in it. I am developing at a good rate, so promotion will come in time.

While acknowledging the gap between his actual qualifications and his current occupational status, Ali draws attention to the development opportunities offered by his workplace and the related chance of future progress.

4.3 Fit

Several respondents relied on a 'fit' narrative to explain their new occupational experiences. These respondents were typically employed in small and medium-sized organisations. The authors of these narratives said that they were content with their new working lives, which now involved better work-life harmonisation.

4.3.1 Accounting for fit

Drawing on working hours, salary packages and favourable work conditions as cues, the respondents argued that their new occupational positions fit into their broader life circumstances. Senior analyst Tiasha, who was a company director back in Sri Lanka, explains:

I only applied for managerial jobs as soon I got here, but I didn't get anything and it was really frustrating, so I just let the idea go. Now the hours are very reasonable, I do not have to be at work all the time, and I still get a comfortable package..... So, this post allows me to balance work and life. Basically, I have time to tutor them (her children) for their A' levels. In Asian culture, we do everything for our children.

In this narrative, the initial difficulty of occupational downgrading is eventually overcome by considering the scope to achieve a healthier work-life harmonisation. Because her organisation offers reduced working hours, she is now able to see her new occupational experience fitting into her broader life circumstances. Declaring that '*we do everything for our children in Asian culture - we are different from people here*', Tiasha elevates reconciliation as an interpretation that applies to all Asian migrant workers. Seeing her circumstances as part of a collective condition allows her to justify her current occupational status.

Janaka, a man, also constructed a narrative of fit using financial imperatives as a cue:

This organisation pays very well regardless of your designation. I am making much more than I ever have. Actually, this post is better paid than even management posts. I am able to finance my kids' higher education through this job. I was Managing Director of DEF (his previous place of work in Asia). I had everything going for me but I could not have possibly financed higher education in the West, so when my kids started to get older, it was time to do something for them – we are Asian people after all, and we make sacrifices for our kids – we are quite different from people here. Money is important to us to enable us to do our duty.

Janaka draws attention to the substantial difference between salary packages in Asia and the West. His financial position, enables him to fulfil his duties to his family as well as harmonise work with his responsibilities at home. Constructing cultural differences between 'we Asian people' and 'the people here', Janaka elevates his sensemaking to the collective ethnic level. More specifically, he highlights the fact that most Asian migrants may interpret occupational downgrading as an avenue for harmonising their duties outside the workplace with their responsibilities at work.

4.3.2 Emotional experience of fit

Interpretations of fit were also influenced by the individuals' overall emotional experience within the organisation. In general, this category of respondents emphasised that their felt experience of employment was generally pleasant and non-problematic – they were happy and content - although not overly excited as respondents in the previous category. For example, Tiasha reported a positive emotional experience of her work, which formed a significant aspect of her interpretation of fit:

People are generally nice here. It is a small organisation and many people work part time so we don't interact with each other in a big way. But I am happy here. It is pleasant. I don't feel as if I have anything to worry about with regard to my colleagues.

Likewise, Janaka emphasised how a healthy level of work pressure produced a positive work experience and an overall feeling of satisfaction:

I feel that there is no pressure any more from anywhere – which is a positive thing. Otherwise it wouldn't work for us. Overall I am satisfied. I am not over the moon but it is not bad either. I don't feel that I have anything to complain about.

Overall, the above narratives convey a positive emotional experience, which is linked to an interpretation of good fit with the workplace. As for the previous set of 'opportunity' narratives, workers felt supported and relationally connected. Differently from the opportunity narratives, however, the emotions expressed here are more balanced and conducive to satisfaction rather than excitement about the workplace. Correspondingly, these workers linked their emotional experience to the prospect of developing a sounder work-life balance rather than the opportunity of pursuing career advancement.

4.3.3 Crafting a positive identity by reassessing one's priorities as an occupational being

The respondents drew on narratives of fit ('this suits us because we are different from them') to explain how they had reassessed their priorities as occupational beings. Previously, they had attached great significance to work, often prioritising work-related responsibilities over other commitments in their lives. Now, on the other hand, they attributed more importance to synchronizing their work and their lives, and as such they were able to construct a positive identity from the scope for balance in their new positions. For example, Tiasha explained how she changed her views and placed a higher value on work-life harmonisation as opposed to instrumental career progress:

For me, life is no longer all about work and advancement; it is also about my family.

