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Moving on up? Exploring the career journeys of skilled migrants in the professions

Abstract

Drawing on the discursive practice turn in social theory, we examine the career journeys of skilled West African migrants based in Britain. While many, especially those from developing countries, may end up in elementary occupations, accounts of their progression into professional occupations remain elusive. Here, we unpack specific transient moments of their career journeys through the lens of 'microstoria': the creation and sharing of contemporaneous storylines. These reveal that the 'way-finding' practices of skilled migrants into the professions are characterized by four distinct but durationally indivisible transitional phases – which we call 'Johnny just come', toe-holding, enrichment-in-practice, and the puissance-lap. Our study provides insights into the career experiences of skilled migrants, elucidating how they make sense of their careers in narrative terms in accessing professional occupations and progressing within these. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and their implications for the theory and practice of international human resource management.

Introduction

Western governments have recently directed attention to closing their immigration doors to low-skilled migrants while admitting their talented highly-skilled counterparts. The fundamental assumptions driving this policy shift is that skilled migrants (SM) extend the talent pool (Hercog & Sandoz, 2018), help to fill skill gaps (Ruhs & Anderson, 2010), and enhance national innovation and competitiveness (Gagliardi, 2015; Lee, 2014), whereas low skilled migrants are perceived as a potential threat to social security systems. The new policy appears to be reasonable, strategic and meritocratic because it recognises the diversity and skills premium of migrants. Nevertheless, profuse interdisciplinary literature examining the career patterns of SMs suggests that the careers of too many are precarious, protracted and uninspiring (Almeida & Fernando, 2017; Crowley-Henry, O'Connor & Al Ariss, 2018). Many frequently find themselves under-employed (Guerrero & Rothstein, 2012; Moore & Rosenbloom, 2016), squandering their talents performing low-skilled jobs in fast food restaurants, security (man guarding) and supermarkets (Goldberg, 2010; Trevena, 2013), while others return to their home countries prematurely (Rai, 2015; Rahman and Lian, 2005). In addition, while the broader careers and migrants literatures do well in specifying SMs' characteristics, mentalities, motivations and in detailing their integration into their host country labour markets (Al Ariss et al., 2012; Williams & Baláž, 2014),

relatively little is known about the dynamics of their careers, career outcomes, and especially how those from developing countries embarking on a professional occupation strategize to fashion a desirable career (Al Alris et al., 2015; Connell & Burgess, 2009; van den Bergh & Du Plessis, 2011). By 'professional occupation', we refer to those skills-based professions that require extensive specialized knowledge, such as architecture, education, engineering, healthcare and the law.

We argue that understanding what it takes for SMs to embark on careers in professional occupations could extend our understanding of the 'employment and broader socio-cultural challenges migrants face' (Syed, 2008, p. 28) in accessing and developing their careers in the professions. Doing such an investigation is valuable, since it could reflexively equip organizations to develop better evidence-based international human resource management (IHRM) strategies that could potentially improve SMs' career experiences and thereby their retention. As observed by Favell, Fedblum and Smith (2007, p. 14), this lacuna calls for 'more micro-level, phenomenological studies of the everyday realities' of skilled migrants, coupled with a need to examine their career trajectories. Our objective in this study therefore is to explore how skilled migrants manage to enter and progress careers in professional occupations in terms of of *getting in* and *getting on* (Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012a). Employing discursive practices as a theoretical lens, we approach our study through microstoria (Boje, 2001; Trivellato, 2015) recounted by West African SMs gainfully employed in diverse professional occupations in the UK.

Our study therefore makes two contributions. First, in explicating the temporal career processes and practices that shape and fashion the careers of SMs from developing countries in professional occupations, we address the call to expand the research agenda on SMs beyond its usual focus on migrants from the developed world who tend to face different challenges (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Bailey & Mulder, 2017; Ramboarison-Lalao, Al Ariss & Barth, 2012). Second, by adopting discursive practice as a lens, we add to the SM literature by providing rare insight into the ways in which SMs make sense of their careers in narrative terms when it comes to accessing the professions and progressing within them. Our study illustrates four distinct, successive but durationally indivisible

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phases that characterize their career journeys, and highlights an opportunity to refresh the research agenda on SMs by showing how agency gives form to and shapes these transient moments of SM career journeys.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we review the salient literature on skilled migrants and their careers. We then draw on the discursive practice turn in contemporary social theory to 'unpack' their career journeys, after which we provide an overview of our empirical research focus. Next we explain our research methodology. In the penultimate section we present the findings from our empirical inquiry. We conclude the paper with a discussion of our findings and the implications of our research for theory and practice.

