Negotiating 'Otherness' as Skilled Migrants

As countries grapple with the challenge of meeting the demand for skills in labor markets characterized by technological change and market fluctuations, skill-based migration has been regarded as the answer to often controversial debates on immigration. Especially in countries such as the US, skill-based migration is increasingly seen as the desirable alternative to family-based migration, which has been associated with wage depression in low-skilled occupations (Card, 2001, Borjas, 2003). Australia's skill-based migration program, like Canada's, is based on admitting foreign workers with qualification in areas where the government determines there is a shortage of talent (Wright, 2014). The model presumes that admitting migrants possessing the human capital that employers need but cannot fill with the local workforce benefits migrants, employers, and the host country alike (Gang Tian and Shan, 1999). Indeed, studies have pointed out the large proportion of SBM relative to family-based and other forms of migration in Australia as the reason why migration has not resulted in depressing wages, especially at the lower end of the spectrum (Breunig et al., 2015, Islam and Fausten, 2008). A recent report on overall migration in Australia has found that migration has resulted in a "negligible" overall impact on the Australian economy, due to migrants sorting themselves into skill groups that have better labour market prospects (Productivity Commission, 2016). Optimism regarding skill-based migration has also been expressed in the scholarly literature on careers. It has been suggested, for example, that the careers of skilled migrants are "boundaryless" (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) and that skilled migrants represent a "kinetic elite" (Cresswell, 2006, Elliott and Urry, 2010) whose globe-trotting mobility affords them a special social status in the globalized workplace.

Empirical research, however, has shown that skilled migration programs in Canada, USA, and Australia have seen mixed results in terms of employment rates of migrants in these programs, resulting in diminished potential benefits (van de Ven and Voitchovsky, 2015; Hugo, 2014; Koslowski, 2014). Policy adjustments designed to improve matches between employers and skilled migrants in the last decade have resulted in the three models converging in a 'hybrid' model that combines supply-side considerations of skills with demand-side considerations of employer preferences (Papademetriou, Somerville, and Tanaka, 2008; IOM, 2002). Prior to recent reforms, the Australian program was 'supply driven' (IOM, 2002), relying on awarding residencies based on points for skills and other desired criteria rather than demonstrated employer preference for hiring the migrant. This study examines the lived experiences of skilled migrants who entered Australia under a supply driven policy; given that the skilled migrants pool in Australia and Canada is still on balance comprised of those who entered these countries under a supply driven policy framework, examining individual outcomes for this group of migrants is likely to render insights for managing the adaptation process for skilled migrants as a whole. Research has shown that overseas qualifications are discounted (Ressia et al., 2017) in the process of accreditation (Iredale, 1987, Iredale, 1997), that skilled migrants are often not successful in obtaining employment in the areas they are qualified (Hawthorne and To, 2014), and that skilled migrants are more likely to be over-educated and under- or unemployed than non-migrants in the same occupation (Junankar and Mahuteau, 2005). Based on interviews with skilled migrants in the area of accounting and finance in Australia, this study aims to shed further light on the challenges faced by skilled migrants in their host country by examining how they negotiate their 'otherness' both in the labor market and in the workplace. While

quantitative studies have revealed important aspects of skilled migrants' economic experiences, we lack an understanding of how skilled migrants deal with pressures for cultural conformity, as well as the social and material consequences arising from (non) conformity.

That 'cultural similarities'—shared tastes, experiences, and self-presentation styles—have economic value (Bourdieu, 1986; Skilton, 2008) has been attested by historical work on gatekeeping in the professions (Hanlon, 1994, Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015), ethnographic studies of recruiting processes in professional service firms (Rivera, 2012), as well as in studies of high-skilled migrant visa certification processes (Rissing and Castilla, 2014). In all these studies, candidates who were seen to have cultural legitimacy were hired or admitted over others. That pressures for cultural conformity can result in discrimination is not only problematic in itself; to the extent that these pressures suppress diverse cultural expression, it also counteracts potential benefits flowing from multiculturalism, such as mutual learning and creativity (Ely and Thomas, 2001, Nishii, 2013).

For individuals, pressures for cultural conformity can have the effect of having one's identity regulated by the employer or workplace culture. This study draws on identity regulation literature to understand skilled migrants' experiences in Australian workplaces; yet it also goes beyond existing theorizations to address contextual factors, such as institutional and legal frameworks in the employment relationship, that can impact on the lived experience of skilled migrants. Thus, I examine the context in which cultural legitimacy is invoked and constructed, both in terms of macro-societal and institutional influences on identity regulation within organizations as well as in terms of interactional dynamics and power relations. To date, few empirical studies have responded to calls (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown,

2015) for studying contextual influences on identity regulation. In the rest of the paper I review existing theoretical approaches to the construction of cultural legitimacy and outline methods used. I draw out the structural and interactional conditions under which migrants come to believe cultural conformity is required, the types of effort expensed in order to obtain cultural legitimacy, as well as individual strategies to resist, invert, and distance oneself from pressures for cultural conformity. The paper concludes by discussing potential contributions to understanding how social constraints placed on skilled migrants can have material consequences.