Similarly, Rukshika highlighted how she reassessed her view of her career to adopt a more comprehensive view:

I was previously a person who saw her career in a completely different way. Now I see it in a more holistic way that goes beyond work to encompass life.

Overall, individuals like Tiasha and Rukshika seemed to be describing a trajectory that shifted from an instrumental focus on career progression to a more balanced view of work in the context of life in general. Through reassessment, they constructed themselves as people who have progressively acquired a more holistic view of life. By quietly accepting the status quo and enjoying better work-life harmonisation, they have been able to create a more positive identity around their downgraded status.

5. Discussion

In this article, we asked how skilled migrants make sense of occupational experiences in their work organisations after they enter the labour market. In order to address this question, we studied a group of highly-skilled migrants who had been forced to deal with the identity-challenging experience of occupational downgrading within their new host country's organisational settings. We identified three distinctive sensemaking narratives – disregard, opportunity and fit – each of which allowed individuals to construct a more positive identity in relation to their downgraded occupational status. The use of these narratives varied according to the organisational context in which the migrant workers were embedded and their overall felt experience within the organisation. Figure 2 depicts the sensemaking dynamics observed in our study in greater detail.

Insert figure 2 about here

Occupational downgrading poses a challenge to individuals' identity that triggers sensemaking. Sense is made both cognitively and emotionally. In the cases we observed, cognitive sensemaking was grounded in identification with the Asian ethnic collective and involved inscribing individuals' organisational experiences into a broader discourse on cultural values in Asia and the West. This was reflected in a homogenous generative pattern that manifested itself rhetorically in the recurring use of the 'us' and 'them' opposition. Emotional sensemaking involved forming interpretations based on the overall felt experience within an organisation. When people felt devalued and angry in the organisation, they formed antagonistic interpretations based on '*they are against us*'. When they felt highly excited about

their prospects within the organisation, their interpretations were positively distinctive and based on *'we can learn from them'*. Finally, when the individuals felt content with their overall experience within the organisation, their interpretations were reconciliatory and based on *'this works for us because we are different from them'*. Through each sensemaking narrative, individuals endeavoured to construct a more positive identity around their downgraded occupational status. Antagonistic interpretations deflected the stigma associated with occupational downgrading by shifting the blame to the host organisation. Positively distinctive interpretations allowed individuals to shift their attention to the positive reputations of their host organisations and their future career prospects. Finally, through reconciliatory interpretations, individuals portrayed themselves as people who valued and enjoyed a better work-life harmonisation. These findings have important theoretical implications for research on sensemaking, identity and global migration.

5.1. Creating positive identities through sensemaking

Our study highlights the role of sensemaking in the construction of positive identities. Research on identity has provided insights into how individuals attempt to maintain a positive sense of self in situations of identity devaluation in the workplace (Dutton et al. 2010). In most cases, the construction of positive identities has been seen as a largely individualistic endeavour (Ashforth et al. 2007; Fine, 1996; Maitlis, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al. 2003); however, some studies have recognised the contextualized nature of identity constructions, illustrating the distinct influence of work groups at an interpersonal level (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Dutton et al. 2012), occupation (Kreiner et al. 2006; Vough et al. 2015) at a meso level and broader cultural collectives at a macro level (Ailon-Souday and Kunda, 2003; Koveshnikov et al. 2016; Ybema and Byun, 2009). We extend understandings in this literature by showing how individuals progressively create positive identities by making the attribution that the treatment they have received is due to their social identity membership. In the case we observed, migrant workers connect their individual circumstances to interpersonal organisational dynamics and broader forms of cultural identification. This progressive amplification of the individual condition to a collective level occurs by means of sensemaking narratives by which individuals convey their perceptions of their co-workers and subsequently elevate their relational experience to the collective fate of all migrant workers. Generalising and normalising the situation (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002) enables individuals to distance themselves from the focal point of identity threat (Ashforth et al. 2007) – occupational downgrading, in this case – and to make it less personalised. Furthermore, as migrant workers begin to see themselves as