THE CAREER JOURNEYS AND EXPERIENCES OF SKILLED MIGRANTS

Over the past decade, the focus of the skilled migrant literature has evolved far beyond notions of 'brain drain' and migrant remittances dispatched to home countries (Bettin, Presbitero & Spatafora, 2015; Clemens, Özden & Rapoport, 2014) to embrace the well-being, motivations and career outcomes of SMs (Bahn, 2015; Ravasi, Salamin & Davoine, 2015). The research on SMs points to some important issues for consideration. First, SMs – highly educated and experienced individuals, who have moved on a permanent basis to work in countries other than their own (Guo & Al Ariss, 2015) – frequently undertake and manage their international mobility and careers independent of overarching organizational and institutional imperatives (Zikic, Bonache & Cerdin, 2010). Second, as free agents who traverse national borders and organizational boundaries, their career moves and life transitions are driven by the desire for career advancement and a better life (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Cerdin, Diné & Brewster, 2014). Collectively, these issues highlight career outcomes as a central issue for understanding SMs' career experiences (Almeida & Fernando, 2017; Fernando & Cohen, 2016). Hence, an important preoccupation of the literature concerns the characteristics, motivations and labour marketplace experiences of this global workforce (Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin & Game, 2013; Dietz, Joshi, Esses, Hamilton & Gabarrot, 2015). Increasingly, young, well educated, and highly skilled,

studies suggest that SMs exhibit a high degree of agency (Cerdin, Diné & Brewster, 2014; Winterheller & Hirt, 2017), and accumulate career capital that explains hyper-mobility (Halvorsen, Treuren & Kulik, 2015), with many enjoying careers that seldom conform to 'traditional employment thinking' (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 2003, p. 23). These findings have been challenged by Dietz, Joshi, Esses, Hamilton and Gabarrot (2015) and Salaff, Greve and Ping (2002), who argue that contextual features undermine and dissipate SMs' career capital accumulation in practice. Drawing on Bourdieu's capital theory, Al Ariss and Syed (2012) also provide a useful corrective to the overly voluntary conception of SMs' careers as exhibiting a high degree of uncertainty and flux by emphasizing how SMs' dispositions and competences combine to shape their career trajectories and outcomes.

A second stream of research has focused on the career challenges faced by SMs, particularly those that tend to influence underemployment (Almeida & Fernando, 2017). For example, Salaff, Greve and Ping (2002) and Zikic (2015) observe that while organizations may be keen to employ this growing international workforce, organizational and national employment policies often generate impediments to hiring SMs and migrants in general. Accounting for variations in the patterns of mobility among SMs, Alshahrani and Morley (2015) and Wagner and Childs (2006) found that those with good host-country language proficiency have significantly higher employment rates than other migrants. However, host countries tend to devalue and reject SMs' credentials and work experience because their foreign qualifications are not deemed to match local standards (Novak & Chen, 2013; Zikic, Bonache & Cerdin, 2010). Elsewhere, Ryan (2011) argues that social networks are crucial to career success, maintaining that migrants are less likely to acquire valuable references and affiliations for employment and promotion since they tend to be disconnected from managerial and professional networks and positions of power. Those aspiring to work in regulated professions, including medicine and teaching, must negotiate complex administrative procedures before becoming registered to practice (Kleiner, 2016; Oikelome & Healy, 2007). In this regard, Ramboarison-Lalao (2012) noted that some physicians permanently switched to nursing, contributing to a waste of their talents and downward career

mobility. There is a further gender issue, since well-educated female SMs tend to be under-employed and struggle to forge successful careers (Kamenou, 2008; Pio & Essers, 2014).

Despite the level of attention paid to SMs careers, the literature is marred by a number of inadequacies. First, probably spurred by the increasing global mobility of highly skilled and talented individuals, recent research attention has shifted to focus on self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) – a select few of the highly skilled migrants who elect to leave their homeland to temporarily pursue a career without the support of an employer (see for example Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Dickmann et al., 2016). As observed by Aris and Syed (2011), there is also a predominant emphasis on SMs from developed countries, impoverishing our understanding of the vicissitudes of the careers of those SMs from the global south (Cerdin, Diné & Brewster, 2014; Shirmohammadi, Beigi & Stewart, 2018). We argue that a balanced view focusing on SMs and particularly those from developing countries is required to extend our understanding of their career experiences, which are bound to differ significantly from their SIE peers who are frequently nationals of other industrialized countries (Makkonen, 2016; Suutari et al., 2017). Second, while the literature on SMs highlights the agency and strategies employed by SMs in developing their careers, it fails to examine the temporal dynamics of their careers, and how those from developing countries enter and forge their careers in professional occupations. An exception is the work of Legrand, Al Ariss and Bozionelos (2018), who examine the challenges qualified migrants face in getting to the top and how they 'strategize' to become chief executive officers (CEOs). In our effort to understand SMs' careers in contexts where institutional constraints, micro-contextual actions and serendipity might influence entrance and progression to professional occupations, we observe SMs' careers as subject to constant flux and uncertainty. Our conceptualization of SMs' career experiences draws from a discursive practice approach, which views the social world as a construction of meaning through language and text (Fairclough, 2013; Tsoukas, 2005). In what follows, we address this issue by charting our discursive practice approach to SM careers to specify the theoretical logics that guide our empirical inquiry.

