

**MAKING THE BEST OF BAD JOBS: THE AGENCY OF NEW MIGRANT
WORKERS**

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Abstract

This paper examines recently-arrived migrants to the United Kingdom, focusing in particular on their experiences as workers in businesses started by their peers. This context is often characterised by disadvantage and exploitation; yet we find workers to be resourceful and creative in the exercise of agency. Contrary to recent assessments of migrant labour and businesses, workers do more than simply 'cope' or 'get by'. Migrant workers often see employment in such firms as a refuge from a hostile labour market and as a site for the development of longer-term agential projects. This has implications for theories of agency and the evaluation of the employment relationship in such contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Recent migration to advanced western economies has been notable not only for its extent but also for the diversity of its sources. This represents a qualitative shift away from what had become the standard post-war pattern: no longer do immigrants 'come in blocks from specific cultures ... today's immigrants are ... from dozens of countries' (Cohen, 2009: 89). Academic inquiry has already thrown considerable light on the causes and process of migration and also on the focus of this paper, the nature of migrants' experience of the labour market once they arrive at their destination. Let us highlight three signal contributions. Anderson (2010) demonstrates that the regime of migration control does not just regulate the number of workers who arrive. It actively constructs certain types of worker, with migration status helping to shape workers' rights and opportunities. Datta *et al.* (2007) underline the linkages between migrants' labour market circumstances and their family and kinship situation so that the latter shapes workers' awareness of job opportunities. These scholars also underline the role of workers' own agency in the working out of market opportunities, though also stressing that such agency is generally about a tactical coping with constraints than a more strategic movement through jobs. Ahmad (2008) captures the work experience of a particular group, mainly illegal migrants from Pakistan to the UK, revealing their poor working conditions and the fact that they often laboured to secure a future that never arrived. Such research connects with an earlier phase of research on low-wage labour markets, which showed that positions were actively created by agents as well as being created by changes in the economic structure (Edwards and Ram, 2006). So what remains to be said? We make two main arguments. The first turns on the novelty of this new migration. Some wish to characterise novelty through concepts such as 'superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2007). Yet this concept simply underlines that migrants come from many different places; it does not say that their experience is qualitatively different from that of previous waves of migration. For Ahmad (2008), novelty arises from the fact that work in the UK is now of a post-Fordist kind, and he emphasises its precariousness and the contrasts with manufacturing in the past. But we should not exaggerate the contrast with the past. Not all work was ever Fordist, and not all migrants worked in factories. Indeed a commonplace was the Asian corner shop and the establishment of new businesses which were a long way from Fordism. The first argument, therefore, is that new migration has many continuities with the old and that in this field, as in many others, truncating or ignoring history is an error.

Secondly, what of the labour process? Scholars rightly stress the low wages, long hours, and poor working conditions suffered by migrants. They also show that migrants often have qualifications in their home countries which are not valued in the recipient countries, so that they find themselves de-skilled. The results reported below confirm much of this picture. But they also point to a degree of consent in the labour process. They support previous studies in this vein (e.g. Ram, 1994; Ram *et al.*, 2007), which demonstrate that the equation commonly between hypercompetition in product markets and autocracy in the labour process (by, for example, Edwards, 1979, Burawoy, 1985, and Rainnie, 1989) is imprecise. Yet analysis of this kind has informed few of the more recent studies, and it needs to be pursued if the complex and contradictory situation of migrant workers is to be understood. Our contribution here is to show that, even very powerless workers who are new to the labour market have means to influence their working lives.

A third contribution is empirical. We add to knowledge about a new group in the labour force, detailing their work and social situations.

The argument is first located in theories of agency. It is then applied to recent migrants to the UK from two contrasting regions who generally work in businesses owned by people from the same background as their own. Two features of the sample make it suitable as an extreme test case. Firstly, the migrants have very limited experience of or power in the labour market. Secondly, their co-ethnic situation further constrained their options. Yet agency was still present: even in such an unlikely context it was evident, and its presence qualifies the interpretations of the scholars discussed above. We thus aim to deepen understanding of the work experience of an important new part of the labour force.

NEW MIGRANT WORKERS IN A POST-INDUSTRIAL LABOUR MARKET

Perhaps unsurprisingly in an age of ‘deregulated labour markets characterised by low wages, insecurity and obfuscated employment relations’ (Anderson, 2010: 300), many recent studies of migrant labour in the UK tend to underplay or neglect the scope of worker agency. Judging from Archer’s (2003: 131) complaint that ‘more effort has been devoted to conceptualising how structural and cultural properties are transmitted to agents ... than has been given to the other side of the equation’, we might think that this lop-sidedness is a general tendency throughout social theory. Whatever the truth of this, it certainly seems to have particular force for the present wave of migrant labour market analysts. For example, Anderson (2010) herself focuses on the regime of migration control and the way in which, as well as regulating the rate of worker entry, this also actively shapes workers’ rights and opportunities through the creation of migration status differentials. Similarly highlighting passivity in the face of external pressures, Ahmad (2008) reveals the poor working conditions of illegal Pakistani migrants in Britain. Capturing an undoubtedly significant historical shift, Ahmad (2008) notes that the switch from ‘old’ to ‘new’ migration in countries like Britain coincided chronologically with the post-Fordist economic restructuring (Jones *et al.*, 2007), which eroded the manufacturing jobs for which many South Asians had been recruited in the 1950s and 1960s (Jones *et al.*, 1989; Miles 1984). For this author, the key change is the disappearance of long-term employment paying a living wage for low skill workers, a theme chiming closely with Standings’s (2011) arguments about ‘precarity’ becoming the new norm in the labour market. According to Standing (2011), flexible labour markets have left growing numbers in insecure employment ‘without a voice in the labour process’; and we might see migrants as the extreme sharp end of this undesirable vanguard.