a collective, they come to view their occupational situation in terms of an “us versus them” distinction grounded in a broader ethnic identification. The ethnic group offers a stronger source of social validation and provides a platform for engaging in an array of positive identity tactics. In contrast to scholars such as Kreiner et al. (2006), who show how individuals separate ‘me’ from ‘we’ to preserve their sense of self in the midst of strong occupational demands, therefore, we argue that collectivising through the movement from ‘me to we’ enables individuals to strengthen their identity constructions through the principle of social extension. Our findings overall suggests that through sensemaking, migrant workers are able to develop self-justifications for their condition of occupational downgrading and convey their occupational experience under a more positive light, thereby creating positive identities. We thus highlight the sensemaking narratives that link particular work contingencies to identity (re)construction.

Our findings resonate with and extend previous research on stigmatised forms of dirty work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al. 2007; Hughes, 1958; Grandy & Marvin, 2012). Scholars have demonstrated that individuals often recast lower status work in more positive terms through collective identification that confers esteem-enhancing meaning (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In particular, dirty workers resort to occupational or workgroup identifications to retain positive self-definitions. In a similar vein, skilled migrant workers maintain positive identities in the face of occupational downgrading by collectivising their work experiences. One important difference, however, is that the category of (skilled) migrant workers cuts across occupations and workgroups. Unlike dirty workers, migrants respond to the stigma of occupational downgrading by connecting their personal circumstances to the fate of the ethnic group they belong to. This connection provides a source of self-justification for their occupational status, which creates positive identities by linking contingent circumstances to *universal* truths and values and the *collective* fate of migrant workers.

5.2 The role of cognition and emotions in positive identity construction

We theorise the cognitive and emotional sensemaking underpinning migrant workers’ identity construction in the workplace. While sensemaking research has traditionally favoured a cognitive focus, more recent studies have recognized that emotions are an integral part of sensemaking (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Patriotta, 2016, 2019; Rafaeli & Vilnay-Yavetx, 2004; Walsh & Bartunek, 2011). For example, Maitlis et al. (2013) have examined the role of emotions in triggering, shaping, and concluding sensemaking processes. Other scholars have shown how positive and negative emotions affect the cognitive processing of errors and failure

experiences (Byrne & Shepherd, 2013; Catino & Patriotta, 2013). Our findings corroborate, but also extend, these insights by showing how cognitive and emotional sensemaking link organisational contexts to individuals' identity construction.

Cognitive sensemaking provides generative patterns that form the basis for the construction of narratives. In the case we observed, narratives are built around homogeneous patterns based on the cultural opposition between 'us' and 'them'. Through cognitive patterns, migrant workers draw both a semantic and psychological boundary around different categories of workers: Asian migrants vs British. At the same time, the narratives acquire a different meaning depending on the migrants' felt experience of the workplace. This is because although all our informants shared a state of occupational downgrading, their interactions in the workplace generated different emotions and distinct perceptions of status as an occupational being (Dutton et al, 2016; Sandelands & Boudens, 2000). For instance, the deflecting tactic relied on the individual's forming an interpretation of disregard and adopting an antagonistic stance towards the host organisation on the basis of a negative emotional felt experience of anger. Likewise, the shifting emphasis tactic relied on the individual's forming an interpretation of opportunity and adopting a positive distinctive stance towards the organisation on the basis of a highly- excitable felt experience. Finally, the reassessment tactic relied on the individual's forming an interpretation of fit and adopting a reconciliatory stance towards the organisation on the basis of a felt experience characterised by contentment and satisfaction. These insights are theoretically important because they demonstrate that identity strategies are grounded in individuals' perceptions and felt experiences of particular workplaces. More specifically, while cognition provides ready-made patterns for framing perceptions of individual work experiences, emotions put a particular spin on these perceptions, thereby influencing the specific pathways through which identity work is achieved.