A discursive practice approach to SM career journeys and experiences

Offering a radically new way of theorizing social life, the theory of practice is concerned with the taken-for-granted sense of space and routines of actors as inscribed in the ways they enact their practice(s). Consisting of both doings and sayings, Schatzki (2005, p. 471) argues that practices are 'organized human activities' made up of 'an organized, open-ended spatial-manifold of actions'. Permeating all social life, a 'practice' as an activity seeking a goal is enacted by actors based on their experience and intelligibility. Such intelligibility brings to the fore the role of mental organization in practices to account for 'internalized predispositions that orient actors in a particular way in their engagement with the world' (Chia & Holt, 2006, p. 644). Expressed in behaviour, internalized predispositions inform activities and provide us with an expansive framework that enables us to understand the complex and dynamic interactions between agency and structure, and the temporal interrelatedness between assemblages of activities, which also serve as a context within which other activities occur (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996). Our practice approach therefore considers a career both as the site and the result of work activities; a view that suggests careers as bundles of practices, and a career journey as a particular form of activity that is routinely undertaken by individuals over time.

Thus, in conceptualizing a career as a social practice, we argue that a career is neither a process nor something that individuals have, but rather is comprised of things that people do, serving as the junction where 'doings' and 'sayings' meet and interconnect in actual, real-life situations. Thus, in using the term 'discursive' to describe our practice approach, we are staking a claim for the turn to 'social accounting where agents justify and explain their actions and social practices' (Greenwood, 1992, p. 114). Our discursive practice approach to SMs' careers therefore uses language to explore the career journeys and experiences of SMs, and places emphasis on SMs' agency and the temporally relational steps they take to enhance and build their careers. In terms of *emic*, our priority is to understand how they forge their careers in professional occupations, exploring their career journeys through the verbal accounts of the purposeful everyday actions they enact in their pursuit. Thus, from a discursive practice perspective, we conceptualize SMs' careers as something durable yet transient; flexible and relational

in context (Corradi, Gherardi & Verzelloni 2010; Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012). Our practice approach differs from others (Chia & Mackay, 2007; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), who argue that practices may be propelled by seemingly blind action and can be profoundly independent of actors' conscious thought processes. Conversely, we emphasize 'intentionality' and its representations as impelling the activities that contribute to the stable features of SM careers (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012). Consequently, we argue that SMs' accession to a professional occupation is an outcome of relational actions, enacted activities and purposeful reflection. We therefore emphasize not just reflexive awareness and consciousness but also internalized habits and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990; Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012a), while prioritizing discernible patterns of relational actions and practices. Hence, the main research question driving our empirical inquiry is: how do skilled migrants get in and get on in professional occupations? We now outline the context of our study.

EMPIRICAL SETTING AND METHOD

For decades, migration for the purposes of seeking asylum has been a major factor underlying African migration to the UK. With most recent arrivals being university educated, holding a visa for the highly skilled or some combination thereof, economic migration from Africa to the UK has become more important than asylum-seeking (Migration Watch, 2015). The population of African migrants has grown as a result, with the black African-born population domiciled in the UK now exceeding half a million (Aspinall & Chinouya, 2016). However, despite relatively open access to the British labour market for SMs due to skill shortages and the impact of the UK's ageing population on its knowledge economy (Hopkins & Levy, 2012; Wadsworth, 2015), recent UK Labour Force surveys show that the British African-born workforce, and in particular West African migrants, who tend to have higher educational attainment, overwhelmingly occupy elementary occupations (Dickens & McKnight, 2008; Rienzo, 2017; Zwysen & Demireva, 2018). Reflecting general gender inequalities in the labour market (Kamerāde & Richardson, 2018), female Africans tend to undertake associate professional and personal service occupations, while a majority of male Africans are employed in elementary occupations,

followed by professional and associate professional occupations (Owens, 2009; Zwysen & Demireva, 2018).

Normative factors contributing to the generally low employment prospects of African SMs and migrants in general may include hiring discrimination (Mahadevan & Kilian-Yasin, 2017), their potential lack of language proficiency (Gibb, 2015), weak occupational networks (Bankston III, 2014), and over-qualification (Johnston, Khattab & Manley, 2015). However, while many of these migrants have been able to forge what can be described as successful careers in the professions, we know very little about their careers. In this regard, we posit that SMs of West African origin represent an interesting research group through which to examine SM career journeys. Representing one of the growing and distinct minority groups living in urban areas of the UK (ONS, 2017; Sarpong, Maclean & Eyong, 2018), West African migrants comprise a diverse yet specific category of people who are rarely studied as a singular, defined group (Sarpong & Maclean, 2015; 2017). We therefore develop our contribution by drawing on West African SMs in the UK. We now explain our research methodology and data analysis.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Given our interest in SMs' careers in professional occupations, a qualitative exploratory research approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Cresswell, 2013) was deemed appropriate to advance insight into the situated experiences of West African SMs within the larger context of SM careers. We conducted our study in Bristol, one of Britain's eight 'core cities', 16% (69,200) of whose population belongs to a black or minority ethnic group (Bristol City Council, 2013). We devised three theoretical sampling criteria (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to select our research participants. First, participants needed to be first-generation West Africans who were supported by a skilled migration programme or initiated their own international career move and life transition to the UK. Second, they needed to be employed in a professional occupation and living in the Greater Bristol area and have the intention of pursuing a permanent stay in Britain. Third, they should have been domiciled in the UK for at least five years to offset any other European country experience they might have had.