The market value of cultural legitimacy

The economic value of cultural legitimacy in the labor market and in the workplace has been the subject of an emergent and growing stream of research. Bourdieu (1986) famously argued that cultural capital, along with human and social capital, generated and reproduced economic value. Rivera (2012) showed how recruiters' preferences for cultural similarity among candidates, such as shared leisurely activities and hobbies, reinforced class-based gatekeeping in elite firms in investment banking, management consulting, and law. Recruiters showed more excitement for such candidates, were likely to evaluate them as more competent, and viewed them as a better 'fit' with their organization (Rivera, 2012: 1006). Rissing and Castilla (2014) found that US immigration officials showed cultural bias in certifying applications for employer sponsored H1B visas. Officials favored Asian professionals over those of Latin American origin, consistent with cultural stereotypes in the US towards Asians as the "model minority" and Hispanics as being "slow to assimilate" (Rissing and Castilla, 2014: 1240-1). Likewise, studies focusing on job interviews reveal that recruiters' assessment of candidates' merit is influenced by culturally

biased models of self-presentation. For example, Campbell and Roberts (2007: 250) found that recruiters believed candidates belonging to ethnic minority groups were unsuccessful in synthesizing personal and institutional discourses to forge an acceptable professional identity.

Studies have also shown that cultural similarities, such as sports preferences, act as mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion on the job (Erickson, 1996; Roth, 2006; Turco, 2010). The identity regulation literature, which focuses mainly on *organizational* pressures for individual identity management, explicitly acknowledged *cultural* influence: “Organizational cultural control is generally anchored in broader, historically derived collective patterns of belief and legitimacy” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 636). Empirical research on workplace experiences of ethnic minority and immigrant workers confirms that organizations act as vehicles for cultural norms, restricting the way that minority workers express their ethnic identities at work (Campbell and Roberts, 2007; Kenny and Briner, 2013: 727). Taken together, these studies show the different channels through which employers and other gatekeepers demand cultural legitimacy. However, not much is known about consequences flowing from efforts made by cultural ‘others’ to obtain cultural legitimacy.

Part of the reason for the above is that, to date, efforts to understand how workers deal with pressures for cultural conformity have focused on the management of identities at work. Studies of female Muslim entrepreneurs in the Netherlands (Essers and Benschop, 2009) and Black and minority ethnic group members in Britain (Tomlinson, et al., 2013), for example, found that ethnic minorities experienced identity fragmentation (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) as their ethnic and/or religious identities needed to be played down or negated at work. Similarly, recent

studies on how non-work identities are negotiated at work has pointed out that workers combine work and non-work identities by creating linkages between them, separating them by compartmentalizing, or deleting one identity in favor of the other (Ashcraft, 2005; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011).

Although efforts focused on identity have made important strides in understanding how individuals manage cultural demands, they rarely examine contextual factors that condition the production of cultural conformity at work and can potentially enable remedial action. This study aims to examine the causes and consequences of migrant efforts to obtain cultural legitimacy at work, and identify the gamut of attitudes, behaviors, and interactional patterns that individuals adopt to respond to pressures for cultural conformity; furthermore, it explores potential sources of resistance. While there have been developments in understanding how ethnic minority workers and women deal with pressures for cultural conformity, some of which are reviewed in the next section, we have little corresponding knowledge of the responses from skilled migrants. The portrayal of skilled migrants as an elite group of workers building boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) in a globalized labor market (Saxenian, 1996, Saxenian, 2006) by scholars and government narratives alike has spun a rhetoric of meritocracy where these individuals are expected to thrive on having their skills and qualifications recognized by the host country system.

Resistance to Cultural Conformity

Empirical research on ethnic minorities has documented how pressures for cultural conformity can be deflected or resisted by minority workers. These studies have documented, for example, how women and minorities use attires and communication such as accents and occupational 'speak' in order to reduce association with stigmatized social identities (Tomlinson, et al., 2013: 257-8). Recent studies of migrant workers also show that ethnic and work-based identities can each be drawn on as resources to construct selves at work that are personally acceptable as well as professionally advantageous. For instance, Essers and Benschop (2009: 405) studied Muslim female entrepreneurs and found that Islam, gender, and occupational identities as business owners provided these women with multiple social categories to construct work identities, and that "the simultaneity of these categories results in both restrictions and possibilities."

A broader theoretical approach to strategies for dealing with cultural conformity than that focused on identities at work starts by addressing not only individual strategies for identity management but also environmental sources for empowerment, such as institutional, regulatory, and communal structures of support. Institutional contexts that may differentially empower the employer or the employee (Marsden, 1999), labor market conditions and dynamics affecting the job search process (Smith and Ridoutt, 2007; Sharone, 2014), power relations within workplaces (Hodson et al., 2006), as well as employers', customers', and peers' preferences are likely to influence the level of empowerment skilled migrants have in and outside of their workplace.