5.3 Organisational underpinnings of migrants' sensemaking and identity processes

Our findings reveal the influence of the organisational context on skilled migrants' sensemaking and identity processes. Research on international migration has mainly adopted a macro focus aimed at explaining how migrants cope with challenges in a host country's labour market (Richardson, 2009; Syed, 2008; Zikic, 2015). The institutional requirements of the profession pose a challenge because migrants need to understand and interpret the unfamiliar local institutional frameworks they encounter in new labour markets. Immigration systems, local regulatory bodies, professional associations, and so on constitute specific macro level institutional sources of threat that impact on skilled migrants' sense of value and identity. For

example, Zikic and Richardson (2016) have found that host countries' institutional requirements – in the form of professional pre-entry scripts – may constitute significant career barriers and act as triggers of identity work. In contrast, our findings emphasise the importance of organisational contexts as drivers of migrant workers' understanding of their own condition. In particular, we suggest that organisational contexts provide microcosms within which migrant workers connect their individual circumstances to broader interpersonal and cultural dynamics. This is theoretically important because it sheds light on the micro-level dynamics that influence migrants' occupational experience after they enter the labour market: that is, after they have dealt with the institutional requirements of the profession in the host country.

Organisational contexts also explain dynamics of similarity and variation within a community's experience of the same phenomenon. Previous research on communities of practice has shown how employees start to see themselves as insiders as they participate in their micro occupational communities (see Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In a similar vein, Sonenshein et al. (2013) suggest that although individuals within a particular community arguably draw from a constellation of cultural resources (Swidler 2001, Weber 2005) they nevertheless end up with relatively similar interpretations (see also Ashforth et al. 2007; Maitlis 2009). In contrast, our findings show variations in interpretations across migrant workers who are from the same occupational community but are embedded in different organisational contexts. For example, migrant workers engage in interactions that are actively interpreted as valuing or devaluing (Dutton et al., 2016). This is because the characteristics of the organisational context provide a set of cues that prompt individuals to make attributions and infer the motives or intent of the "other" involved in the interaction. These insights are theoretically relevant because they point out the moderating role of organizational contexts in linking sensemaking to identity processes. They offer a more fine-grained theoretical understanding of how context influences the construction of positive identities in the workplace. More generally, they lay out the basis for future studies on the micro-foundations of global migration dynamics.

6. Managerial implications and directions for future research

Our study has significant implications for organisational policy makers, HR personnel, career guidance counsellors, managers of others' careers and highly-skilled migrants. Our findings indicate that migrant workers' interpretations of new occupational experiences and their overall stance vis-à-vis the host culture are significantly shaped by organisational factors. They show how the micro-organisational context shapes employees' sense of belonging and

their perceptions of their own career prospects. Based on these findings, we argue that organisational policy makers should ensure minority ethnic representation in senior positions because they serve as a significant motivator for under-represented workers. Furthermore, HR personnel should formulate special HR practices to help migrant employees integrate into their new organisations and roles and increase their sense of belonging.

Second, our findings indicate that the culture of origin is a significant lens through which migrants perceive and make sense of new occupational experiences in the host country, at least during the initial phases of migration. Individuals see things from the cultural group's perspective and their expectations are shaped by the cultural group's norms (Stets & Burke, 2000). Managers should be made aware of the differences in the type of support people from various cultures are accustomed to receiving so that they are better able to manage expectations and help migrant employees through the transition to employment in a new cultural context.

Our findings are based on a small group of migrant management accountants from Sri Lanka, and we acknowledge that we cannot generalise our findings across all migrant professionals. Having said this, our study provides insights into how the sensemaking processes highly-skilled migrants engage with in order to deal with occupational downgrading are influenced by broader cultural discourse and social identities. We invite scholars to develop our work. Scholars might further understanding of what leads people to make sense of occupational disruptions in positive and negative ways: is it only a matter of organisational circumstances, or do other factors play a part? What might be the influence of intersecting social identities such as religious identity, which might shape individuals' general outlooks, their resilience, their hopes for the future and thus their propensity for making sense of circumstances in a broadly positive or negative way? Furthermore, would prior experience of dealing with change shape individuals' sensemaking in any way?

