Service nepotism in the multi-ethnic marketplace: Mentalities and motivations

Abstract

Purpose – This paper emphasizes the multi-ethnic marketplace as the site of the emergence of service nepotism: the practice where employees bestow relational benefits and/or gifts on customers on the basis that they share a perceived common socio-collective identity. We draw on the contemporary turn to practice in social theory to explore why ethnic employees may engage in service nepotism even when they are aware that it contravenes organizational policy.

Design/Methodology/Approach – Given the paucity of empirical research which investigates the multi-ethnic marketplace as a locus for the emergence of service nepotism, we adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach to advance insight into service nepotism. The study benefits from its empirical focus on West African migrants in the UK who represent a distinct minority group living in urban areas of the developed world. Data for the study were collected over a six-month period, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection.

Findings – Our research highlights the occurrence and complexities of service nepotism in the multi-ethnic marketplace, and identifies four distinct activities (marginal revolution, reciprocal altruism, pandering for recognition, and horizontal comradeship), that motivate ethnic employees to engage in service nepotism, despite their awareness that this conflicts with organizational policy.

Research limitations/implications – By virtue of our chosen theoretical lens, we were unable to demonstrate how service nepotism could be observed outside spoken language. Also, care should be taken in generalizing the findings from this study given the particularities of the subgroup involved. For example, since our study is based on a small sample of first generation migrants, our findings may not hold true for their offspring, whose socialization and marketplace experiences may be qualitatively different from those of their parents.

Practical implications – Service nepotism challenges fundamental Western egalitarian ideals in the multi-ethnic marketplace. Organizations may wish to develop strategies to placate observers' concerns of creeping favouritism in a supposedly equitable marketplace. Our research could also serve as a starting-point for managers objectively to assess the likely impact of service nepotism on their organizing value systems and competitiveness. In particular, we suggest that international marketing managers would do well to look beneath the surface to see what is really going on in international-marketplaces, since ostensible experiences of marketplace consumption may not always reflect underlying reality.

Originality/value – By using service nepotism as an analytical category to explore the marketplace experiences of ethnic service employees living and working in industrialized societies, our research shows that the practice of service nepotism, whilst taken for granted, can have far-reaching impact on individuals, observers and service organizations in an increasingly highly differentiated multi-ethnic society.

Introduction

The emergence of the multi-ethnic marketplace as a result of migration, international education, and the globalization of markets and production has placed egalitarianism at the centre of diversity and equality discourse in the West. In this regard, nepotism, the human tendency to bestow patronage or grant favours to family, friends and relatives, without qualified merit, has been described in contemporary social life as contrary to natural equity, social justice, and counterproductive to successful organizing (Becker, 2010; Robert, 2013; Stewart, 2003). Following early anthropological research (e.g. Berge, 1982; Hamilton, 1964), recent theorizing on nepotism unanimously accords ontological priority to family relationships, romance and long-term friendships. Outside the 'family-friend-romance' triad, little attention has been paid to antecedents such as social identities and weak social ties as a requisite to nepotism. We therefore know relatively little about the practice of nepotism or favouritism among individuals who share taken-for-granted resemblance based on, say, a common culture or similar physical appearance. In this article, we investigate one such class of nepotism as played out in everyday multi-ethnic marketplaces, in the form of *service nepotism*. Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) define this as follows:

> Favouritism an employee grants to a customer during a service encounter by virtue of his or her relationship with the customer based on shared socio-collective commonalities and without qualified substantiation related to either the customer's economic value or organizational practices (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012, p. 242).

Frequently practiced among distinct and under-represented minority groups such as homosexuals or ethnic Turks residing in Germany (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012), service nepotism in the marketplace may serve as a junction where consumer 'tribes' engage in rituals of solidarity (Goulding *et al.*, 2013; Heath, 2004), celebrate their distinctive identity (Jamal, 2003; Murray, 2002), and forge ephemeral communal bonds (Wetherel *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, bestowing gifts and other benefits on customers simply because they belong to a particular group constitutes potential discrimination. Hence, service nepotism undermines Western egalitarian

2

ideals and frequently runs counter to sanctioned organizing behaviour. As a practice, moreover, it is managerially uncontrollable, occurring as it does largely unobserved and in this sense 'under the radar'.