The institutional contexts in which cultural 'display rules' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993, Hochschild, 1983) rise, for example, can provide workers with a

relatively wide array of resources with which to question, resist, and even punish the enforcers of cultural discipline. Regulatory protection in the form of anti-discrimination laws in hiring and employment practices as well as harassment and bullying laws can instil in migrants the confidence and knowledge that they will be supported if they choose to take action against violators (Dobbin and Kelly, 2007). Workplace representation in the form of unions and other advocacy groups can provide procedural assistance and can sometimes make respect for diversity a collective bargaining issue (Colvin, 2016). Furthermore, organisational sources of support, such as inclusive human resource management practices (Niishi 2012), and community-based sources, such as co-ethnic support from communities and social networks (Parker and Arthur, 2000) can also enable skilled migrants to question the validity of cultural conformity in the host society. Finally, viewed not as a determinant of self-conception but as a toolkit (Swidler, 1986) for relatively autonomous action, culture itself may provide materials that workers can utilize to manage impression (Goffman, 1959, 1969; Roberts, 2005; Roberts et al., 2014), reframe social norms, and resist conformity. Thus, this study additionally addresses the extent to which institutional, organizational, and communal sources of empowerment impact skilled migrants' abilities to respond assertively to pressures for cultural conformity.

Method

Research Context: Migrant professionals in Australia

Australia has been an early adopter of skills-based migration; a point-based assessment system was adopted in 1979 and formalized legally in 1989. Under this system permanent residency is granted according to points allocated for English

proficiency, age, and the possession of qualifications in areas of need. The Australian skill-based migration system relies on periodic assessments of occupational shortages by government appointed committees as well as consultations with employers and unions; hence, this system has been called the ‘corporatist’ supply driven model in comparison with Canada’s ‘human capital’ model which was solely based on skills assessment (Koslowski, 2014). Under the ‘general’ skills migration program, once permanent residency is acquired by the individual migrant under the point system, the individual is eligible to apply for any job in Australia, and not necessarily in the occupation in which their qualifications have been assessed for residency. Under this system, migrants compete in the same pool of applicants as Australians for jobs. While a majority of (but certainly not all) migrants attempt to seek jobs in the occupation they are qualified for—and which the government has explicitly recognized as an area of skills shortage—employers’ hiring practices, which favor “local experience”, has disadvantaged migrants (Green et al, 2007). In response to studies demonstrating relatively low employment rates for general skilled migrants, and particularly those who became eligible for residency after obtaining an Australian degree, policy reforms undertaken in 2005 under the conservative Howard government (1996-2007) and in 2009/2010 under the Labor government resulted in large increases in employer-sponsored cases, shifting the system away from a supply-driven model to a hybrid model combining employer recruitment and self-sponsorships (Phillips and Spinks, 2012).

Demand for accounting and finance skills in Australia has been boosted by the financialization of the economy and growth of the mining and resource extraction sectors in recent decades (Yap et al., 2014, Weller, 2017). As a response, the government included accounting in the Migration Occupations in Demand List

(MODL) in 2004 (Yap et al, 2014: 563). Between 2005 and 2012, accounting has been the occupation under which the highest number of skill-based residencies was granted; an average of more than 9,000 migrants were admitted to Australia based on skills assessment in accounting between 2005 and 2012 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2005-2012). Until 2011, migrant intake in the occupations listed under the MODL was uncapped (Weller, 2017). Studies have shown that migrants who received permanent residency based on skills assessed for accounting work in a range of occupations variously related to accounting, including clerical, administrative, and bookkeeping jobs (Weller, 2017).

Once obtaining an Australian degree in accounting was identified as a migration pathway in the points system, universities, whose government funding was reduced in the same period, exploited the demand by expanding admission of international students in areas that would earn them permanent residency (Ziguras, 2012). Between 2005 and 2012, approximately 30,000 international students were enrolled in accounting programs in Australian universities on a rolling yearly basis (Weller, 2017). Admission rates of international students in Australian accounting programs did not diminish after the employer sponsorship pathway, which privileged experience over an Australian degree, was given priority (Weller, 2017). Empirical evidence from longitudinal surveys of migrants admitted through the skill-based migration program in accounting has demonstrated that former international students graduating from Australian accounting programs who opted for the skill-based migration pathway were least likely to be employed in accounting jobs compared to other groups with similar qualifications, with only 30.5 per cent of respondents in this category holding jobs in accounting or related professional or management roles (Weller, 2017). In comparison, 42.4 per cent of migrants who sponsored themselves

independently for permanent residency based on skills assessment in accounting were likely to hold accounting jobs. Those who had employer-nominated sponsorships were most likely to retain jobs matching their qualification, with 90.8 per cent of respondents holding jobs in accounting or related professional or management roles (Weller, 2017). Surveys of employers in accounting found that demand was low for entry-level accountants and shortages existed in regional areas, in particular specialisations, and in roles requiring 3-5 years of experience (Mavromaras et al., 2013, Weller, 2017), and that employers were reluctant to employ international graduates (James and Otsuka, 2009, Birrell and Healy, 2008).

