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Migrants: First Work Encounters

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Abstract

Migrants struggle to perform to expectation during their early years of settlement – a phenomenon usually ascribed to a combination of host country characteristics, migrant profile and the ‘acculturation’ process. The current study aimed to explore the role of migrants’ ‘first work encounters’ against the background of acculturation. Semi-structured phenomenological interviews were conducted with 19 South African migrants to Australia. Apart from confirming the personally challenging nature of migration, the study revealed that first work encounters facilitate realism, induce culture shock and generally influence migrants’ adjustment and acculturation. The findings have important implications for migrant support and Human Resource Management practices.

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1. Introduction

With increasing global integration the movement of resources across international boundaries has evolved to become a characteristic feature of the global landscape. Apart from financial resources, human resources are now traversing international boundaries with greater ease and frequency. A large segment of the latter is informed by economic considerations, facilitated also by exponential growth in the number of multinational companies (Chao & Moon, 2005, p. 1128) and access to increasingly affordable international travel. This trend, however, has been influenced also by governments who have pertinently targeted skilled migration as a strategy to supplement workforce deficiencies and to stimulate economic development (Clydesdale, 2011). Migrant labour is undoubtedly a subject of considerable economic and political importance. Recent indications are that global migration is set to continue its upward trajectory (Koser & Laczko, 2010) suggesting the need for greater managerial.

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In what can be considered a logical consequence of the demanding and unsettling nature of the migration process, but nonetheless surprising, migrant economic performance generally does not seem to live up to expectations. Büchel and Frick (2003), in a study involving eight European countries, observed that the economic performance of immigrants is notably lower than that of the local populations. This performance differential appears to be consistent across countries and immigrant profiles. This suggests that the origins for unrealised immigrant performance are more likely to be found in country-specific institutional arrangements and regulatory parameters (e.g. citizenship, access to labour markets), which impose constraints on immigrants. Generally though, the primary causes for migrant underperformance are typically ascribed to host country characteristics (e.g. politics, labour market dynamics and legislation) and, in particular, ‘acculturation’ (cf. Bernardi et al., 2010; Schwartz & Unger 2010). While these considerations have received considerable research attention, a substantial need for continuing research in these areas remains. Phinney et al. (2001) for example have argued that the wellbeing of ‘newcomers’ (migrants) should be a priority research agenda in all migrant-receiving countries. This is largely because of the complexity prevalent in multifaceted research settings, characterized by unique combinations of migrant and host country profiles, government ideologies and policies, and broader contextual dynamics at a specific point in time. Research into migrant experiences in the workplace e.g. workplace adjustment (cf. Bernardi et al., 2010), migrant occupational and career dynamics, as well as the obstacles they face (Fang, Zikic, & Novicevic, 2009) consequently remain limited. In this regard insufficient attention has been directed at the migrant’s first work experiences in his/her new, adopted country. This is an area of considerable importance as migrants are likely to construct enduring frames of reference on the basis of their first encounters of the foreign or ‘new’ workplace and their first work experiences. If, indeed, the workplace occupies a central position in the migrant’s acculturation (cf. Van de Vijver & Phalet, 2004), this then becomes an important research and intervention focus also for Organizational Psychology and Human Resource Management.

2. Purpose of the study

Given this context, a research project embracing both an initial exploratory (qualitative) phase followed by a second, more explanatory and predictive (quantitative) phase was scoped with the objective of shedding light on those factors and considerations in the migrant’s work environment that constrain or facilitate the migrant’s settling-in and acculturation. The current study represents a first stage within this research endeavor and aimed to explore the first work encounters and workplace(s) of migrants against the backdrop of acculturation and settling-in. More specifically, the researchers wanted to obtain a saturated and lived-world understanding of the migrant’s first actual experience of work in his/her newly adopted country – hence the focus on ‘first work encounters’. This paper specifically reports the initial observations obtained from the 19-strong cohort of South African participants that were secured in this part of the study (South African migrants to Australia being the first of five migrant groups to be engaged in the research).