By contrast, Datta *et al.* (2007) do recognise an element of autonomy on the part of migrant workers, in particular their use of what is in effect a portfolio of coping methods, reminiscent of what Davis (2007:175) calls 'survival by miracles of economic improvisation'. As well as multiple job-holding, these include mobilising family and community as a means both of job hunting and of pooling otherwise meagre resources. In this, the authors draw inspiration from Smith and Stenning's (2006: 19) notion of survival 'secured through a host of economic practices articulating with one another in dynamic and complex ways and in multiple sites and spaces'.

Datta *et al.*'s (2007) attention to the work-home-community connections of migrant workers highlights the blurred distinction between individual and collective agency. Migration processes are often shaped by complex combinations of individual and household decisions within institutionalised social networks (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Studies of migrants in larger firms are cognisant of the importance of social ties, but tend to see them as a mechanism of securing compliant labour and as a resource for social control (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003: 83). Investigations of 'ethnic enclaves' (Ahmad, 2008; Zhou, 1999) highlight the intersection of community and family links in the operation of small businesses; but rarely do they consider worker agency and the labour process. Nonetheless, these studies alert us to the importance of two considerations that are germane to the present analysis of migrant worker agency. The first relates to the importance of wider subject positions of individuals (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Workers have multiple subject positions – family members, citizens, consumers – which will have a bearing on how they exercise agency. This is particularly important in the case of the businesses that migrants establish and work in, for in such small family-owned businesses non-economic ties are particularly strong (Baines and Wheelock, 1998). Secondly, the nature of these identities and social ties means that the employment relationship will be shaped by a wide range of 'non-work' influences and has to be evaluated accordingly. As Bailey (1987:44) suggests in his study of immigrant-owned (and run) restaurants, 'although the obligations may not always be in the short-term interest of one or both of the parties, they are understood to be mutually advantageous within the broader context of immigration and settlement'.

Active though agency certainly is in Datta *et al.*'s (2007) account, it is presented in a very limited and short term light as a set of 'tactics' designed to cope with immediate challenges as opposed to a 'strategy', a conscious decision-making process aimed at a long term drive for improvement in the job market position. Indeed, if their workers in reality do lack the capacity for forward planning, then they are denied what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call 'projective agency', for them one of the definitive properties of selfhood. According to their seminal definition, social agency is 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past ... but also oriented towards the future (as a projective capacity to imagine alternative possibilities)' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 964). We produce evidence of migrant worker 'projective' resilience in the face of the most crushing forces.

Ultimately we see Datta *et al.*'s (2007) view of agency as *partial*, an approach which only includes one element of what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) see as essentially multi-dimensional. The latter are centrally concerned with the temporal dimension of agency and they calibrate the concept to accommodate past, present and future orientations. From this we see that Datta *et al.* (2007) are concerned only with 'evaluative' agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), the actor's immediate response to present dilemmas in the here and now. Tellingly, however, the present dimension is intimately bound up with past and future, the former described as 'habitual' agency, established routine derived from past practices, the

latter labelled as ‘projective’ agency, the aspirational visualisation of a future improvement in life.

We also caution against the idea that new migrant labour markets are a true historical novelty. ‘Super-diversity’ tells us that the UK’s incomers are no longer overwhelmingly from the Caribbean and South Asia but it says nothing about whether their economic and social potential differs from previous migrant waves. Novel provenance does not necessarily produce novel outcomes. Even Ahmad’s (2008) picture of the deterioration in the Asian worker’s position is a misleadingly exaggerated contrast with a past in which by no means all work was Fordist and many migrants did not work in factories. On the contrary, one of the staples of contemporary scholarship in ethnic relations was the widespread exclusion of racialised minorities from the more desired opportunities of the Fordist core (Miles 1989, Phizacklea and Miles 1980).

As argued earlier, this lack of historical perspective is the probable reason for the apparent denial of earlier work on low-wage labour markets (Ram 1994; Edwards and Ram 2006). From this research emerged the important finding that, even in face of apparently extreme disempowerment in workplaces often characterised as ‘sweatshops’, positions were actively created by agents themselves as well as by structural imposition. Certainly low wages, long hours and poor working conditions were rife but, counter-intuitive though it may seem, the labour process actually depended on a significant degree of consent. Moreover, the commonly assumed equation between hyper-competition in product markets and autocracy in the labour process (Edwards 1979; Burawoy 1985; Rainnie 1989) is imprecise.