However, given the low visibility of the practice, operating unseen and unobserved, while we may surmise that it is common in multi-ethnic marketplaces, we know little about its shape and form because the practice has been largely ignored, rather than confronted. In particular, the underlying motivations behind service nepotism remain unexplored, and little is known about the set of conditions under which it thrives. We argue that service nepotism constitutes an organizing challenge with potentially far-reaching implications for individuals, observers and service organizations in the late-modern marketplace. We speculate that such knowledge could help organizations to develop strategies to calm observers' fears of creeping favouritism in a supposedly egalitarian marketplace. Also, such knowledge could serve as a starting-point for managers objectively to assess the likely impact of service nepotism on their organizing value systems. We aim to make two contributions to the literature on service nepotism in the following ways: First, while prior research has examined service nepotism from the customer perspective (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012), this paper draws on the theory of practice to explore why ethnic employees engage in service nepotism even when they are acutely aware that it contravenes organizational policy. Second, employing an explorative qualitative research approach, the paper opens up new possibilities for rethinking the influence of service nepotism on Western organizational egalitarian ideals which serve to guarantee ethically responsible behaviours from front-line employees that prioritise the equal treatment of customers, irrespective of their creed, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation (Arnould, 2007; Barry, 2013). Shedding light on a taken-for-granted marketplace culture, the paper provides an opportunity to increase our knowledge and understanding as to how organizations can manage service nepotism without jeopardizing employees' freedom to engage with like customers, which is part-and-parcel of being human, while enhancing the service experience of already 'disadvantaged' ethnic customers inhabiting

urban areas of the developed world. We develop our contribution drawing on the everyday service experiences of employees from ethnic minorities (West African migrants) living and working in the Greater Bristol area of the South West of the UK. Our paper highlights that the global, international marketplace in which international marketing managers increasingly operate, is not always as it seems, being revealed in our research as fragmented, variegated and riddled with inequalities, both visible and invisible.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we delineate the organizing logics of service nepotism in the multi-ethnic marketplace. Following this, we draw on the discursive practice theoretical lens to delineate the logic of service nepotism, after which we explain our research methodology. Next, we present the findings from our empirical inquiry, and conclude the paper with a discussion of these and the implications of our research for theory and practice.

The 'paradessence' of service nepotism

The practice of service nepotism in the marketplace contains an inherent paradox in that it seeks to privilege like customers while ostensibly abiding by egalitarianism. Its paradoxical essence or 'paradessence' (Sharkar, 2001) lies in its symbolic and material value of bestowing relational benefit(s) or gifts on customer(s) on the basis of homophily. It manifests itself in three durationally indivisible activities which together comprise the salient logics that gave form to service nepotism in practice. The first is *similarity-to-self cueing in the moment*. This refers to the recollection and recognition of physical markers and other shared identity commonalities (Song and Parker, 1995). The group markers frequently cued may be real or imaginary, and may include language, accent, physical marks, and mode of dressing which often indicate common descent. The actual starting-point, we argue, eludes systematization, but the immanent emergence of similarity-to-self cueing may be triggered by an (un)conscious glance or a deliberate eye gaze just before, or in the course of the service encounter. Its coming to presence, we argue, is a function of a series of interlocking contextual actions, individual interpretation and contingent

cooperation on the part of the customer. While cueing may be initiated by a customer, these interlocking contextual actions are likely to occur when an employee has a desire to 'champion their distinctiveness in consumption settings, alienating and isolating societal conditions (e.g. being members of a stigmatised minority group in a service domain)' (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012, p. 243). The key insight here is that through basic human impulse, the general identity marker(s) of a customer may prompt an employee to recall an identity commonality he or she may share with the customer (Cameron, 2000). The intensity of the intimate connection or shared attachment causes the employee temporarily to depart from his or her role as a service provider to forge an instantaneous, albeit transient friendship with the like customer for the duration of the service encounter.