3. Methodology

Participants were identified through word-of-mouth and purposefully approached for participation. In this manner 19 South African migrants who settled in Australia were engaged in the study. Most of these secured visas as skilled migrants and possessed qualifications generally ranging between a B-degree and doctoral degrees – see Table 1). Consistent with this visa status migrants were formerly employed in South Africa, among other, as engineers, chartered accountants, lawyers, and psychologists.

Following a briefing on the research and after securing informed, voluntary consent, the participants that agreed to participate in this study were then engaged in semi-structured phenomenological interviews. The primary focus of these interviews was for respondents to recount their migration experiences since their arrival in the country. A short series of sequenced but broad, open ended questions were posed to participants. Questions

addressed such topics as the migrants' initial and current perceptions and experiences of the host country as well as their views of the challenges associated with living in the host country. Recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and narratives analyzed, using basic content analysis. To ensure consistency in interpretation, the meaning ascribed to participants' narratives were cross-checked among the researchers. Following several repeated 'passes' through the data, focusing on intact phrases as the smallest units of meaning and revisiting margin notes, several general themes pertaining to South African migrants' experience of this process were surfaced. Within this dataset, the researchers then pertinently focused on participants' references to 'work' and the 'workplace' from which several more specific themes about migrants' first work encounters and experiences with the 'new' Australian workplace emerged. These are briefly introduced and discussed under 'Findings'.

Table 1. Respondent profile

Respondent ID ^a	Gender ^b	Age	Residency ^c	Educational Qualification	Alignment: Employment ^d	Registered Professional
Resp1	M	39	8	B.Ing degree	N-	Engineer
Resp3	M	44	3	B.Ing	N-	Engineer
Resp6	M	59	25	Dipl Instr Eng	N-	-
Resp7	M	48	3	N4	Y=	-
Resp8	M	36	21	Cert IV Building & Construction	N.A.	-
Resp9	F	43	3.5	Grade 12	N-	-
Resp10	F	55	12	LL.B	N-	Lawyer
Resp11	M	53	3	M.Com, MBA	N-	Psychologist
Resp12	F	48	3.5	Hons, MBA	N-	-
Resp16	M	27	2.5	Hons B.Com	Y-	Chartered Accountant
Resp18	M	53	2.5	D.Litt et Phil	Y-	Psychologist
Resp20	M	44	5	Hons B.Com	Y=	-
Resp21	M	50	5	Dipl Metallurgy	N-	-
Resp22	M	47	4	LL.B	N-	Lawyer
Resp23	M	51	6	D.Com	N-	-
Resp24	F	35	3	Hons	N-	-
Resp25	F	38	4	Hons B.Com	N-	Chartered Accountant
Resp26	F	52	9	D.Ed, LLB	Y-	-
Resp27	F	41	3	Dipl	N-	-

Notes. All respondents were married.

^aRespondent numbering reflect the administrative numbering sequence with omitted 'numbers' reflecting ineligibility for various reasons such as being of a different nationality (e.g. Chinese), or having retired prior to migration, etc. ^bMale(M), Female(F). ^cPeriod of residence in Australia at the time of the research. ^dAlignment of pre-migration employment with the first employment taken up in the Host country is indicated with Y – 'Yes', N – 'No' or 'N.A.', where 'Yes' signifies consistency from pre- to post- migration position content e.g. engineering in both situations (as opposed to *engineering* and *sales*). Alignment is not applicable (N.A.) where no employment occurred before migration. Alignment of pre- and post-migration employment in terms of level / seniority is indicated with the symbols '+', '=' and '-', indicating the post-migration position as being of a higher level (+), on the same level (=) or a lower level (-) respectively.

4. Findings

In this exploration of South African migrants' experience and first work encounters in Australia, three meta-themes were identified. The first revealed migration as a significant challenge that entailed major sacrifices. Secondly, employment (and the new workplace) is a central preoccupation and, thirdly, pertinent dynamics characterize first workplace encounters. Observations are consequently presented in accordance with this structure.