All this highlights the importance of individual worker agency in low-wage labour markets, where formal labour market institutions such as trade unions are virtually non-existent. With sharp resonance for the present paper, Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010: 212) remind us that, well into the 1980s, workers, whether migrant or native, were ‘still largely depicted as an oppressed class, without the capacity to affect’ their own circumstances. Whenever researchers in this field wished to recognise workers’ resistance, their preoccupation tended to be with ‘trade union activity as opposed to worker agency articulated through community and civil society groupings’ (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 213). As we will see in the present case, access to jobs is shaped by family and kinship ties very much in the way suggested by these authors, with behaviour shaped by commonly observed norms.

As well as warning of the need to compare like with like – the employee in the small family firm cannot be subject to the same analysis as the Fordist production line operative - Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) are in several other respects encouraging to the notion of worker agency even in the most unpromising circumstances. In the manner of Archer’s (2003) insistence that causative social forces are “conditional not deterministic”, they take pains to establish that assessing the effectiveness of agential input is a delicately nuanced rather than a black and white exercise. This theme of countervailing forces interacting simultaneously is picked up once more by Delbridge and Edwards (2013). In their suggestion that two parties can at one and the same time be both opposed (in ‘contradiction’) and interdependent, we detect the process of ‘negotiated consent’ (Ram, 1994). This rationale is elaborated in Jones and Ram’s (2010) account of the South Asian workplace: there is an inevitable contradiction between the material ends of capitalist owner and proletarian worker; but the former is unable to *realise* his power without securing the active consent of the latter. In effect, the smooth operation of the migrant-owned small firm depends on an *implicit* contract between owner and employee, an entirely unofficial trust-based effort bargain completely free of formal rules about pay and conditions (Bailey, 1987). Through this form of paternalism, owners secure reliable workers while migrants themselves gain a refuge from a hostile labour market and culturally

unfamiliar environment. Moreover, as well as enjoying non-material benefits of this kind, workers will occasionally be able to negotiate certain material bonuses through individual bargaining (Jones and Ram, 2010; Ram *et al.*, 2007).

Following Datta *et al.* (2007) our main interest is in the resourceful actions of individuals to overcome disadvantage and to 'get by', but the key distinctiveness lies in the interest in the shared ethnicity of owner and worker; and the question of whether the co-ethnic workplace offers workers a sheltered space in which to bring their own wills to bear on their working lives. We also examine the possibility that the co-migrant workplace can trap them at the bottom of the labour market.

Our findings demonstrate not only the resilience and resourcefulness of migrant workers in the face of acute pressures but crucially their capacity to balance short, medium and long term considerations which comprise. As well as immediate survival tactics like drawing on social networks to find work and escape from discrimination and social isolation, they demonstrate a long-term strategic capacity: informally negotiated working relationships that provide a means of survival and sufficient latitude to develop career plans; and an active commitment to a vision of the future that involves engagement in the formal labour market or entrepreneurship. This 'multi-temporality' (Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2011) is further demonstrated by substantial numbers of our respondents engaged in training and preparation for long term occupational self-improvement, including business ownership itself. Though it is not inconceivable that some of these future plans might prove illusory, what is undeniable is a fairly widespread determination among our sample to impose a little of their own will on a narrowly constrained situation. As Anderson (2010: 305) suggests, 'jobs may be viewed optimistically ... as an opportunity to get a foot on the ladder'.

In summary, we follow social theorists stressing the need to look at the active role of agency together with scholars who have applied such ideas to migration. We study a context, workers in new migrant businesses owned by people from the same background, in which agency might be expected to be very weak. The context thus acts as something of a critical test case for the importance of agency.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

In order to capture the range of experience of new migrants, we focus on workers from two migrant communities. In the region studied, the west Midlands, as elsewhere in Britain, new migrants tend to fall into the two broad categories: migrants from the eight former Soviet nations of Eastern Europe granted EU entry on May 1st 2004 (the A8 countries); and asylum-seekers and refugees from a range of countries, among whom we concentrate on those from Africa and certain Asian countries, with Somalis, Nigerians and Zimbabweans particularly prominent (we use the acronym 'AME' to denote these migrants).

Drastic restructuring of the London labour market forms the context for Datta *et al.*'s (2007) analysis, with the shift from manufacturing to financial services bringing about a calamitous erosion of job opportunities for low skilled migrant workers. In the case of our own migrants, economic restructuring in the west Midlands has followed similar and possibly even more extreme trends. A regional economy traditionally based on manufacturing and revolving around the mass motor industries of Birmingham and Coventry was acutely vulnerable to global change, with manufacturing losing 814,000 jobs between 1971 and 2009 and being whittled down to 30 per cent of its former size (Rowthorn, 2010). Unlike the metropolis, the west Midlands is in no sense a financial hub, generating a growth of only

264,000 new jobs in finance. In his analysis of the UK gulf between an economically buoyant South and declining North, Rowthorn (2010) allocates the West Midlands to the latter.