We employed a range of strategies to reach and recruit our research participants who belong to this 'hidden population' of West African migrants (Barratt, Ferris & Lenton, 2015). These included a local institutional contact, an African Charismatic church in Bristol (Sarpong & Maclean, 2015), whose resident pastor put us in touch with eight of our participants, while five others were enrolled through interpersonal contacts with graduates from two local universities. The remaining seven were enrolled through participant referrals and snowballing (Noy, 2008). Altogether, 20 SMs originating from West-African countries (Ghana, Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Nigeria), pursuing a career in diverse professions ranging from healthcare to education, met our sampling criteria. Raised in Commonwealth countries where English language is the medium of instructions in schools and colleges (Crystal, 2012), all our participants had a very good command of the English language and confirmed they were familiar with British culture and institutional context before relocating to the UK. Our participants were aged between 31 and 46, with approximately one third (35%) being female. While three had entered Britain through spousal visas or work permits, the remainder came to study prior to work, and 16 (80%) possessed postgraduate qualifications. Together, they reported an average of 12 years living in the UK. Table 1 provides biographical summaries of our participants.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Data for the study were collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews, conducted over a six-month period. Since the discursive nature of practices implies they may be captured in discourse (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004; Tsoukas, 2005), we chose to approach our research through the elliptic gaze of '*microstorias*', a narrative turn in contemporary social theory that privileges the use of contemporaneous storylines to illuminate social life (Boje, 2001; Imas, Wilson & Weston 2012). Microstoria are readily available stories often recounted by marginalized individuals located outside traditional research programmes, whose views can be harnessed to open up and theorize social orders and relationships on multiple levels (de Chadarevian, 2009; Muirs, 1991). In this regard, our microstoria approach enabled us to capture the 'existential condition of [our] research subjects in a [consummately] meaningful way' (Venkatesh, 1995, p. 36), to generate relevant insights into their career journeys. Most

importantly, it enabled us to zoom in and out on concrete instances of our participants' career successes and setbacks using discursive devices such as footing and forward-pointing (Whittle & Mueller, 2011), that encouraged them to narrativize their own careers and experiences in the professions (Bosley, 2009; Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012b). That one researcher was born and raised in West Africa helped us gain privileged access to participants; this kinship association encouraging openness on their part regarding their career journeys.

All interviews were conducted individually and in private. After signing an informed consent form, participants agreed to have their interviews digitally recorded, and each lasted approximately two hours. We began each interview with assurances of confidentiality and the collection of relevant socio-demographic data, after which interviewees were invited to relate their migration histories, qualifications, how they entered a professional occupation, their career experiences and plans, views on diversity, and the issues they perceived had profoundly influenced their professional careers. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, with interviewees accorded pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis followed three stages. First, our main textual analysis focused on mapping the 'doings' and 'sayings' of interviewees onto the 'organizing logics' of social practices – activities, values and beliefs, relationships, 'practical coping', and background knowledge (Schatzki, 2002), which served as our basic social processes (BSP) (Glaser, 1996). We did this by engaging in an iterative line-by-line coding of our data to ensure the relevance of our BSP. Recurrent phrases and identified salient practices were also 'analytically converted' (Strauss, 1978, p. 30) to fit these categories. In this regard, we focused on what participants identified as affecting their ability to enter professional occupations, their career trajectories, and perceived real and imaginary limitations. In doing this, we meticulously sifted through the interview data several times to identify comparatives, futures, and in particular, modals such

'may/might', 'must, will/would' 'shall/should' which were frequently used by the interviewees to evaluate what we thought were salient narratives in their accounts (Labov, 1997).

This produced a broad array of segments that were further categorized based on their similarities and analytical connections. Drawing on theoretical insights from the SM literature, the identified segments were analysed and interpreted iteratively until common themes emerged and became saturated (Suddaby, 2006). These themes were then sorted, reconstituted (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), and indexed to generate the analytical categories of personal inventiveness, perseverance and learning, ascetic-wit, and quantum leap. An overview of our coding structure is shown in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 here]

After further probing and deliberation, we developed four aggregate theoretical categories, namely: 'Johnny just come', toe-holding, enrichment-in-practice, and puissance-lap. These categories helped to make the stories intelligible and accessible for analysis and exploration for viable theoretical explanations that emphasize temporality of individual actions and events according to their effect on respondents' careers (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas & Van de Ven, 2013). While the short duration of our study did not allow us to document the variances in time periods our SMs spent at each phase, we estimate from our interviews that most participants spent 2-4 years in the first stage ('Johnny just come'), 1-2 years in the second stage (toe-holding), and 5-6 years in the third stage (enrichment-in-practice).

The final categories in the form of thematic frameworks, concepts and themes by which the data was examined and referenced (Saldaña, 2015) were then applied to the dataset, accompanied by brief descriptions elaborating the stage of the participant's career. Systematic comparison of the indexed themes with the existing literature enabled us to identify latent patterns in the data to produce generalities (Ritchie and Spencer, 1993), and thereby build up a broader understanding of the unfolding career journeys of our research participants, and how they experienced the world of work in professional occupations. The analytical and conceptual categories developed in probing our data are shown in Table 3.