4.1. Migration as challenge and sacrifice

Consistent with conventional knowledge about the migration experience, the narratives of 11 of the 19

respondents in this study confirmed the challenging nature of the migration experience, for example: ‘...it’s really been difficult...’ (Resp21); ‘...not for sissies and not for everybody...’ (Resp07). While this is to be expected, the observation is significant, in part, because of the cultural proximity of the migrants’ culture of origin and the host culture. Parallels are generally noted in history, geographic and climatic features, industrial and economic development, social profile and custom but, most importantly, the countries are generally *perceived* to be very similar by both Australian and South African nationals. Intensified adjustment challenges are more probable when migration occurs between less proximal cultures. Van de Vijer and Phalet (2004, p. 218) for example observed that ‘...when the actual or perceived cultural distance between original and host culture is large, there is indeed no psychological area that remains unaffected by migration’. Secondly, because of the (high) level of skills of the respondent cohort, it could be argued that coping skills should similarly be at an advanced level - given more complex and higher levels of functioning associated with professional occupations and roles.

Respondents without exception reported substantial ‘sacrifice’ associated with migration (12 of 19 respondents). ‘Sacrifice’ for this cohort meant a reduction or abandonment of, among other, a pre-migration lifestyle (‘...we could never replicate the kind of lifestyle we had in South Africa’, Resp26), most often associated with a loss of financial independence or freedom from financial burdens (‘We came from being owners with a never-ending supply of money to here where we had to work on one salary’, Resp27); sacrificing occupation, seniority or careers e.g. ‘I left a very good job behind to come here to no job...’ (Resp26); a loss of status (‘...you might be a kingpin in South Africa and you find you’re not in Australia.’ – Resp26); relinquishing networks (‘...when you emigrate I think you lose that network, you lose all the colleagues you had...’, Resp10), and/or friendships and family relations (‘...most people sacrifice relationships with family’, Resp22). These sacrifices were invariably accompanied by dissonance and psychological discomfort associated with the challenges migrants encountered. This pattern is consistent with ‘culture shock’ which is usually defined as an adverse psychological reaction e.g. a feeling of inability accompanied by negative affect (such as anxiety, confusion), which stems from contact with a new and unfamiliar culture *and* the loss of a familiar cultural and social setting (cf. Brown & Holloway, 2008; Winkelman, 1994; Yost & Lucas, 2002). The prominence with which South African migrants’ recounted the *challenges* encountered during their first work engagements suggest this to be a primary setting for culture shock and acculturation.

4.2. Prominence of ‘work’ and ‘workplace’

Work (employment), *working* and the new or ‘foreign’ *workplace* were particularly salient in respondent narratives. No less than 13 (of the 19) migrants noted at the time of their arrival in Australia that they were concerned about *finding employment*, while those who secured employment prior to arrival expressed uncertainty about the unknown nature of the new workplace. This however represents a small minority (two migrants) who arrived on what is known as the ‘457’ Visa (cf. Toh & Quinlan 2009).

Particularly telling, are the interviewees’ responses to a question which required them to reflect on their residency since arrival in the country and to indicate those aspects of living and working in Australia that they experienced as most challenging. Sixteen migrants indicated *employment* in the host country as the most challenging / one of the most challenging aspects of being a resident migrant. For 14 respondents this was the most important challenge (and the second and third nominated challenge for the two remaining respondents). Three respondents, in addition, also indicated that work / working in the Australian workplace was the greatest challenge *for their partners*. Respondent 12’s commentary is illustrative: ‘I think the fact that J [husband] in the beginning struggled to find work also created much stress’; and ‘I think the one that was the worst hit by the immigration was my wife. She had to give up her work back in SA she had actually her own business plus teaching job in SA...’ (Resp3); or Respondent 10 commenting on her husband, a very successful Accountant who had a very large practice in South Africa prior to migrating: ‘...he had the full Monty... he would be your

classic case of really struggling to fit in and just hated every moment... hated the people...hated the atmosphere... the climate. He hated the fact that it was flat and all he did was complain’; and *‘So he just took strain, strain, strain, strain, strain...’* (Resp10).