There is a lack of accurate information on the numbers and characteristics of new migrant communities in the west Midlands, with no single data source providing a comprehensive picture. Consequently, there were no existing data-bases from which we could construct a 'representative' data base of new migrant businesses. Our sampling strategy was therefore 'purposeful' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in the sense that we sought respondents who would be able to cast light on our research question relating to the agency of new migrant workers. There are sensitivities involved in researching communities that are often designated as 'hard to reach' (Jones *et al.*, 2006). Our initial challenge therefore was one of access. We responded by employing four trusted intermediaries from new migrant communities with considerable local knowledge of the types of firms and individuals that we wished to study. Each intermediary had been trained in research methods and enjoyed a record of effective collaboration with the university sector. The use of multiple intermediaries, each with their own myriad contacts, is a form of 'chain referral sampling' (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Penrod *et al.*, 2003), which is an advance on snowball sampling because a variety of networks are drawn upon. The researchers were solely responsible for devising the interview guides, data analysis, and interpretation and presentation activities.

The eventual sample comprised 60 workers who were drawn from 49 new migrant businesses. The sample encompassed a range of geographical origins, entry routes, legal statuses and socio-economic composition. Fifteen countries of origin were represented, with Poles (14) and Somalis (14) being the most numerous. Other prominent groups included Iraqi Kurds (9), Zimbabweans (5) and Congolese (3). The respondents were comparatively young, with 40 of the 60 respondents under the age of 40 (and 30 of this group were between 20 and 30 years old). Seventeen of the respondents were women. Many workers were well educated, with 38 respondents have experienced high college level education or higher. This seems to contrast sharply with the poorly educated migrants who feature in studies of work in large firms. The workers operated in businesses that were concentrated in a narrow range of economic sectors such as low-end retail, catering, and personal services. This pattern replicates that of predecessor entrepreneurial minorities in Britain, notably the South Asian shopkeepers of the 1970s (Aldrich *et al.*, 1981).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2011 with 49 business owners and 60 workers. Interviews with owners elicited profile data on the firm, such as activities, employment size, age, location and sectors. Information on the owner included age, gender, ethnicity, migrant status, management qualifications/training and experience, as well as motives for starting and running a business. Worker interviews focused on motivations for coming to the UK and the west Midlands, their experiences of work, the material and non-material rewards they received from working in new migrant businesses, their plans for the future. Interrogating these issues allowed us to explore the extent to which social ties were mobilised in a response to societal inequalities, whether the workplace acted as a refuge against labour market discrimination, and workers' plans to either move out of the new migrant firm or stay put. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Data analysis followed an iterative process, initially deductively by applying our conceptualization to the accounts provided by the respondents and then inductively, by resorting the data to preset categories but also by developing new ones. Consensus over what data meant was reached after formal and informal meetings and conversations. A number of steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of our data. First, interview transcripts were carefully reviewed by the research team as the research proceeded. Regular discussions were

held with the intermediaries; this allowed issues to be clarified and further data to be collected where there were gaps. Second, the researchers met on a regular basis to discuss emerging patterns in the data and to explore the developing themes. Third, the fourth author was engaged on the project when the fieldwork was completed, and was therefore able to provide a fresh perspective on the research procedures and emerging themes. Finally, we asked an experienced qualitative researcher familiar to assess our empirical materials and the procedures that we followed. She reviewed our interview schedules, a random selection of transcripts and approach to data analysis in order to assess the plausibility of our conclusions.

FINDINGS

Results are presented under three heads. We first set out the context in terms of reasons for migration to the UK and entry to the labour market. Secondly, employment relations are analysed. The first sub-theme here addresses ‘structure’ and the constraints that it placed on workers; the second turns to their agency despite these constraints. Thirdly, we look at longer-term agential projects.

Mobilizing the Community

Our data show that the intersection of community, work and family plays a pivotal role in the process of migration, which eventually permeates the workplace too, as workers seek refuge from traumatic conditions in their home country and a harsh labour market in the UK. Respondents migrated to the UK for three main reasons (see Table 1): political asylum, economic considerations, and family re-union. Half of the sample was forced to flee their homeland for security reasons. In many cases, their experience of flight from terror was truly traumatic: ‘I was a child soldier before I fled to the UK’ (interviewee LO5B); ‘many members of my family were killed by Saddam Hussein and I paid a trafficker a lot of money to get here’ (LO14A); ‘my parents were killed in a chemical attack’ (LO16A).

Table 1. Main Reason for Migration

Reason	Representative Data
Political Asylum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reason that led me to come to the UK is the continuous fighting, poverty and to find a place for peace and education. As a result of the years of war in Somalia, there was no peace, no education and persistent poverty ... I escaped to the UK through many other countries, and after two years I managed to reach the UK alone and my family joined me a year later' (LO6A, Somali supermarket worker) • Our country was destroyed by the war in Iraq and many of our people were killed by Saddam Hussein ... I couldn't continue to stay there as my mother and father were killed in a chemical attack, so I had to escape here for protection (LO16A, Iraqi Kurd restaurant worker) • My family are Ugandan Indian. Due to political problems, we were resettled here ... I was only two when we were resettled here (LO13A, Ugandan Indian shopworker)
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had trouble finding a job in Poland so came here to live with my sister who found [me] work (AK2A, Polish photographer) • My family are originally from Afghanistan ... As a result of the fierce war in Afghanistan we decided to emigrate to Pakistan, but there it was not a good place to live either, so I bribed somebody to bring me here ... I came to the UK to look for better opportunities (LO14A, Afghani shopworker) • I came here to change my life and start a new life ... It was hard to live in Poland; not enough money (AK8A, Tattoo parlour)
Family re-union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I ... settle here because most of my community members and my family members ... lived here in the west Midlands ... A lot of the Somali community are here too and it's like home (LO6A, Somali supermarket worker) • I have decided to settle in West Midlands because my family is here (MU4A, Zimbabwean fish store worker) • I have decided to live in West Midlands because of family and relatives who are living here (MU5A, Zimbabwean hairdresser)