A particularly fruitful line of inquiry might be to focus on the impact of cities on individuals' sensemaking. The phenomenon of migration is significantly associated with cities, as some are more receptive to migrants than others. From this perspective, the influence of cities on individuals' sensemaking as it pertains to their careers might prove to be a particularly pertinent line of inquiry, given that careers are often grounded in the socioeconomic fabric of particular cities.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have examined highly-skilled migrants' sensemaking in new host country organisational settings. Sensemaking was triggered by the identity challenge posed by occupational downgrading. We identified three distinctive sensemaking narratives, which had cognitive and emotional dimensions. Cognitive sensemaking was grounded in identification with the Asian ethnic collective, and involved inscribing individuals' organisational experiences within a broader discourse on cultural values in Asia and the West. Emotional sensemaking involved forming interpretations on the basis of one's overall felt experience within an organisation. Taken together, these findings illustrate how cognitive and emotional sensemaking connect positive identity construction to broader organisational and social contexts. These understandings can be extended beyond migration to other situations in which one inscribes one's own experience within an organisation as part of a broader communal experience, allowing individuals to make the identity threats they experience less personalised and setting the stage for them to engage in particular kinds of positive identity construction tactics.

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Table 1: Background of respondents

Name	Age	Years in UK	Gender	Current designation in host country	Previous designation in home country	Sector
1. Palitha	38	6	Male	Senior management accountant	Financial Controller	Logistics
2. Amithya	45	6	Male	Finance manager	Director	Pharmaceuticals
3. Gihan	28	2	Male	Accountant	Assistant Manager	Event management
4. Jeydan	36	4	Male	Controller Accountant	Finance Manager	NHS
5. Dion	35	5	Male	Senior Analyst	Finance Manager	Insurance
6. Kamal	45	5	Male	Commercial Accountant	Finance Director	Manufacturing
7. Mesith	31	4	Male	Senior Accountant	Finance Manager	NHS
8. Ronak	43	5	Male	Senior Analyst	Senior Finance Manager	Public sector
9. Tharindu	29	2	Male	Management Accountant	Revenue Manager	Manufacturing
10. Ali	30	3	Male	Accountant	Supply chain manager	Logistics
11. Malinda	32	4	Male	Senior Analyst	Operations and Finance Manager	Logistics
12. Nandadeva	38	3	Male	Analyst	Finance Controller	Media
13. Kasun	27	4	Male	Revenue Accountant	Assistant Manager	NHS
14. Hasindu	27	3	Male	Senior Analyst	Manager of Accounting	NHS
15. Namal	42	6	Male	Finance Manager	Director	Aerospace
16. Janith	26	3	Male	Analyst	Senior Accountant	Pharmaceuticals
17. Sean	38	4	Male	Business Partner	Finance Manager	Telecommunications
18. Sharadha	29	3	Male	Senior Accountant	Finance Manager	Media
19. Dayan	42	5	Male	Supply chain finance manager	Finance Director	Logistics
20. Sruti	29	3	Female	Management accountant	Planning Manager	Retail
21. Janaka	48	3	Male	Analyst	Financial Controller	Retail
22. Sudharma	41	4	Female	Finance Analyst	Senior Manager Finance	Insurance
23. Tiasha	45	6	Female	Senior analyst	Director	Information Technology
24. Achala	42	3	Female	Accountant	Financial Controller	Information technology
25. Esandi	29	3	Female	Analyst	Assistant Manager of Finance	Transport
26. Shreya	33	4	Female	Planning accountant	Finance Manager	Logistics
27. Rukshika	36	5	Female	Management Accounting Manager	Financial controller	Information technology
28. Malini	32	5	Female	Senior Analyst	Finance Manager	Banking
29. Hansika	40	3	Female	Assistant finance manager	Director	Manufacturing
30. Jayathri	39	6	Female	Assistant Finance Manager	Finance Controller	Pharmaceuticals
31. Thakshila	34	4	Female	Senior accountant	Finance Manager	Retail
32. Erangani	26	2	Female	Management trainee	Senior Accountant	Logistics
33. Nuwan	27	3	Male	Accountant	Assistant Manager	Logistics
34. Mal	38	4	Male	Treasury Accountant	Finance Manager	Public sector
35. Zain	40	5	Male	Commercial Accountant	Finance Manager	NHS
36. Randev	46	6	Male	Planning manager	Director	Petrochemical
37. Rohan	41	5	Male	Senior Analyst	Director	Transport
38. Parakrama	44	5	Male	Senior Analyst	Financial controller	NHS