These observations are also meaningful from the perspective that respondents regarded issues related to ‘work’ more prominently than the typically assumed challenges associated with re-establishing an identity (e.g. opening up bank accounts, securing driving licences, finding schools for children, securing accommodation) and settling in and finding their way around in a new environment - in particular fitting in socially and relating to the community. While the latter were encountered and voiced, they were not perceived to be of the same magnitude and/or intensity as those relating to the workplace, as one respondent indicated... *‘The place where I spend most of my time is my workplace; I think that is where it’s most prominent to me...’* (Resp20); or *‘...for me personally the major challenge would have been in the working environment, having moved countries...’* (Resp01).

Migrants’ work-related challenges actually commenced upon arrival in the country, before securing employment. For many this centred on the novel and uncomfortable status of *being unemployed* and, unexpectedly struggling to secure employment:

‘...When I got here I thought well this is the land of opportunity and then when I tried to find a job I couldn’t find a job...’ (Resp27)

‘... start looking for a job, and that takes longer than you expected...’ (Resp20)

‘...it was very frustrating not to get a work and coming from a culture where you work rather than lived on the dole, it was hard you know - that was the hardest part of adapting... saying that you need to work rather than sitting around...’ (Resp6)

Challenges also related to what South African migrants perceived as the *idiosyncratic features of the Australian workplace* and the *Australian way of working*, for example:

‘...I would say the whole style of working is different [...] more individualistic, a lot more...’ (Resp12)

‘...some things are as different as day and night...’ (Resp1).

‘...they do have different procedures and things...’ (Resp3)

‘These okes [blokes] are a lot more relaxed and their working methods are different’ (Resp7)

For most migrants securing employment also meant a *different and substantially reduced work role and status*:

‘... I’m not really using my potential here...’ and *‘...I’m in a career where I am doing what I can find to do – and so that’s another frustration’* (Resp24)

‘...coming here you are at the bottom of the ladder again...’ (Resp1).

In a few instances (five respondents) challenges related to *disingenuous / exploitative employers*, for example:

...

‘... you tend to do a bit more than the average Aussie and very easily that is recognised and misused’ (Resp22)

‘...just being in that situation of feeling you were misled isn’t a good experience.’ (Resp01); and

‘...coming to terms with what seems to be fairly suppressive and exploitative behaviour.’ (Resp18); and

‘...the company who should have sponsored me had some financial difficulties and they played games with me.’ (Resp7); and

‘In SA you knew where to expect racism or segregation and you do not expect that in the new country’ and *‘When I started to work I experienced it ...’* (Resp8)

Migration, of course, is widely recognised to be an exceptionally demanding psychosocial challenge, (García-Ramírez et al., 2011; Van de Vijver & Phaet, 2004), most often accounted for with the theory of acculturation (cf. Berry, 1997, 2001; Dere et al., 2010). Acculturation is framed as a reciprocal change process that is induced in both the migrant and the host culture representatives through interpersonal contact and interaction. From the perspectives of the interviewed respondents it is evident that work-related challenges actually occur during, and as a consequence of, the first substantive interaction that the migrant has with representatives of the host culture and from which change i.e. the process of acculturation, follows.

The adverse impact of the migration process on the psychological health and well-being of the migrant, often

over a protracted period, is similarly well documented and reports of acculturation stress and depression among migrants are consequently common (Bhugra, 2004; Neto, 2010; Whitlock, 1971). In the current study 11 respondents acknowledged that their experience of the Australian workplace had adversely *impacted their functioning*. Respondents, for example, indicated significant inter- and intrapersonal dissonance and strain...