The remaining half of the sample was split equally between economic migrants and those who were following family members who had already migrated. These categories were mainly populated by Polish migrants and Africans who had managed to secure citizenship in other European countries. Typifying the former category, a Polish supermarket worker commented, 'there is a better situation here financially than in Poland. I had a contract here and my boyfriend was here as well. I have better earnings. Everything in life revolves around money. I can live comfortably here' (AK14A). Family ties figured prominently in the responses of African migrants too:

I chose to settle here because many of the Somali Dutch community are here and it is like home to me. I also chose to settle here because I would be able to get a job as many of my friends and relatives who came here are working and helping their families (LO8A, Somali IT worker).

These responses draw attention to a staple theme in migration studies: the manner in which the process of international migration is typically a collective affair orchestrated through social networks, where the presence of initial waves of settlers in a new land helps to ease the passage of their successors. Describing how this ‘beaten path’ eases the friction of displacement, Waldinger and Lichter (2003: 11) argue that ‘migrants move not as solo adventurers’ but as part of an exclusive in-group, ‘their social ties lubricating and structuring their transition from one society to the next’. Our respondents exemplify the importance of such chain migration. In cases where they have not been directly dispersed by the UK Border Agency, they have mostly chosen to settle in the West Midlands because of the presence there of earlier settled family and friends. A flavour of this is given by LO4A, a Somali money transfer shop assistant, ‘I thought I will be safe and comfortable in this region, with relatives, friends, mosques and Somali food’.

Yet respondents frequently referred to their strenuous but unsuccessful attempts to secure work in the mainstream labour market. Racism was seen as key factor; typical is the comment of this business studies graduate, now working as a window cleaner:

I was really prepared for any kind of job that I could. It’s better than living in Zimbabwe under the leadership ... there ... It’s hard to get any job because of ... recession and ... the fact that I am black. I applied for different jobs and ... was invited to interviews and as soon as I got in I could see that something was shocking the interview panel ... [It’s] so discouraging ... I am sure it was because of who I am and where I came from (MU7A).

The employee’s bargaining power is ultimately stymied by the lack of realistic job alternatives, a lack which amounts in effect to a basic un-freedom arising specifically from the status of racialised immigrant. As the following quotes confirm, linguistic barriers are only one element in a far-reaching web of entrapment: ‘Many people can’t get a job because of the colour of their skin’ (LO5B); ‘some employers don’t trust people from Africa, I don’t know why, maybe you can do research about this’ (MU11B); ‘why my expectations were not met is the fact I am black ... when it comes to reducing workers, migrants always seem to be the first to go’ (MU7A).

The co-ethnic workplace offers a kind of additional layer of protection. In such an atmosphere of actual and latent hostility, the feelings expressed by refugees such as LO15A – ‘I have made this workplace my home. The customers are very friendly, very human and supportive and they make my life improve’ – suggest deep appreciation for the local small scale community-based working environment. This respondent’s opinion is echoed by many, with LO2A using the phrase ‘peace of mind’ to describe the contentment he derives from his work as a fashion shop assistant where ‘I have developed kindness and friendship with people’.

Following initial settlement, the co-ethnic community comes further into play as an informal recruitment organisation (Jones *et al.*, 2006; Staring, 2000). So vital has this been for the present sample that no respondent had obtained a job through formal channels of application, finding employment instead by using the communal ‘grapevine’ (48 out of 60 cases) or by directly approaching a prospective employer. For many migrants, their eventual employers will themselves be members of that community; the likelihood of this has been increased by a shift from mainstream employment to ethnic enclave employment, yet another major

consequence of the post-industrial shift; ‘since deindustrialisation, the ethnic economy has come to absorb the bulk of new migrant labour’ (Ahmad 2008: 308-9).

Work in New Migrant Firms

Bad jobs

“Bad jobs” are a defining trait of [an] unequal society’ (Waldinger and Lichter, 2003: 9); there can be little doubt that the work of our respondents is captured by this term. Breaches of regulations – or informal economic activity in the sense of a legal enterprise that is partially concealed from the state for tax purposes (Williams, 2004) – were rife. Just over half of our sample (37 respondents) claimed to be in receipt of the National Minimum Wage. At the time of interview, this was set at £5.80 per hour, a rate frequently argued to fall short of a decent living wage (Grover, 2009). Even this meagre return could be exaggerated since our workers could have claimed to be in receipt of their legal dues so as to protect their employer. Assessing compliance is rendered even more difficult because of the imprecise ways in which hours worked were calculated. Working time was expected to correspond with customer demand rather than pre-set times. A hairdresser highlighted this practice:

I’m paid according to the customers that I have each day ... Sometimes there are no customers, [so] I use the money that I worked for in previous days. I do have to be careful the way that I use the money I get each day because there are days that I don’t get anything at all (MU5A).