Policy reforms in the last decades have reduced the number of residencies awarded in the general skills migration scheme and increased points awarded for relevant experience (Hugo, 2014). Since 2007 a graduate visa of eighteen months has been introduced to assist international students graduating with Australian degrees in acquiring experience in the job market; however, studies have shown that employment rates of those on graduate visas as well as their transferability to employer sponsorship after the eighteen months remain low (van de Ven and Voitchovsky, 2015).

An additional issue with Australia's skills migration system has been differential labor market outcomes of migrants based on countries of origin and race. A recent study showed that employment outcomes varied significantly between accounting migrants entering Australia from advanced countries compared to those from China, South Asia, and the rest of the world across all pathways in the skilled migration program: while over 80 per cent in the former group worked in accounting and related professional or management jobs, only between 30 to 40 per cent of skilled migrants from China and South Asia were in the same jobs (Weller, 2017).

Stratification of jobs based on cultural heritage, especially favoring Commonwealth member countries, has been prevalent in Australia's professions (Groutsis, 1998; Iredale, 1987). For example, Hawthorne (2001; 2002) found a significantly higher likelihood of Eastern European and Asian nurses of non-Commonwealth background working in public hospitals and nursing homes, in comparison with Western European and Asian nurses of Commonwealth member countries who were more likely to work in private hospitals. Almeida, Fernando, and Sheridan (2011) interviewed recruitment managers in accounting firms and employment agencies and found that employer preferences for local experience, knowledge of local clients, and 'cultural fit' with a local, mostly male, top management deterred firms from hiring qualified migrant professionals. Studying how migrant professionals construct cultural legitimacy in one occupation 'controls' for occupation-specific characteristics that may potentially confound theory-building. Australia's openness to migration and multiculturalism, the large influx of migrant professionals into accounting, and the uncertainty of guaranteed employment for these migrant professionals make this an opportune setting to examine how workers construct cultural legitimacy.

Data and analysis

Interviews were conducted with foreign-born members of two professional associations in accounting, the Institute for Chartered Accountants Australia and Certified Public Accountants Australia, in 2009. Respondents volunteered to be interviewed by answering affirmatively to a request for participation in interviews inserted into an online survey of professional accountants. Among interviewees, the sample for this study consisted of 19 individuals who had obtained permanent residency in Australia as adults through skills assessment in accounting. Interviewees' year of entry into Australia varied from 1986 to 2006. All interviewees underwent the

skills assessment process prior to the first wave of policy reforms that expanded employer sponsorship. Perhaps due to this, all interviewees had been awarded Australian residencies under the general skills migration program and none had been sponsored by an employer at the time of entry into Australia.

Interviewees represented a variety of national origins, and included both visible (non-Caucasian; 13 respondents) and non-visible (Caucasian; 6 respondents) minority groups. The largest group among the former originated from China and India, and among the latter, from South Africa. Interviewees were asked for their work histories, both in their countries of origin and in Australia, and about the process by which they obtained jobs in Australia. Approximately half of the interview time was spent addressing one issue—the extent to which interviewees' national origin had affected their working lives in Australia—to which interviewees were asked to respond freely. With the exception of one respondent who was self-employed, all respondents were working for an employer at the time of interview. Respondents' workplaces varied from government and the public sector to private schools, financial institutions, and mining companies. Only one of the respondents worked at a Big Four accounting firm at the time of the study. All but two respondents were working in the broadly defined area of accounting and finance. Profiles of the respondents, including job histories, are presented in Table 1.

Responses were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo. Initial coding searched for recurring themes in the data. The focus on cultural legitimacy emerged during this stage. I drew on the literature on identity regulation and negotiation (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013; Alvesson and Willmott 1996; 2002) to code interviewees' responses to pressures for cultural conformity. I also drew on industrial and employment relations literatures to code for institutional and regulatory contexts,

power relations and social interaction at work as well as career and labor market outcomes of migrants' actions to conform to cultural pressures. Initially, an attempt was made to analyze the effects of cultural otherness and race separately. However, a first analysis of the data suggested that cultural 'otherness' and race were interactive—employers, in particular, demanded more displays of cultural legitimacy from visible minorities than they did from non-visible minorities such as White South Africans. Hence, 'otherness' can be conceptualized along a spectrum of cultural distance where visible minorities are othered at a greater extent compared to non-visible minorities. Previous studies in and outside of Australia documenting greater labor market bias based on visual characterizations of race justify this approach (Hawthorne, 2001; Kalter and Kogan, 2006). Classification of respondents as visible and non-visible minorities was based on survey responses on country of origin and interview questions that asked respondents to identify their race. In the rest of the paper, all names have been changed and interviews are referred to by a randomly assigned number between 1 and 19.

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FINDINGS

Gaining Cultural Legitimacy: An effort with consequences

The discrepancy between Australia's migration policy, which at the time interviewees went through the migration process granted residency based on qualifications, and employer preferences, which favored 'local experience,' provided the context in which cultural legitimacy generated economic value in the Australian labor market. I demonstrate below how employer preferences for 'local experience'

led to lengthy engagements in contract work for the majority of interviewees prior to obtaining a full-time job in their field.