Table 2 - The disregard narrative: Excerpts illustrating first-order codes

	Indicative quotes
Little support vs. plenty of support back home	<p><i>I have received no help here – nothing at all. They don't want to help us because they don't want us to progress. Back home, we go out of our way to support new people – I don't understand what is happening here (Rohan)</i></p> <p><i>Generally, anyone helps out new people in organisations especially when they are new to the country or at least that is what we do back home but here, they don't care. So and there are very few support structures in the organisation as a whole. (Kasun)</i></p>
Little direction vs. plenty of direction back home	<p><i>In Sri Lanka we are precise 'this is what we want'. Here is exactly the opposite - people don't want to be prescriptive (Randev)</i></p> <p><i>We are explicit, so we expect to receive clear directions from our bosses. But here everyone is very vague ((Sudharma)</i></p>
Only few Asians at the top	<p><i>There are very few foreigners or minority ethnic people in senior positions (Mesith)</i></p> <p><i>You don't see many foreigners or people of colour in the top – it sends a message to people like us 'you will never make it here' 'you are devalued now and you will always be' I am clearly more qualified than my bosses so the message is very clear (Mal)</i></p>
Feeling like an outsider	<p><i>I have felt quite isolated in this organisation – They don't bother with you– they don't try to include you (Sisil)</i></p> <p><i>I felt completely out of it – all the chit chat and everything (Palitha)</i></p>
Feeling devalued	<p><i>I felt that nobody saw any value in me – regardless of my qualifications (Kasun)</i></p> <p><i>You feel as if no-one values your opinion and what you have to say (Palitha)</i></p>
Colleagues don't seem to care	<p><i>You instantly feel that they don't care about you (Sisil)</i></p> <p><i>They just don't care – they are not bothered about anyone (Zain)</i></p>
Feeling anger	<p><i>It ticks me off sometimes (Hasindu)</i></p> <p><i>You feel the angry obviously – anyone would (Zain)</i></p>
Collective fate of Asian workers	<p><i>Every migrant I know has had a similar experience – it is not just me (Zain)</i></p> <p><i>When you think about others who are in the same boat – you realise that you shouldn't take it too personally (Mesith)</i></p>
Discounting self-blame	<p><i>It is not my fault that I am in this position (Mesith)</i></p> <p><i>It is difficult perform because you receive very little help from anyone ... I am able to grasp anything in the right environment (Kasun)</i></p>
We are intelligent people	<p><i>Our education levels and skills sets are very high... we are not dumb people. Asian people are very intelligent (Mal)</i></p> <p><i>Asian are very strong analytically - no one can doubt their skill sets (Jeydan)</i></p>

Table 3 - The opportunity narrative: Excerpts illustrating first-order codes

	Indicative quotes
Training is and support are incredible	<i>The support structures are very good. We have not had that kind of experience back home. If there are gaps, they train you on the job (Namal)</i> <i>You are trained and well supported with everything (Dion)</i>
Sophisticated processes	<i>I had experience in leading MNCs back home but here the atmosphere is something else. It is totally stimulating – everything is done in a state-of-the-art manner (Namal)</i> <i>Everything is so advanced here – processes are continuously improved (Malinda)</i>
Company reputation important to Asian people	<i>It is NAME after all – so it is not surprising. It is very prestigious for people from our part of the world (Namal)</i> <i>the company is so well known which is a big thing in our circles (Esandi)</i>
Feeling valued	<i>I can feel that they see potential in me– I get this when I interact with bosses, senior colleagues and junior colleagues (Malini)</i> <i>I feel that they value me –I can see myself here in the long run (Ali)</i>
Feeling that the organisation desires your development	<i>I feel that they want to my career to progress here (Janith)</i> <i>They want me to stay and grow within the organisation – I can feel it (Esandi)</i>
Feeling excitement	<i>I am thrilled about my work here (Esandi)</i> <i>I very early look forward to everyday at work (Ali)</i>
Emphasising scope for future career progression	<i>I can see a path for me here (Janith)</i> <i>When I look into the future – there is scope in this organisation to go further (Dion)</i>
Emphasising potential to learn	<i>This is good outcome for me to further my knowledge (Esandi)</i> <i>I see this appointment as an opportunity for learning –there is so much out here to learn (Ali)</i>
Professional development as a source of status	<i>I might be an analyst but my development is immense (Sean)</i> <i>I now focus on the potential for my development (Ali)</i>