Overtime was rarely if ever paid for extra work, with additional working hours seen an accepted part of working life. A Zimbabwean food shop worker (MU6A) responded to a question on overtime by explaining, ‘This business is not even paying for the hours that I work, how can it pay other times?’ Additional payments were the sole prerogative of the proprietor, ‘It is entirely at the discretion of the business owner ... When we are not paid we don’t complain ... It is up to him to decide’ (LO1A: Somali, money transfer agency).

Regulatory compliance is further undermined by the pervasive employment of ‘helpers’. Virtually every business owner utilised the services of helpers who were either unpaid and or given little more than subsistence for their efforts. A Somali supermarket owner (LO1) gave a stark explanation of the rationale.

We have 8 employees and numerous helpers who offer their time for free ... Some ... like students we reimburse them for their bus passes or weekly ticket, while for ... family members their help is unpaid, though we give them some tokens such as nearly expired products, bread or biscuits ... The number of helpers is up or down depending on the success of the business.

That said, most of these firms are themselves surviving on the margins and cannot be said to be solely concerned with profiteering at the expense of their labour force.

Making the most of bad jobs

An understandable, if partial, reading of the evidence would be to view work in the new migrant firm as another instance where ‘employers have ruthlessly exploited migrant labour in order to hold down wages’ (Milne, 2012: 104). At this point, however, careful qualification is needed to take account of our respondents’ capacity to exercise a quite surprising degree of independent agency, of influence over their own destinies. If, with Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 1005), we regard social agency as ‘the capacity of resource-equipped actors to act creatively’, we would immediately need to concede that our respondents are the very definition of *non*-resource-equipped and would accordingly dismiss them as completely

externally determined. Yet this statement follows hard on the heels of the same authors' declaration that 'social action will never be *completely* determined or structured' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 1004 – original emphasis). In what might be regarded as a classic resolution of this paradox, we might argue that in the present case the normal rules of engagement are modified by an alternative logic rooted in social networks bonded by common ethnicity. Specifically we would maintain that the co-migrant workplace offers a secure space in which workers are able to exercise some degree of personal agency. This space is granted by an 'implicit contract' in which owners are 'unencumbered by formal rules regarding pay, fringe benefits, or work organization ... [but] are constrained by an implicit understanding concerning the rights and obligations of employees' (Bailey, 1987: 24). This tacit arrangement certainly allows owners to secure a dependable and flexible workforce; but it also opens up space for workers to exercise latitude that extends beyond day-to-day coping and the immediate dilemmas of evaluative agency.

An indication of the importance of social ties is the value that many respondents attached to their personal relationship with their employer despite the most meagre and unreliable of wage payments. One example is LO3B who combines shop work with taxi-driving, 'I'm very close friends with the boss, so I don't give him a hard time when my pay is delayed ... it's not the pay that makes me happy but the people, the customers'. Similarly, Nigerian shop worker (MU6) remarked 'I am not paid at all but am happy helping my friend'. But such comments also have to be seen in the light of severely limited employment options. Illustrative of this ambiguity is HM3A, a Kurdish assistant in a halal butcher's shop. On one level he enjoys job satisfaction and a great deal of personal security from an excellent relationship with his boss; 'the shop owner is very good with me. As long as there is a job, I am happy here'. He claims to be indefinitely wedded to it because it keeps him content; yet he also confesses, 'I'm not sure I can get a job anywhere else, as I don't have any qualifications and my English is not that good'. This lack of human capital is of course the classic condition of immigrant occupational entrapment, with the linguistic barrier often the most immediate handicap (Jones *et al.*, 2006). For HM3A it is an intractable barrier because he is unable to take time off for English language classes; 'I can't survive without working because I have no one to support me'. Across the sample around one in four respondents complained of inability to communicate in English.

Effort and reward also have to be seen in the context of family networks both inside and outside the firm, providing an important means of coping with the competitive market place and of flexibility. Even family members who are not formally employed in the firm played a vital role, often for little immediate reward. A student who regularly helped out in his brother's internet café explained:

this is like a family business so helping my brother is like helping myself ... No explanation is needed ... because we came here to improve our lives so we are doing it. It's not easy because I am not getting payment as such but I do get paid a little money to keep me going (MU10A).

In other cases the relationship is a more straightforward matter of resource-pooling in the manner proposed by Datta *et al.* (2007). Illustrating this is the case history of MU9A, a Tanzanian woman who came to Britain ten years ago to study nursing at a local university. As well as holding down a 30 hours a week job in the NHS, she also works seven hours a week 'doing the books' for her husband's driving school. Much of the time this is unpaid labour, which she sees as a contribution to their joint livelihood, though 'he does pay me sometimes when business is good and he has a good number of learner drivers'. Viewed as a household unit, this arrangement involves not only sharing but also cross-subsidisation

between self-employment and external job-holding, a quite well-established survival tactic among migrant business owners in Britain, long pre-dating the new migrant phase (Ram and Jones, 2008).

This case also illustrates the contrast between tactics addressed to immediate survival and strategies for long term goals, a situation in which the driving school business is seen as a temporary holding operation prior to full self-realisation. For this Tanzanian couple, both of whom are qualified nurses, their ultimate aim is the joint ownership of a private care home, an ambition depending on their eventual ability to raise the financial capital to match their specialist human capital.