Before we present the details of our research findings, we wish to reflect on our methodological limitations. First, by employing semi-structured interviews, we were unable to step outside of language to account (Alvesson, 2003) for the work realities of our SMs. Second, we could not rule out the potential impact of self-serving bias in attribution (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde & Hankin, 2004), as we invited respondents to narrate past events and 'preferred versions' of their careers. Also, while our researcher's West African kinship connection was useful in helping us to recruit research participants, we acknowledge it is possible this same connection might shape our assumptions and latently influence our understanding of the phenomena we studied. Finally, our data evidence suggests that the careers and experiences of our research participants in the professions are likely to be similar to other SMs located in other UK cities and regions. Nevertheless, given the particularities of the sub-group we studied and Britain's unparalleled diversity (Economist, 2016), care should be taken in generalizing our findings to other group of SMs, and in particular those domiciled in other industrialized countries, where potentialities, opportunities and limits on SMs' careers could be markedly different.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A contextual practice of 'way-finding' into professional occupations

The stories recounted by our SMs demonstrate that their career journeys tend to unfold as a contextual practice of 'way-finding' in the light of the challenges they face in securing a professional occupation (Dany, Mallon & Arthur, 2003; Maclean, Harvey, Gordon & Shaw, 2015). These stories provide novel insight into their coping strategies, and how the 'liability of foreignness' (Fang Samnani, Novicevic & Bing, 2013) coupled with the temporary nature of their movement abroad shape their sense of agency. Our data analysis indicates that while most of our research participants were 'professionals' in their home countries, they migrated to Britain as students. This suggests not only that skilling has become a central aspect of pre-migrant student lives (Raghuram, 2013; Grimm, 2019), but also, more importantly, that access to European student visas is far easier than access to work visas (Hawthorne, 2018; Nilsson

& Ripmeester, 2016). They predominantly retrained to kick-start their dreams of entering professional occupations, and the stories they recount suggest that the way-finding that characterizes their career journeys is distinguished by four distinct but durationally indivisible phases.

We unpack these four phases of participants' career journeys as follows. We call the first phase 'Johnny just come'. Driven by personal inventiveness which creates possibilities seemingly out of nothing through tenacity and resourcefulness, this early stage of SMs' career journeys into professional occupations involves (re)training and the acquisition of certification required to secure a job in their chosen profession. The second phase pertains to what we term 'toe-holding'. Akin to getting a foothold on a career ladder, it entails gaining entrance to professional occupations and actively developing the requisite personal and relational resources to hone the skills and professional competences required for success. Third is what we describe as 'enrichment-in-practice'. Propelled by what we call ascetic-wit, a self-willed sense of obligation to learn to improve professional competence through grit and sacrifice, our SMs work hard in this phase to strengthen their professional acumen, skills and cultural competences. The fourth and final phase, for those who achieve this, is characterized by career progression. Typified by a marked step-up in career advancement, SMs engage in what we conceive as a 'puissance-lap', potentially coming to embody modern successful migration. We recognize that the transition process in practice is dynamic and recursive (Chudzikowski et al., 2009), hence the linearity of our phases is designed to clarify boundaries between each.

Stage 1: 'Johnny just come'

The term 'Johnny just come' is 'pidgin' English shorthand signifying 'newcomer' within the Anglophone West-African migrant community. The SM at this initial stage must navigate an institutional maze of administrative structures and associated boundaries. For example, s/he may need to join the electoral register and acquire proof of address (e.g. a utility bill) to open a bank account. To obtain a British national insurance number, s/he must prove to the UK Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) that s/he has been offered employment. This may entail registering with a job agency

to find menial work to make ends meet (Harrison, Shaffer & Bhaskar-Shrinivas, 2004), West African qualifications being seldom recognized in the UK (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012). As George explains:

> I came straight into London and all my money was finished in no time. I had to sleep at the bus stop for ten days, before I eventually got my first job as a sales boy and a security guard. I was able to send myself to Imperial College London and then UCL. I knew a security guard for me was a means to an end; not an end in itself. (George, lecturer)

While most participants held qualifications in professions in which the UK was facing shortages, like George they still needed to overcome structural impediments to reach the starting-line. A qualified medical doctor, for example, must first pass professional entrance examinations. Likewise, a nurse has to retrain by completing a formal work-based adaptation programme to obtain a licence to practice. With shrieks of laughter, one doctor bemoaned the lack of a compass to point the way ahead:

> There's no compass. You're just trying to find your own way. You register for an exam that costs over £4,000. You have no syllabus to rely on. You just go and write the exam. No matter how much you prepare, you are likely to fail a few times because the social context within which the exam is structured is totally new to you. (Monica, doctor)

George's plan to use his security job as a stepping-stone to retrain, we argue, was strongly conditioned by the precarious situation he found himself in. Monica resat her exams three times before passing. During these difficult periods, common to all participants, they exhibited personal resourcefulness and held on to their aspiration of entering their chosen professions. The hope that kept their aspirations alive (Mische, 2009) undergirded their personal inventiveness in following a more arduous road less travelled by other migrants.