Extra effort in the labor market

Migrants typically engaged in a succession of low-wage and low-skilled short-term work with little prospects for career progression. This provided a veneer of 'local experience' that eventually qualified them for an entry level full-time job in their area: "It doesn't matter what experience you have – even if you say, I worked for a year and you were just doing filing or whatever you were doing and you just said, I worked for XYZ firm for a year." (R17) Respondents said they were unprepared for the difficulty in obtaining a job in their area—believing that accounting qualifications would lead to residency in Australia and a career, some had even repeated their tertiary education in order to obtain an Australian accounting degree. Several mentioned having contemplated returning to their country of origin due to difficulties in finding a job; most knew friends who had returned, and two respondents had left Australia (they were interviewed over the Internet whilst in New Zealand, and the UAE, respectively). Those who persevered in the Australian job market became aware of cultural misalignment through the job search process, in interviews, and, once they found a job, through direct and indirect pressures at the workplace. Although much of their experience was owed to discrimination as I show below, employers communicated requirements for the job in terms of cultural fit and 'local experience'. The ambiguous nature of the phrase—did it refer to local experience in any occupation or specifically in the area of accounting—as well as its arbitrary application to some groups of migrants more than others as recounted below made respondents believe that extra effort was needed on their part to compensate for what they came to see as deficiencies.

Interviews suggested that employers disproportionately applied requirements for 'local experience' to visible minorities. For example, 'Clara', a respondent with ten years' auditing experience in a 'Big Four' accounting firm in Colombia, failed to find an accounting job after a two-year job search and was currently a sales manager in retail. Her experience contrasted with Caucasian migrants with 'Big Four' work experiences, who were able to find accounting jobs in Australia with relative ease, sometimes with the same 'Big Four' firm. In 'Clara's' words, "If I apply for levels like supervisor or senior auditor, which was the level I left in Columbia, they say to me, sorry, we can't give to you this job because you don't have local experience." (R11) By contrast, White respondents reported relative ease in finding jobs in accounting and "fitting in". One Caucasian respondent from South Africa attributed colleagues' acceptance of him directly to his race: "I think because I am Caucasian, and look more like Australians do, people have accepted me at that face value. So it's been quite easy from a work point of view to fit in." (R6) Accepting employer preferences for 'local experience' resulted in delayed career advancement for qualified migrants who spent months and sometimes years in menial jobs.

Migrants saw themselves as relatively powerless against subtle forms of racial discrimination, and, although not pleasant, they found it feasible to make provisions for employer preferences for North American or British cultural backgrounds. Employers were not averse to exposing such preferences, often explicitly demanding that respondents' cultural traits, such as accents and ethnic names, be changed to qualify for the job: "One of the things I was disadvantaged in was because I had a strong accent and in one of my interviews I was told, you know, your strong foreign accent… [pauses] He [recruiter] said, "My clients can understand me because I speak English with no foreign accent but you've got a strong foreign accent that will make

them very uncomfortable." (R16) The problematizing of foreign accents, however, seemed to be disproportionately applied to migrants from Asia and Latin America, as none of the Caucasian respondents mentioned having received similar comments. The 'othering' of some groups based on accents and not others evokes earlier studies about the cultures of class that have identified accents as markers of social class (Lamont, 2000; Sayer, 2005, 2007). Beneficiaries, as well as targets of cultural bias were expressly aware of how it conditioned the job search process. As a respondent from the US remarked, "I found that I was actually probably given a bit of an edge having come from America. Usually people would comment that they would hire Americans because of their work ethic and their backgrounds, and obviously probably the English speaking, over other candidates." (R7) Respondents who were unsuccessful in interviews came to understand their failures in terms of cultural misalignment, particularly as manifest in self presentation styles: "Me personally, myself, I failed 150 times at interviews. It took me three years to find my first accounting job. What I found is, the cultural difference in terms of interacting with others and communication and being a Chinese - well traditional Chinese families, we were told to be humble and I don't think that plays a very good role here during the interviews." (R14) Respondents came to expect that experience, self-presentation, and confidence, rather than qualifications, were key to finding a job: "Asia is very focused on your degree. So if you're a master degree or a PhD degree you definitely will get a job easier than undergraduate students. But here they don't really care about if you are a master degree or PhD as long as you have many good experiences in that field." (R19) "It's your work experiences, it's how confident you are, it's how you present yourself. It's all of the above." (R9) Hence, respondents became accustomed to employer preferences for displays of cultural similarity.