'... and if you are looking for work and they say to you 'Sorry, but you do not have enough Australian experience' it leaves a bitter taste...' (Resp11)

'... he sat for year doing nothing...feeling miserable and going mad and, you know, really depressed out of his mind' (Resp10)

'My increasing disenchantment and disillusionment with the workplace – becoming more aware of deviousness and unfairness – prompted considerable reflection and self-analysis' (Resp18).

These types of experiences impacted the work situation and the situation at home, for example:

'...when you go through all these things your marriage becomes very strained at times because you both get frustrated with each other's situations...' (Resp25)

'... Yeah, I think it would have affected the work. You do not operate at full potential at work ...' (Resp03)

'...here I've often felt frustrated at work if my colleagues or whoever I approach don't deal with the issues the same way I do' (Resp24).

'...I must say awareness of this in yourself is difficult, but if you were to ask other people they would say 'yes' I was stressed, and a little short tempered...' (Resp11)

'... I don't sort of... don't get into good situations with my colleagues...' (Resp23)

These observations draw attention to the importance of the foreign (new) workplace as a critical acculturation setting and hence an arena of adjustment. The migrant's exposure to this work setting with its embedded challenges prompts dissonance and a series of intrapersonal dynamics that are fundamental to adjustment and the acculturation process.

4.3. Dynamics of migrants' first work encounters

Respondent narratives suggest that several primary dynamics underpin the adjustment challenge that migrants face during their first work encounters. These stem from pre-existing and untested assumptions and hence expectations about circumstances in the host country and own capabilities for succeeding. The first is about the nature of work and the new workplace, reinforced by perceptions that the country of origin and the host country are substantially similar prior to arriving in the country. The second is concerned with the migrant's confidence in his/her competence and expertise (self-efficacy), borne from an established and successful career in the South African context (acknowledging that most South African migrants are granted residency visas on the basis of skills that are considered scarce in Australia). These are briefly outlined in the ensuing discussion.

4.3.1. Workplace realities and culture shock

The South African migrant appears to anticipate substantial similarity between the South African and Australian workplaces – an understandable position considering that the perceived similarities between the countries regularly surfaced as reason for choosing Australia as migration destination rather than Canada or the United Kingdom, for example: '...I personally did not want to go to Canada or America, I kind of identified more with Australians than I did with anybody else in the world. Climate was a big thing – it was very similar, so the similarities in terms of where we were going were probably a big driving factor' (Resp21), but also '...similarity in both climate and perceived culture...' (Resp20) and "... the cultures in SA and Australia are very similar..." (Resp6); and '...for me was very similar because not just from the basic things, the weather conditions and so on, but in terms of similar sporting activities...' (Resp1)

Migrant assumptions and expectations about work and workplaces in the host country (Australia) unavoidably will be informed by this tacit understanding of *sufficient similarity*. Indeed, to a fair degree migrants seem to

harbour an uncritical expectation of merely continuing in a role in the host country workplace that is similar in nature, seniority, and required competencies to that 'left behind' in the South African workplace (e.g. '*...coming to Australia I thought I could just continue where I left off...*', Resp24). Perceived similarities between the two countries appear to mask underlying cultural differences, to the point that migration appears (deceptively) uncomplicated. Yost and Lucas (2002, p. 155) for example observed that culture shock is greater when (because) '*...the chasm between the country of origin and the new culture is so great*'. The prerequisite however is that the migrant has to perceive it as such and until such time that this is recognised, the new culture is everything but daunting. For the current study, it is only once the migrant commences work and has attempted to function in the 'new' workplace for a period of time that he/she becomes aware of meaningful differences in various facets of the work setting. It was not uncommon for respondents to state, for example, '*...Initially you think it's very alike, but it isn't. That was a shock to me.*' (Resp20) and '*...when I first came here it was a very big wake-up call because the cultures are very different.*' (Resp27).