While the above case displays many of the most problematic aspects of co-ethnic small firm employment – a financially struggling venture which fails to generate sufficient revenue to properly recompense either owner or staff – it also contains many progressive elements. Indeed there is more than a suggestion of voluntarism about this operation, of projective agency, with two individuals working together to enact their own destiny. Moreover, coping with the present is made easier by their future orientation, a mentality driven by not entirely unrealistic hopes for a vastly improved livelihood. As we shall see, the sample contains significant numbers of workers who look upon their present job not as an end state but as a stepping stone to a better future, a mentality which in itself might be regarded as one of the key coping mechanisms here.

For other workers, their family member's firm seems to have few redeeming features. For example MU10A, a 26 year old Somali, works for his brother's café and money transfer agency but is highly conscious of this as a stop-gap in the absence of alternatives: 'I am yet to get proper employment. When I apply for a job, they see I am from Africa and they don't give it to me. People here do not like Muslims at all'. Despite the mostly unrewarded toil – 'some weeks I may get £50' – he is still sufficiently moved by family loyalty to admit, 'I always remember the business is for my brother, I have to support him'. Ultimately, however, this feeling is not unconditional and 'as soon as I get something better, I'll go for it. This job gives me the experience that may lead to a better one'.

In line with the contradictory nature of the new migrant position, the migrant-owned workplace is simultaneously a bulwark against the external world and a kind of bridgehead ushering the newcomer into that world, an opportunity attested to by the many respondents who claim to be integrating well through the contact with British society promoted by their work. Examples are given in Table 2. Typical here is MU11A, a shop assistant who says, 'in business, you really have to be friendly and understanding to other people's culture'. Even a multiple job holder working as a taxi-driver and in a money transfer agency (and paid sub-NMW wages) attaches great value to the social benefits afforded by his varied economic activities.

I feel I am ... happily integrated into the UK and made many friends and acquaintances. ... [By] working here in the money transfer agency and giving people a service with my taxi, I get integrated with diverse people And in the mosques, restaurants and internet cafes that I visit on a daily or weekly basis, I meet so many people and have a lot in common with them (LO3A).

Table 2. The Workplace as Integration Bridgehead

Worker	Representative Data
LO10A Sudanese shop assistant	In this job, I am introduced to so many customs and cultures
LO12A Iranian waiter	I am able to befriend so many people here in the pizza restaurant
MUIIB Zimbabwean shop assistant	I serve all different backgrounds and countries
MU10A Somali cafe assistant	This business helps me meet people from many backgrounds
MU10B Tanzanian driving instructor	This type of work means we need to welcome anybody from anywhere
MU5A Jamaican hair stylist	I meet people from different countries in this salon

All the above respondents attach importance to participating in a cohesive multi-ethnic community. It appears that by initially providing shelter within their own community, the workplace gives them the confidence required to eventually brave the outside world. But this integration effect is not universal and certainly fails to work in the case of LO5B, a 26 year old Congolese male who feels isolated. ‘Many people hate and despise me for the colour of my skin’. This case does not overturn the overall verdict that these small migrant-owned work places provide a degree of emotional solace for often traumatised people entering Britain.

Looking to the future

As seen in the previous section, a common theme running through the responses is future orientation or projective agency as a means of coping with present privations. Relevant here is Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998:1006) rendering of projective agency as seeking to ‘imagine alternative futures for a problematic present’. In the present case imagination goes far beyond some sort of vague dreaming and takes the form of quite specific propositions. As well as hoping for improved job rewards, a number of the interviewees specified a wish to become business owners themselves.

Such entrepreneurial ambitions are shared by almost one quarter of respondents and the sense of work in the migrant firm as a kind of entrepreneurial apprenticeship (Ram *et al.*, 2001) is well captured by LO2A’s claim that ‘this business has shown me how to establish my own business in future’. As Table 3 indicates, LO2A is one of 17 respondents with ambitions for self-employment and it might be argued that very meagre wage payments in the here and now are a kind of deferred gratification, with informal apprenticeship acting as a stepping stone to long term progress. For the above respondent, his shop assistant’s work is a channel through which ‘I am exposed to the business community, learning the knowledge and making connections with influential business people’.

Table 3. Current and Future Plans

Intentions	Frequency
Satisfied with current position	31
Looking for better opportunities	17
Ambition for own business	17

While the notion of entrepreneurial apprenticeship is a seductive one, with its suggestion of deferred gratification in exchange for future gain, it cannot be uncritically accepted (Ram *et al.* 2001), principally because it is an imposed rather than voluntarily elected arrangement. Even so, it is clear that a great many of our respondents were animated by the prospect of future material improvements and are taking practical steps to bring that about. In addition to those who brightened up their present job by visualising it as a business training exercise, there were many engaged in boosting their personal human capital through part time education or training.