> So I said, you know what, rather than being a slave in my own country, I will fight it abroad. I will only have to be a healthcare assistant for a year or two and I will become a nurse again for ever. (Fredina, nurse)

Our data reveal that, despite diverse professional backgrounds, all participants took a menial job on entering Britain. To get closer to regulated professional occupations experiencing shortages (Koumenta et al., 2014), they all undertook some formal training to (un)learn, refresh, and acquire new skills and credentials to stand a chance of achieving their ambitions. The next phase of SMs' journeys concerns securing an entrance to their chosen professions.

Stage 2: Gaining a toe-hold in the professions

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The second, transitional phase in SMs' career journeys involves securing their first job in their chosen professions. This entails gaining a 'toe-hold' in the professional doorway, which resembles a fast-moving escalator, since all-important qualifications and skills gained in the previous phase can quickly become obsolete. This phase was commonly characterized by stress and adversity. Those participants who entered the UK as students were at this point still actively navigating immigration hoops, e.g. applying for work permits, sometimes requiring the support of an employer. The difficulty in obtaining a work permit and sometimes a first job in a chosen profession led some interviewees to the uncomfortable realization that they needed to change direction. As Bismark clarified:

> I studied law, did the postgraduate, had work experiences and apprenticeships in law firms but I quickly realised I was never going to get things like training contracts or be taken on permanently since I had no connections. I didn't want to carry on doing work experiences. I thought well, I'll go into teaching and that's how I ended up as a teacher. (Bismark, teacher)

Some participants had little choice but to commence with unpaid internships or temporary contract jobs, which in turn served as a stepping-stone to subsequent hiring by their organizations. While we concede that many young non-migrants entering the professions also tend to encounter similar challenges, our SMs' relative deficit in situated 'social capital' in their new country makes their situation appear much more challenging and precarious (Joy, Game & Toshniwal, 2018; Winterheller & Hirt, 2017). In this regard, all participants reported that they faced serious pressures to excel in these roles to stand a chance of securing a permanent position. In meeting these demands, they often relied on the benevolence and expertise of sponsors(s), who sometimes went beyond regular mentoring to consciously 'stage-manage' them and thus ensure they delivered in their roles. Harriet illustrates this:

> I was so lucky to find someone who taught me the tricks, and steered me in the right path to get ahead in this job. She even got me in touch with others who could help me in other ways, and always told me if you needed any references let me know... and she did. I was happy, and the rest is history. (Harriet, nurse)

Similarly, Jepson stressed how the counselling and support he received in his early professional days enabled him to survive in a very competitive academic environment:

> I was so fortunate to have a senior colleague who took an interest in me. He guided me in the application process and ever since has been a sort of a critical friend to me. He mentored me academically, but also provided personal support when I needed it most. (Jepson, lecturer)

In a precarious labour market marked by institutionalized uncertainty for migrants (Anderson, 2010; McDowell, Batnitzky & Dyer, 2009), sponsors often passed onto their mentees relational capital in the form of networks – a valuable asset resistant to immigration controls (Rajendran et al., 2017). Such relational networks at times proved far more useful than advanced certificates, which though important, may not cultivate insight into the prevailing tacit norms of a given profession. This applied to Thomas, who found himself in a profession 'where everybody counts':

> My first boss was very influential in the way my career developed... giving me advice, coaching and leading me in the right direction. He actually taught me how an accountant ought to behave so as not to be seen as a bean-counter. (Thomas, accountant)

In retrospect, Thomas observed that his mentor, while helping him 'learn the ropes' of accounting, also provided him with additional psycho-social support as a role model, enhancing his competence, effectiveness and corporate exposure (Fowler & O'Gorman, 2005; Garvey et al., 2017).

Reflecting on this stage of their career journeys, participants unanimously agreed it was here that they needed to exhibit the highest level of agency to stand a chance of achieving their ambitions. Their liability of foreignness (Fang, Samnani, Novicevic & Bing, 2013) together with a lack of networks, made it difficult to gain a toe-hold in the doorway of their chosen profession. Even when they secured entrance, their basic understanding of the social context(s) of their professions, coupled with accumulative disadvantage, especially in the case of female participants (Erel, 2016), required that participants audaciously invest significant time and resources to acquire the requisite skills, references and professional socialization networks. As Imogen expressed it, she 'had to do two miles if [her] colleagues did a mile' to prove her worth and hone vital skills necessary for progression.