This realisation prompts recognition of unanticipated differences between the South African and Australian workplaces: '*... it takes a few months for you to realise 'yes, that's all great', but you have actually lost some things as well and that's when you start going downhill a bit, I think*' (Resp25). This then becomes a source of dissonance and stress and... '*After about three to four months into being here and being in the role, then you start to struggle with some things*' and '*...then you think 'oh' but there's some things that are actually going to be hard, harder than I thought*' (Resp25). Consider also the view '*...it only caught up with me that it is not a holiday when I started to work permanently every day. Then the reality struck me...*' (Resp9)

4.3.2. Knowledge deficits and inoperative work paradigms

Respondent narratives also revealed that upon entry of the foreign workplace for the first time, the migrant is confronted with a reality that deviates from the beliefs, assumptions and consequently expectations that he/she tacitly held up to that point in time. The dissonance prompted by the observed 'differences' in and of the Australian workplace extends beyond a mere acknowledgment that personal work approaches are ineffectual... In several instances respondents indicated that they lack knowledge in areas such as the business environment e.g. '*...it was just challenging and to get to know how things operate; to get to know the business entities that you will work with on a frequent basis. I'm still learning and that after 3,5 years...*' (Resp22) and '*... the challenge for me was... to up-skill myself, to open up and learn a whole new field... I did have to learn an entire system...*' (Resp26).

Particularly insightful are those comments that reveal the incomprehensibility, sense of confusion and 'powerlessness' that are symptomatic of 'culture shock'. Respondents for example indicated

'... to me the most frustrating thing is the one in the workplace because I don't have a handle on how to resolve it' (Resp20)

'... it was challenging to adopt the Australian way of doing' (Resp21)

'...it's more about mind-set, attitude...' and '*...as time goes by your perception does change and your viewpoint has to change whether you like it or not.*' (Resp27)

'...I was struggling to come to grips with why they do things in a certain way and what I am doing wrong ' and '*you realise something's wrong but you don't know what.*' (Resp25)

'...it's quite difficult to get behind how to work and what you have to do...' (Resp3)

'...I took about six months to make the mind shift...' (Resp7)

What these accounts further convey are that South African migrants' operating paradigms or schemata, which have served them well in previous South African work settings, now appear dysfunctional to a large extent. The utility value of these paradigms especially in sourcing appropriate, effective solutions for novel problems seems to have diminished.

4.3.3. Self-efficacy, confidence and self-esteem

Although the relatedness (especially impact) of migration and self-esteem is a somewhat under-researched area, self-esteem is acknowledged to have a pervasive influence in the overall functioning of the person (Altinyelken, 2009). Migrants' in this study seemed to echo this position. Once the migrant recognises that changes to established ways of thinking and acting in the workplace are required, this in itself appears to have a toxic influence on migrants' perceived self-efficacy, self-esteem and confidence. Consider for example...

- '...You've actually lost some things as well and that's when you start going downhill a bit I think...' (Resp25)
- '...I don't feel good about myself. I'm not on the same level that I have been on...' (Resp23)
- '...I experienced feelings of self-doubt. This made it hard for me to muster up the courage to venture into a career along the lines of my qualifications...' (Resp17)
- '... Against my own standards, I struggled to deliver the outcomes and to take on the many different assignments I used to and felt that I never got enough sleep' and 'An unavoidable consequence of this was a gradual but clear erosion of self-confidence and I believe this was noticeable...' (Resp18)

The self-efficacy and self-esteem issues evident in these statements convey how intrusive culture-related work encounters can be. The significance of this impact is brought into sharp perspective by Bandura (1993, p. 119) who observed that '*Personal accomplishments require not only skills but self-beliefs of efficacy to use them well*' and '*...depending on fluctuations in self-efficacy thinking*', the performance of a given person can vary between mediocre and exceptional (Bandura, 1993, p. 119).

First work encounters accordingly can compromise the workplace performance of the migrant in important ways. At a more general level these observations also suggest that the foreign workplace confronts migrants with paradigmatic change at a deep personal level. Successful adjustment and acculturation in the host country consequently is contingent on the effective resolution of these 'workplace' and work-related challenges.