Extra effort at work

Cues that employers preferred Western behaviors, decorum, and names were received first during the job search process and continued once a candidate was hired. A Spanish-speaking respondent explained how he ceased to be called 'Jose' and instead became 'Joe': "One employer and the other prospective employer said I have a very strong foreign accent and the clients will not feel very comfortable and this other place asked me to change my name from [Jose] to [Joe] because [Jose] would not be very welcome in the suburbs but [Joe] is more welcome. [...] So is the reason I started to be called [Joe]." (R16) Such direct requests as well as subtle hints compelled behavioral and presentational adjustments, which, importantly, respondents referred to as "work". Even when migrant professionals denied being "singled out," their narratives revealed that they believed not being targeted was a consequence of extra work on their part. Some believed that they needed to "compensate" for not being Western:

> I think I'm very lucky. I don't feel I'm singled out but at the same time, I believe that I'm not singled out because I have an attitude that I'm actually in an English – it is not my mother country so I need to actually *work very hard* to make sure that I'm at the same standard as a person who has been in this country for life so that attitude helps. You just have to *work hard to actually compensate for what you don't have*. (R14; emphasis added)

The objective of this work, as respondents put it, was to "blend in", as in: "I had to *train myself* to become more confident and I was working in order to *blend into the culture* otherwise I would just - well I used to be very quiet and a bit passive." (R17; emphasis added) An important component of cultural work was performative simulation—the mimicking of culturally appropriate behaviors, presentation styles,

leisurely pass times, and humor. Simulation entailed, for example in the case of professionals of Asian backgrounds, breaking out of reserved communication patterns and becoming more expressive: "I think we're a quite reserved population, so we don't generally say what we think. A lot of things we tend to keep to ourselves and I think being in a business environment, those sort of things have certainly affected me because I'm still coming to terms in terms of adjusting to that sort of difference." (R1) As indicated by this respondent, performative gestures were seen as required to appear more 'businesslike' in the Australian workplace.

Characteristically for professional work, social interactions with peers and colleagues were deemed important for career success (Anderson-Gough et al., 1998), and respondents believed displays of cultural similarity were necessary to prevent social exclusion. Hence, cultural work was performed in the workplace and beyond—in pubs, in front of water coolers, and at dinner parties. Pretending to 'get' humor and feigning knowledge of and affective support for Australian sports such as cricket and Australian rules football allowed migrant professionals access to social relationships and prevented peers from "walk[ing] away", in the words of one respondent. In short, it saved migrants from rejection by drawing attention away from conspicuous social differences. Migrants were aware of the potential negative social and professional consequences, both of not displaying culturally appropriate behavior and of failing to be *convincing*. As one respondent said of situations when one was found out to be laughing without 'getting' a joke, it could impact professional relationships:

> You don't know what you're laughing at. It's just to pretend, you know, actually you don't know, because when they ask you something, you can't go back. Sometimes they ruin the relationship because they just walk away,

> because they feel not very interesting. Even though they like you very much in the job, but in the pub it is totally different. (R2)

Resisting, inverting, and distancing oneself from cultural conformity

In this section I discuss the ways in which skilled migrants sought to resist, invert, and distance themselves from cultural conformity by asserting their civil rights, cultural heritage, and personhood. The primary source of *resistance* to cultural conformity was knowledge of civil rights based on anti-discriminatory and equal opportunity laws. *Inverting* cultural conformity involved re-enforcing one's own cultural heritage in the workplace to re-frame and countermand forced cultural norms. *Distancing* involved reflecting upon the changing nature of cultures, and selectively and critically appropriating those elements that proved consistent with one's self concept.

Resistance The existence of government outreach to migrant workers, unions in the workplace, or knowledgeable friends meant that skilled migrants were variously equipped with knowledge of their rights. Although direct recourse to the law or complaints to unions and labor tribunals were rare, skilled migrants used knowledge of anti-discriminatory laws and organizational policy to sanction or threaten enforcers of cultural conformity. Respondents were likely to push back especially when the latter violated interpersonal justice and/or stereotyped their communities of origin. For example, Jose, who was told by an employer that his heavy accent would be a 'problem', put in a claim with the Equal Opportunities Commission upon exiting the interview and received a thousand-dollar compensation, in his words, "straight away". As seen in the following quote, respondents reacted strongly to interpersonal hostility and acts of humiliation that had no professional pretext and yet became part of the workplace experience:

> Sometimes I feel humiliated being asked like three times to repeat myself or ask me to speak English when I'm speaking English. Sometimes, well, actually this happened last month and I was in a meeting and we were talking about the unemployment rate in China and one of my colleagues turned to me and said, oh, don't you feel lucky that you're in Australia? (R17)

Three respondents mentioned they were contemplating leaving Australia for career opportunities elsewhere, suggesting that one recourse skilled migrants had was to incorporate the desire to avoid cultural prejudice as a factor in selecting destination countries.