As suggested earlier, this point is at odds with Datta *et al.*'s (2007) proposition that precarity rules out any chance of long term strategising and forces migrant workers into rather desperate immediate term measures such as multiple job 'juggling'. Fewer than one in five of the present respondents held more than one job and they appeared more likely to use their free time for college attendance. Among the small minority of second job holders there were indeed several who saw themselves as fortunate to be able to combine more than one wage-earning opportunity. One who saw this as a distinct career improvement was MU11A, a shop assistant, who had previously worked shifts in a factory. As well as working 17 hours per week for a 'very good' shop owner, he did 20 hours as an NHS care assistant and was highly satisfied with 'my two jobs, they are flexible and they work for me'. Among the nine two-job holders, care work/nursing seems to be the commonest occupational area for the second job but the sample also contained a taxi driver and a security guard.

In terms of autonomous choice and attempting to impose one's own terms, the two most intriguing cases are LO7A and MU8A. Particularly happy with his lot was the former, an Algerian migrant qualified as an ITC engineer, employed as an assistant in a computer shop. For him the craft ethic was his life's motivation –'all that matters is learning about computers'- and he supplemented his income by repair work in his spare time. Perhaps even more creative was MU8A, a young Ugandan who, in addition to his work in a shop, played and sang in a band. Consistent with the recurrent theme of future orientation, he was seriously contemplating a full-time musical career, perhaps as a singer-songwriter.

More commonly, self-improvement was being undertaken via education and training, with 15 respondents attending some kind of college or university course in their spare time. Most frequently this took the form of basic English language courses. The majority of Africans in the sample were, however, fluent or at least adequate in English communication and hence several had set their sights on higher education, with two respondents studying law-related courses. Striving for recognised formal credentials appears to represent a more genuine form of deferred gratification than the entrepreneurial 'apprenticeship'. This suggests that the co-migrant workplace actually does create something of a refuge from precarity, a protected space in which migrants can exercise a projective agency planning for a future escape from the awfulness of the here and now.

CONCLUSION

We have shown how employment in fellow migrants' small firms functions as part of a portfolio of survival tactics for low skilled new migrants in the west Midlands. As well as providing psychic security for those fleeing past traumas and present hostility, the ethnic enclave workplace protects against the mainstream labour market and offers potentially better material returns, though it is certainly not a haven of harmony. These results may differ from those reported by scholars such as Ahmad (2008) for a number of reasons. Firstly, he looked at only one group of migrants and may have had less diversity than there is in the present sample. Secondly, he stressed disadvantage, which we recognize while also pointing to worker agency.

This agency generated some job satisfaction and sometimes financial rewards a little above the generally depressed norm. For many workers, job satisfaction was also coloured by the feeling that their position was a transitional staging post en route to a better destination. In the light of Datta *et al's* (2007) claim that the precarity of migrant workers gives rise to a short-term survival 'tactics' mentality, our own respondents are particularly intriguing, with their widespread ambitions for self-employment or higher qualifications in the long term. As suggested earlier, this is most succinctly captured by Coe and Jordhus-Lier's (2010) label "constrained agency". Following Katz (2004), these authors postulate a continuum of worker relative autonomy, running from *resilience* ("small acts of 'getting by' ") to "*resistance ... direct challenges to capitalist social relations*" (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 216). While our respondents' stance falls well short of the latter, it certainly exceeds the former of these, essentially the short-term survival tactics described by Datta *et al* (2007). Our workers' position conforms to the intermediate category *reworking*, "strategies to lever better terms and conditions" (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010: 216). Central here is a recognition that our respondents are proactively defining their own terms and conditions, a feeling heightened by their widespread definition of the present as a transitional staging post en route to a better future. It is hard to think of a better concrete example of 'projective' agency.

A number of wider implications follow. Firstly, this research resonates with debates in labour geography on the importance of spatial and temporal dynamics in understanding migrant worker agency. The 'spatiality of everyday life' (Ward, 2007: 267) is an important theme in the reviews of labour geography by Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) and Lier (2007), and is central to Rogaly's (2009: 1984) account of the myriad ways in which agency is exercised by migrants in the most hostile of settings: 'migrant workers as subjects may still play a role in seeking, and obtaining, incremental and sometimes highly significant changes in microspaces of work and living, albeit it in a world dominated by capital' (Rogaly, 2009:1984).

Secondly, the role that migrant firms played in providing a refuge from a hostile labour market can potentially contribute to widening the range of actors involved in industrial relations research (Heery and Frege, 2012) and the kind of migrant support intermediaries studied in debates on 'integration' and social inclusion (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2012). Businesses in the current study made an important social contribution: they circulated information, alerted community members to relevant opportunities and served as a means of overcoming social isolation. These functions are important in the light of migrants' estrangement from mainstream institutions. Further, the operation of migrant firms as 'informal training systems' (Bailey, 1987) for workers, and their role in providing workers with the space to pursue educational opportunities, suggests that they fulfil an important function in wider processes of economic and community development. This has implications for the way in which the

labour process is evaluated and, in line with McGovern (2007: 219), questions the portrayal of labour migrants as the ‘closest living embodiment of *homo economicus*’.

Finally, the workings of the employment relationship outlined in this study also connect with injunctions to study work in the context of broader problems and institutions (Ackers, 2002; Ackers and Wilkinson 2005). The application of an employment relations perspective to the operation of migrant enterprise has been helpful in casting light on the constellation of factors that shape work – family, community, kinship ties – as well as the wider problematic of migration and labour (McGovern, 2007).

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