In a few cases respondents recalled the difference that an understanding and supportive employer can make in fostering appropriate first impressions '*A lot of that I must say had to do with the employer. They helped a lot ...*' (Resp22) or '*The company that brought me over was very helpful, impressive the way they handled us...*' (Resp3). Employer support, however, is infrequently mentioned (four respondents) and support structures in the work context consequently are virtually non-existent – especially when compared to the social support mechanisms (family, friends, religion/church, community) that migrants utilise to sustain themselves during the acculturation process.

Notwithstanding the challenging nature of migrants' first work encounters, they eventually do adjust and settle in, as respondent 22 indicated: '*...It's most definitely starting to feel like home now, so that Africa is becoming more and more of a vague picture almost...*'.

5. Further perspective

The study set out to gain an understanding of how South African migrants experience their first work engagement in the host country and to interpret this from within an acculturation and settling-in framework. Observations obtained from the empirical study indicate that acculturation and adjustment stress commence immediately after arrival in the host country, during the search for employment. Secondly, that the first work that the migrant secures confronts him/her with several realities that are contrary to tacitly held assumptions and these trigger dissonance which, in most cases, manifest as culture shock and a negative emotional reaction. The latter is at the heart of the acculturation and adjustment process.

These observations, in a general sense, are not novel... the challenge, sacrifice and 'trauma' of migration have been well documented. The reaction of South African migrants to the host culture similarly is not unique and parallels the experience of a multitude of migrant communities of varying ethnicity. It is interesting to note that many of the dynamics reported by South African migrants for a host country that in many respects is very similar to the country of origin (e.g. loss of status, pre-migration expectations, experience of the 'new' labour market,

attitudes of locals) align near perfectly with those reported, for example, by Russian migrants to the USA (Yost & Lucas, 2002) - two countries that are culturally quite dissimilar.

Of particular interest though, is the prominence of first work encounters (and work settings) in the South African migrants' accounts of the migration process and its challenges. Any event during which the newly arrived migrant engages representatives of the host culture is important as this provides the setting for the acculturation dynamic. It is intuitively logical that the workplace and work encounters should constitute a major adjustment and acculturation setting - by virtue of the time the migrant spends at work and hence in contact with the host culture. The salience of this experience in one sense then is to be expected. The range and intensity of the challenges that the migrant reports, however, indicates this to be more prominent than may have been acknowledged to date. The first work opportunity the migrant secures and his/her initial work encounters consequently suggest this to be a primary adjustment and acculturation setting. While it can be argued that work (and working) is psychologically significant regardless of whether the person is a migrant or not; or that survival needs will unavoidably intensify when a person or family are without employment (and likely to be more so for migrants); or that the migrant's South African heritage further imbues him/her with a distinct work ethic, which will further influence the salience of 'work' for the migrant, the themes surfaced in this study nonetheless suggest that the observed salience of 'work' can be attributed to acculturation. Themes, for example relating to awareness of workplace 'difference', work challenges and sacrifice are migration-specific. These will be amplified by the migrant's predisposition in terms of work-relevant issues (e.g. survival needs, psychological significance of work generally). Nesdale and Mak (2003, p. 34) concluded that the migrant's initial contact with a new or foreign culture will have a pronounced impact on the migrant. In this study this is clearly evidenced in migrants' first work encounters and the work-related challenges they conveyed during the interviews. On the basis of the latter it is argued that the foreign 'work setting' actually becomes the first substantive contact between the migrant and the authentic host culture. The workplace consequently needs to be reframed as a critical acculturation setting, which now becomes a major arena for adjustment. In this context first work encounters constitute significant, formative moments that determine the direction and pace of migrant adjustment.