In reflecting on workplace experiences as minorities, respondents drew connections with non-work experiences to interpret the severity of breaches in interpersonal justice. For example, the same respondent as above, when asked about her experience as a minority person at work, recounted racist encounters outside of work and subsequently identified discriminatory attitudes as barriers to her "growth" at work: "Last month when I went to a concert, on the street, I got some drunken guy, I was being called a turd. It had nothing to do with my profession but it's just something that I experience in the country. Going further back, back in [city in New South Wales], I've been thrown eggs on the street when I was walking on the street." (R17)

<u>Inversion</u> Inversion has been referred to in the identity regulation literature as a re-framing of organizational identity demands that allows workers to reinforce personal identities (Ashcraft, 2005; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013). For example, pilots, whose masculine identity is threatened by organizational demands for gender neutrality, may re-assert their masculinity by portraying themselves as caring paternalistic figures (Ashcraft, 2005). Migrant accountants inverted workplace

cultural demands by re-framing stereotypes and bringing in values from their cultures of origin into the workplace. They often expressed affective loyalty to both their origin and host cultures: “I’m extremely proud of my origins and heritage and history just as well as I’m proud of being a citizen of Australia and gaining my experience and education in this country.” (R4)

Many respondents spoke of bringing in values based in their communities of origin into the workplace, such as a work ethic or a view of the workplace as an extension of the community: “Being Indian means giving importance to family and respecting elders. Even in my work, emphasis is on consensus, not hurting people’s feelings and by default deferring to seniors in the organization.” (R5)

Distancing In contrast to dis-identification, which has been associated with a severing of one’s identity from an occupation or work, distancing is a by-product of evaluative thinking that results in a demarcation of the self from something else (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014: 94). As cultures and societies change, so skilled migrants’ notions of what it means to belong to them did as well. Respondents critically reflected upon changes in their host and origin countries, distancing themselves from aspects of cultures that no longer matched their personal values and appropriating others that more closely aligned with their self-concept. Singular national cultures, then, at best partially influenced respondents’ self-concept. For example, one respondent described himself as “less Chinese” now than when he had recently arrived in Australia as, in his view, Chinese society now espoused values he didn’t relate to:

> The messages I get of what the values are for the current generation in China - I kind of see it through a lot of international students and all that - I just see it as, you know, it’s not what China has historically been about. It’s a lot more

> materialistic, there's more of a concept of the emperor mentality – 'that poor child'. Because of all these things I'm more disillusioned with where China has been headed and going in that sense, in a social and social value sense and that's just overall less Chinese feel, less Chinese if you like. The way I see it, that's China right now and I don't live those values; I don't share those values, hence I'm less Chinese. (R2)

Likewise, being critical of the way they were typecast at work didn't preclude respondents appreciating elements of the Australian workplace culture that appealed to their own values. Many, such as Rajiv, sought to actively adopt elements of Australian workplace cultures that resonated with their own values: "Getting used to the work culture was not difficult, because I in fact like the work culture here where you don't have any boundaries between yourself and your boss, where it's not difficult to strike a dialogue with your boss." (R4)

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aimed to shed light on the effort put in by skilled migrants in order to achieve cultural legitimacy in the labor market and in the workplace as well as examine the potential consequences of such effort (or the lack thereof). The study makes two main contributions, namely broadening our understanding of the material and social consequences of skilled migrants' performance of cultural conformity, and shedding light on the institutional frameworks that give rise to the above consequences as well as those that potentially can mitigate pressures for cultural conformity.

Consequences of Cultural Conformity

Among other things, this study has identified the conditions under which cultural 'others' are compelled to perform extra interpersonal work, and the potential consequences of *failing to perform* this work, such as the damage on job prospects and social exclusion. Additionally, it is possible to envision potential costs to *performing* 'cultural work'. Findings show that the extra effort that skilled migrants put in to achieve cultural legitimacy is *real* work—it can be measured in terms of time and effort put into acquiring accents, demeanors, names, jokes, presentation styles and knowledge of social appropriateness. I have shown that this work can beget career consequences—such as length of time spent in precarious jobs, and job opportunities and promotions gained and lost—as well as social inclusion and exclusion. Evidently, the extra work skilled migrants perform to obtain cultural legitimacy is unremunerated. Whether it is an 'investment' is uncertain, as positive payoffs are not guaranteed. In the absence of guarantees it appears that the *expectation* that the work will be rewarded, in the form of opportunities that otherwise may not be offered, can prolong such activities. On the other hand, performing cultural conformity may backfire. Recent theorizing on identity work, for example, has argued that identity narratives that lack authenticity and are incoherent are likely to be disbelieved by those who judge the individuals professionally (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006). As suggested by current findings, individuals performing cultural work, then, may be viewed as inauthentic by peers and employers and thus incur costs to personal credibility. Furthermore, individuals may themselves feel inauthentic while performing cultural conformity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), resulting in the need for emotional labor to manage the affective consequences of impression management (Grandey, 2003).