Table 4 - The fit narrative - Excerpts illustrating first-order codes

	Indicative quotes
Salary package	<i>It is not a bad compromise – They pay me well (Hansika)</i> <i>The money is good – very good for the amount of work we do. (Rithika)</i>
Reasonable hours	<i>I have more time in hands than I ever did (Hansika)</i> <i>I am not up to my chin with work anymore (Rithika)</i>
Work conditions and perks help us fulfil Asian cultural duties to family	<i>In our culture we have significant responsibilities to family and we need the time to fulfil them. The flexibility is very good even though the company is not known (Thakshila)</i> <i>Family comes before self to us – we are moulded like that so it is a factor in everything we do. You need time and money to do things for family (Rukshika)</i>
Feeling unpressured	<i>I am not stressed anymore, so I can focus on other things – it is not a high-pressure environment (Rithika)</i> <i>I don't feel any tension anymore – on the positive side (Thakshila)</i>
Feeling happy	<i>Everyone is nice here – it is a real pleasure to work (Rithika)</i> <i>People are nice. You feel that it is a happy place (Jayathri)</i>
Feeling satisfied	<i>I can say that I am content with my lot (Gihan)</i> <i>I am satisfied – it works for me (Hansika)</i>
I get on well with them	<i>You can have a good working relationship with people here (Hansika)</i> <i>I can get along with them – a smooth relationship (Rithika)</i>
Harmonising home and work	<i>Friends are important now family is important now and the time I spend with them – it was not like that before. (Thakshila)</i> <i>I value balance now - it is very important for me (Jayathri)</i>
Adopting a holistic view of life	<i>I have realised that there is more to life than work (Hansika)</i> <i>It is about the way you look at life – it changed for me (Jayathri)</i>

I am a different person now	<i>I am not in resistance to life anymore. I now see work in a different way – life is not all about work (Gihan)</i> <i>I have changed as a person (Rihika)</i>
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Figure 1 – Coding structure

First-Order Categories	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Little support vs plenty of support back home <input type="checkbox"/> Little direction vs plenty of direction back home <input type="checkbox"/> Only few Asians in top positions 	Accounting for disregard	Cognitive sensemaking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sophisticated processes <input type="checkbox"/> Training and support are incredible <input type="checkbox"/> Company reputation important to Asian people unlike people here 	Accounting for opportunity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Salary package <input type="checkbox"/> Reasonable hours <input type="checkbox"/> Work conditions and perks help us fulfil Asian cultural duties to family 	Accounting for fit	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling devalued – “they think that you are nothing” <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling like an outsider, not feeling welcome <input type="checkbox"/> Colleagues don’t seem to care 	Felt experience of disregard	Emotional sensemaking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling highly valued <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling that the organisation desires your development <input type="checkbox"/> Colleagues seem to care 	Felt experience of opportunity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Colleagues are decent/nice/friendly <input type="checkbox"/> I get on well with them <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling unpressured 	Felt experience of fit	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Discounting self-blame <input type="checkbox"/> Collective fate of Asian workers <input type="checkbox"/> “We are intelligent/bright/talented people” 	Deflecting stigma	Creating positive identities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Emphasising potential to learn <input type="checkbox"/> Emphasising scope for future career progression <input type="checkbox"/> Professional development as a source of status 	Shifting emphasis	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Harmonising work-life balance <input type="checkbox"/> Adopting a holistic view of life <input type="checkbox"/> I am a different person now 	Reassessing priorities	

Figure 2 – Sensemaking and identity dynamics