Stage 3: Enrichment-in-practice

If toe-holding is about gaining a foot in the doorway, 'enrichment-in-practice' entails striving for a surer, more secure foothold on the fast-moving career escalator. In this third phase, participants actively invested in developing their core competences to 'up their game' in their chosen profession. This period of transition is characterized by perseverance and ingenuity combined with a willingness to sacrifice for the future, when participants fine-tuned and enacted dispositions and competences observed and

internalized during early career experiences (Iellatchitch, Mayrhofer & Meyer, 2003). Eleanor relates how she drove herself, burdened with fast-changing biomedical technologies, her mentors' expectations, and her desire to reach the pinnacle of her career:

> I certainly wanted to up my game. The lab became my second home. When others were going home, I stayed back, sat in the doctors' offices where they have these big, big, books (laughter), just to read and push myself further. (Eleanor, biomedical scientist)

Eleanor is typical in this regard. This is the stage where participants began to establish their professional credentials and sought to carve out a reputation for themselves as recognized 'authorities' in their chosen field of endeavour. This entailed actively visualizing future career trajectories, which might then serve as a template for actions, decisions and relations in practice. As Barnes articulates:

> I have been forfeiting my annual leaves to go on courses. I use my own time, my own resources, because I know where I am coming from and where I want to be. I just don't want to stay at this level where I will be pushed around – I want to be able to give orders as well, and probably be the head of the department, you know, rather than being told what to do. (Barnes, petroleum engineer)

Barnes' emphasis on personal development and his detachment from pecuniary motives (Lamont, 2002) resonated with the narratives of other participants when they explained how they had striven to achieve autonomy, respect and control over their careers in professional occupations. Akin to what Garfinkel (1984) calls 'post-hoc accounting practices', most participants shared the view that simply accumulating the necessary knowledge to succeed was not sufficient to propel their professional careers. Rather, it was more about cultivating a reflexive awareness (Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012a) of the broader transformations occurring within and beyond the periphery of the professions, and learning to overcome their perceived 'liability of foreignness' by developing the requisite political and intercultural skills and relational capital in practice. As recounted by Albert:

> There's politics everywhere in whatever organization you find yourself in. You've got to be careful how you choose your buttons, because sometimes, like I said earlier on, if your colleague is going a mile, you probably need to go the extra mile just to prove a point. It's not the nicest thing but that's what it is. The reality is that you've got to show all the time that you know your stuff and you understand the organizational culture. (Albert, engineer)

Typifying the life-worlds of SMs at this stage in their careers, Albert's observation is representative of the multitude of individual, often unique actions that characterize the stories of the

'politics of progressions' we heard in the field. It emphasizes the relevance of social competence and cultural awareness as salient characteristics of excellence (Lindberg & Rantatalo, 2015), displayed by many participants at this stage in their career journeys. These attributes are also essential to understanding and engaging in both formal and informal organizational and professional processes with the potential to propel SM to the final stage of the career journey (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015).

Stage 4: Puissance-lap

We characterize the final phase of participants' career journeys as the 'puissance lap'. Subjectively defined, this phase is not about reaching a summit (Vinkenburg & Weber, 2012), nor attaining a professional plateau (Ismail, 2008). Rather, it is more about progressing and achieving a more favourable, consolidated position in their careers. Having accumulated sufficient experiential and relational capital (Dickmann & Harris, 2005), this stage in their careers, indicative of apparent stability, is also marked by movement from one organization to another in pursuit of higher remuneration and career advancement (DeFillipi & Arthur, 1994). Thomas's case is illustrative, his accumulated skills and relational capital facilitating movement between firms:

> My friends say I change jobs like the way I change my shirts. The fact is I can walk into any job any day, because I've invested in myself. I can play with any accounting programme. In addition I have the right qualifications, experience, the ACCA badge, and passion, so people are keen for my services. (Thomas, accountant)

Born and raised in Cameroon, Thomas speaks French and German as well as English, which in a British context makes him very employable (Davoine & Ravasi, 2013). He explained that he is no mercenary, having served his time working for a small tax firm where he learned the ropes of his profession on a meagre salary. Rather, he is on the hunt now for positive new experiences and better remuneration that match his talents. Most participants at this stage in the career journeys claimed intended moves were aimed at gaining personal control over work-life balance in ways that professionally challenged them to remain skilful, attain personal mastery and become more marketable. As recounted by Imogen and Wilma respectively:

I became a qualified practice educator a few years ago so I now supervise students on placement and teach them evidence-based practice, how to link theory to case load, legislation, and if you like, why I send people to court. At the moment I'm off-site because I work out of hours. I just go in every other week to review the case loads. (Imogen, social worker)

I see to the efficient running of day-to-day activities in the department which sometimes involves recruiting personnel for the department. It's a huge task. So every other day I'm doing something different. I absolutely enjoy it. (Wilma, operations manager)

As qualifications acquired previously receded in importance, personality, ambition and experience, we observed, came to the fore. Participants also began to focus on emotional well-being and relational satisfaction. Having completed the full cycle themselves, some participants like Imogen and Wilma became informal mentors, or what Roland described as 'unofficial ambassadors' to young African professionals seeking to navigate their way into the professions:

I keep telling the young Africans I come into contact with that opportunities in this country are bountiful... Just know thyself and have goals! Work twice as hard as anybody else, never give up, and you will get there. (Roland, engineer)