To extend this argument somewhat... the majority of migrants changed employers soon after their initial experiences, with some making up to three career moves over a relatively short time span. Except for a few younger migrants with less established careers at point of migration, this was a reaction to the demanding and usually demeaning nature of the first work experience and work setting. Viewed from the migrant's perspective, the first work engagement ultimately served as an intermediate 'adjustment station'. This is unsurprising, as the migrant was not utilised in accordance with his/her established skills and competence profile (especially statutory professionals) and often performed quite menial roles (16 of the 19 respondents interviewed in this study were underemployed and in roles that content-wise were not aligned with pre-migration roles). As a case in point consider Respondent 10, who owned a large, successful law practice for more than 20 years in a highly-sought after business area in Johannesburg, but in Australia worked as a real estate salesperson in low socio-economic neighborhoods. Requalification hurdles, bureaucracy, local attitudes and demeaning treatment of migrants during the first work opportunity invariably equates to employment change. This is not uncommon. A former business owner and chief executive of a listed South African company, who packed shelves during night time stated... *'I packed in the coldest section that nobody wants to work. I went and I worked there by the fridges...cold, cold, cold – so you wear gloves and... and jackets to keep you warm and I did that for seven and a half months, but knowing that I wasn't going to be there for long'* (Resp27). Consider also the professionally registered Psychologist that previously operated as group effectiveness manager for a large mining house and who was made responsible for a fresh fruit and vegetables section in a neighborhood supermarket (Resp11). Though reasons may differ, 'survival' in the broad sense of the word undergirds such behaviors. These experiences echo earlier observations that immigrants are often underemployed i.e. in positions substantially below their skills levels and below that of similarly-skilled locals (Fang & Heywood, 2006) and do so willingly (Godin, 2008; Kogan, 2010), but it also points to Schittenhelm and Schmidtke's (2010) observation about the paradox observed

when a Government promotes the recruitment of migrants from within a sophisticated multiculturalism policy framework, countered by an extensive range of obstacles encountered at point of entering the foreign labor market.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that migration remains a deeply challenging experience for migrants. The workplace and work-related challenges experienced by the migrant in his/her first employment in the host country reveal the dynamics of psychological acculturation and suggest that migrants for the greatest part would acculturate and adjust *in the work setting*, which will manifest in their functioning. The latter may well translate into reduced economic underperformance for migrants as a distinct labour pool. These observations consequently have important implications for employers, especially Human Resource Management and organisational psychologists. Where employer organisations provided workplace support to the migrant employee this eased the initial arrival anxiety and uncertainty, to the extent that migrants pertinently recalled such support with obvious gratitude. While all stakeholders stand to benefit from the provision of support to migrants during these early stages this is unfortunately not sufficiently recognised in the migrant-saturated environment in which this study was undertaken. Human Resource Management functionaries and organisation psychologists could assist by cultivating greater awareness and educating the organisational system, providing focused support to migrant employees and developing appropriate policies and practices – not just in terms of recruitment and placement of migrants, but in particular accelerating migrants' workplace adjustment and acculturation. Custom-designed induction and other socialisation interventions followed by sustained support and monitoring should reduce the dissonance the (South African) migrant will experience and combat the knowledge deficits and sense of 'powerlessness' often observed.

Although these results provide a saturated perspective on the experiences of South African Migrants, uncritical extrapolation embodies risk. Findings are relevant in a specific socio-cultural context (Western Australia). At best, these observations would guide thinking about the plausible factors that may impede migrant adjustment in a given setting should be verified for different settings. Secondly, in this study the extent of professional establishment and career maturity, increasingly relevant as migrants 'age', influences the platform from which the adjustment process is launched and appears to intensify the experience. Further research should aim to expand representation within age and professional categories in order to fully probe the parameters of this dynamic. Research into the first work experiences of migrants, specifically its relatedness to other demographic features and socio-cultural predispositions (e.g. 'national' role stereotypes associated with gender, religion, the 'head of the family'), but also variation in the national cultures of the country of origin and host country and the influence of these on migrants' work expectations, workplace behavior and work experience generally, will assist migrant adjustment in the workplace, with its accompanying benefits for all stakeholders.

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