Institutional Frameworks Impacting Cultural Conformity

Findings from this study offer implications for a continual review of the institutional framework around skilled migration and employment practices. As mentioned previously, reforms in the last decade have reduced the cap for general skills migration in favour of increases in employer sponsorship. Employer sponsorship privileges experience over qualifications, typically requiring a minimum of three years of experience in the relevant area (Birrell and Healy, 2010). As with the previous program, however, the shift from a government-led corporatist supply driven model to an employer-led demand driven model lacks sufficient oversight over employer practices (Birrell and Healy, 2010; van de Ven and Voitchovsky, 2015: 26). *Inter alia,* the possibility that employers continue to use 'local' experience as a reason to reject otherwise qualified applicants, shown here as a significant and consequential phenomenon, remains. Findings from this study suggest that the use of 'local experience' by employers in the hiring process acts as an employment barrier against qualified skilled migrants and can potentially be a mechanism that begets over-education and under-employment for individuals whom Australia has deemed worthy of legal residency based on skills assessment. Not only, as seen here, does this negatively impact the individual migrant's career and may lead to some skilled migrants leaving Australia; such practices can distort the distribution of talent in the labor market leading to foregone opportunities for Australian workplaces (Islam and Fausten, 2008, Ng and Metz, 2015). The negative consequences of hiring practices based on local experience could be prevented by Australia adopting a similar measure such as Canada's ban on the use of 'Canadian experience' as a tool for employment discrimination (Fang et al., 2013; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2013). However, there may also be limits to preventing discrimination based on a regulatory approach. For example, banning the use of 'local experience' to disqualify applicants

may prompt employers to use alternative criteria such as 'communication skills' in order to shade discriminatory practices. Hence, a system of oversight must include monitoring of employment practices.

Low transferability from foreign graduates on temporary graduate visas (with the exception of PhDs or equivalent) to employer sponsorship (Birrell and Healy, 2008; Weller, 2017; Yap et al, 2014) also poses problems. One issue is managing expectations of international students who may still look towards an Australian degree as a pathway to skilled migration despite recent changes in policy. Equally significant is that recent policy changes re-inforce a broader tendency in the Australian labour market that distrusts academic qualification in favour of experience. Such a trend has led, *inter alia*, to an enlarged labour market for internships, a growing proportion of which are unpaid (Cameron, 2013, Stewart and Owens, 2013). A catch twenty-two whereby job seekers need experience (in the form of internships) to obtain experience (in the form of a job) has resulted in privileging students from relatively affluent socioeconomic backgrounds whose families are able to support them while they engage in obtaining both university qualification and internships that offer little to no remuneration (Stewart and Owens, 2013). Ongoing reviews of tertiary curricula should incorporate work-based expectations in order to reduce any large discrepancies between the content of university education and skills required in the labour market.

Theoretically, this study broadens extant notions of worker resistance stipulated by the identity regulation literature (Alvesson and Willmott 1996; 2002) and the burgeoning literature on managing work and non-work identities (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013). Current findings demonstrate the need to broaden the theorization of resistance to identity regulation by examining institutional and communal sources of support and resistance. The current study suggests that minority workers use cultural

elements reflectively to gain cultural legitimacy while preserving personal authenticity and draw on institutional, cultural, and personal sources to resist, invert, and distance themselves from pressures for cultural conformity. Findings suggest that better linkages between skilled migrants and institutions that can be a recourse in discriminatory situations, such as the government's labour inspectorate as well as workplace representation by unions and/or HR will be important in identifying and rectifying problems. Another source of support can be ethnic networks, whether occupation or community-based. Studies based in the US have shown that occupation-based co-ethnic and migrant networks can beget opportunities for career advancement, knowledge exchange, and investment and business opportunities for skilled migrants (Saxenian et al., 2002, Wenger, 1998, Waldinger and Der-Martirosian, 2001). A relatively neglected source of support for skilled migrants, who tend to see themselves as independent professionals, is co-ethnic and immigrant communities. Recent research has argued that communities can be viable spaces for supporting and motivating careers, acting alternatively to, or scaffolding, organizational support structures (Parker and Arthur, 2000; Parker, Arthur and Inkson, 2004).

Further Research

Although this study focused on one occupation, one can stipulate the conditions under which extra effort to obtain cultural legitimacy is likely to be required based on an assessment of the characteristics of this occupation. For example, cultural conformity is likely to be more important in occupations where social interaction with colleagues and clients is likely to impact career success. Therefore, accountants may be more reliant on cultural conformity, ceteris paribus, than would physicians or information technology (IT) professionals, for example.

Organizationally, large firms with multicultural norms may require *less* cultural conformity from skilled migrants than smaller firms with local clientele (Wines et al., 2013). Macro-institutional frameworks that determine the mode of gatekeeping in the professions can affect how cultural 'others' are able to manage challenges to their identities in different occupations. Zikic and Richardson (2016), for example, found that IT professionals who immigrated to Canada had more autonomy to forge respectable professional identities than did medical professionals, who faced institutional barriers to practicing their occupation. Future research should further examine organizational contexts in which efforts to gain cultural legitimacy are more or less required as well as the conditions under which the costs of compliance and non-compliance vary.

Understanding how minorities can positively impact their workplace experience is important, yet surprisingly few studies have examined how minority workers draw on laws and/or union agreements to subvert overt pressures for assimilation and threaten wrong-doers with punishment. Future research could shed more light into how cultural 'others' use institutional supports and social ties to act in empowered ways.

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