As Roland explains, the path to the professions can be arduous. The best he can do for the compatriots he encounters is to share his knowledge and experience. Those who stay the course and distinguish themselves professionally may become emblematic of 21st-century migrant success stories (Maclean et al., 2012b).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Scholars have documented the unusually precarious career patterns, motivations and workplace experiences of SMs. While it is well known that many, especially those from developing countries, are likely to end up in elementary occupations (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012), accounts of their career journeys into professional occupations remain elusive. Drawing on the contemporary turn to discursive practices as a theoretical lens, we studied UK-domiciled West-African SMs' entrance to and progression within professional occupations. Assuming an exploratory qualitative research approach, we captured specific transient moments of their journeys through 'microstoria'. These stories revolved around a contingent logic of action, and provided valuable insight into the high degree of agency frequently displayed by SMs in their efforts to enter and progress their careers in the professions. We theorize that

SMs' practices of 'way-finding' are characterized by four distinct, durationally indivisible phases: namely, 'Johnny just come', toe-holding, enrichment-in-practice, and the puissance-lap. Illuminating what it takes for SMs to achieve a professional position, our study casts new light on the common actions and practices this involves, and the consequences of these for career advancement. Our participants' progression through these phases required them to exhibit a high degree of agency reminiscent of prior migrant employment studies (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin & Game, 2015; Pio & Essers, 2013). This similarity, we observe, raises the possibility that our study simply provides a new way of framing SMs' career journeys without examining effective ways to leverage their potential. However, our findings suggest that the dispositions and relational actions purposefully enacted by SMs to penetrate the professions also involves their cognitive capacity to coordinate their actions in ways that may enable them to develop professional careers in the future. Moreover, their stories about influential mentors helping them achieve their potential serve as a corrective against the tendency to over-simplify understanding of SMs' progression within professional occupations (Winterheller & Hirt, 2017). Such anecdotes conveyed in extraordinary detail the heroism and, at times, dark humour that SMs from developing countries employ to manage their cultural and historical embeddedness and attendant disqualifying non-work identities (e.g. nationality, ethnicity, gender) in professional occupations (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013).

Our research makes two contributions to the extant literature on SM careers and international human resource management more broadly. First, by explicating the temporal dynamics and transitional phases of SMs' career journeys, we add to existing literature by revealing the underlying processes that shape and give form to their professional career progression. Our focus on SMs from Africa, in particular, provides a rare insight into the career experiences of a hidden and growing population of SMs otherwise overlooked by traditional SM research programmes (Bailey & Mulder, 2017). Second, by approaching our study through the reflective gaze of microstoria to examine SM career journeys, we show a reflexive commitment to the contemporary turn to the microanalysis of the stories of 'little people' in theorizing social life (Dawson & Sykes, 2019; Muir, 1991). Most critically, it

provides us with the opportunity to examine how the stories of West African SMs in Britain could help clarify, or even challenge the often taken-for-granted grand narratives of SMs as cosmopolitan globetrotters and experts who enjoy 'golden' careers in the professions (Kennedy, 2016; Rodriguez & Scurry, 2014).

At a time when SM migration to many countries, including the UK, particularly in a post-Brexit context, is increasingly being encouraged, potentially expanding the pool of SMs on whom companies might draw in the future (Williams & Baláž, 2014), our research holds implications for IHRM specialists in their effort to leverage SMs' skills and provide them with career support. First, beyond cross-cultural adjustment support (Ravasi, Salamin & Davoine, 2015), IHRM professionals can effectively structure their organizations' human resources policies and practices to prioritize and monitor the mentoring of their SMs' careers. In this regard, we encourage specialists to develop bespoke 'SMs in professions' training for potential mentors to enhance their understanding of the 'career worlds' of their SM mentees so they can help them to effectively navigate and manage their careers in the professions. Second, HR managers can promote and champion 'SM-friendly' initiatives that are likely to help SMs reach their full potential. As an example, they might draw up guidelines to support SMs with their visa renewal and work permit applications. In an impermanent global race to attract, hire, and retain the best talents, such initiatives can enhance SMs' commitment and loyalty to their organizations, which in turn can make opportunities for switching jobs or working for competitors less attractive.

While our study advances understanding of SM career journeys in the burgeoning domain of international careers research, it also has some limitations which in turn open up opportunities for future research. First, while analysis of the stories we heard enabled us to identify four transitional phases, we conducted our research over a six-month period. Longitudinal research that tracks the career journeys of SMs over an extended duration is needed to elucidate the full temporal dynamics of SM career mobility, so we can fully characterize the antecedents, processes and consequences of SM dispositions and relational actions for their professional careers. A comparative study of those who pursue successful careers in the professions with those who fail to make the grade also holds promise.

This line of research offers fertile ground to probe the dark side of SM careers, balancing progress with pitfalls. An additional point of inquiry might involve examining how taken-for-granted organizational practices facilitate (or impede) SM careers, and whether there are differences in the career journeys of those from particular regions or nations (Chudzikowski et al., 2009). Given that a growing number of migrants are becoming business leaders (Carvajal & Campbell, 2016), a further research avenue involves exploring the careers of those who ascend to positions of power within and beyond their professions (Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012b; Maclean, Harvey & Kling, 2014).

In conclusion, we hope our study not only opens up exciting new research opportunities into SM career dynamics, but may also encourage SMs to reflect on their own careers and take action that might positively influence the unfolding of their future career journeys.

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