The second activity is *non-verbal communication and shared dispositions of like customers*. Rather than homophily solely setting the context for the enactment of nepotistic actions, non-verbal communications and the disposition of the like customer as perceived by the employee become a more salient basis for forming an *ad hoc* friendship in the course of the service encounter (Gwinner *et al.*, 1998; Price and Arnould, 1999). The upshot, we argue, is the cognitive cueing and interpretation of a customer's disposition as either pro-social (e.g. charming, courteous, respectful, polite), or antisocial (e.g. rude, arrogant, bullish, aggressive). Such dispositional ascriptions, we concur, may be driven by the employee's personal moral qualities and life courses. The key insight here is that after forging a solidarity tie with the like customer or client on the basis of a perceived socio-collective identity, the employee begins to pay some attention to the disposition of the like customer. In this way, 'within the contingencies of the moment' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 963), the customer's perceived body language coupled with the employee's cognitive cues and state of mood during the service encounter precipitate the employee's formed opinion of a like customer's disposition as pro-social or otherwise. Pro-social behaviours may quickly lead to the building of trust during service encounters (Sirdeshmuk *et al.*, 2002). Taken further, the extent or number of relational benefits or gifts an employee may

bestow on a like customer may also depend on the degree of discretionary authority vested in the employee.

The third activity is the *leveraging of discretionary authority* to the elaboration of projected courses of nepotistic actions. The discretionary authority available to service employees, we argue, serves as the final determination of the enactment of service nepotism. In this regard, the degree of employee latitude afforded by management may have a significant influence on an employee's propensity to engage in service nepotism, especially when the differential treatment of customers cannot easily be deciphered by management, or when the penalties for nepotistic actions are low and hence do not constitute a deterrent (Kelley *et al.*, 1996). While employees are likely to leverage their discretionary authorities to enhance the service experience of like customers, discretion may be (mis)used as a nepotistic tool, especially by those working in organizations where the penalties for inappropriate behaviour are low. Thus, employees may sometimes 'switch their cognitive gears' (Louis and Sutton, 1991) to use the same discretion as a 'domain shift' in order at times to 'punish' like customers whose disposition and behaviour they deem as somehow off-putting or antisocial during service encounters. Our shorthand term for this phenomenon is 'reverse nepotism'. These acts of 'reverse nepotism' are more likely to occur when the discretionary authority of service personnel is high, or when the service organizations concerned have no or few prescribed sanctions for such behaviour. At the other end of the scale, service personnel are less likely to engage in reverse nepotism when they have limited discretionary authority and/or when their organization's prescribed sanctions for such behaviour are harsh. In this regard, discretionary authority as an antecedent of service nepotism, we suggest, is flexible and simultaneously structured through human agency-structure transformation (Billet, 2009; Hambrick and Abrahamson, 1995). It serves both as a source and outcome of enacted nepotistic actions in the marketplace. Thus, in a highly differentiated multi-ethnic society, the rituals of service encounter, we suggest, are likely to vary by sub-group but

also to share common elements, as relatively minor power struggles which revolve around status and recognition are acted out unobserved in the moment.

Insert Figure 1 about here

We are of the view that service nepotism challenges fundamental ethical and egalitarian principles, and hence run contrary to Western meritocratic ideals and engineered equality in the marketplace. Our objective in this study, therefore, is to examine the social influence behind service nepotism in practice. The fact that employees are willing to bestow relational benefits on like customers even when they know it is against organizational policy is in itself intriguing and warrants further study. In this regard, the main research question driving this study is: what motivates ethnic employees to engage in service nepotism in multi-ethnic marketplaces?

Our conceptualization of service nepotism draws from a practice approach, which argues that a social practice is neither a process nor something that individuals have. Rather, it is something that people do, serving as a junction where 'doings' and 'sayings' meet and interconnect in actual, real-life situations. In the following section, we attempt to chart our practice approach to service nepotism to specify its underlying logics to guide our empirical inquiry.

A practice approach to service nepotism

Drawing on the recent turn to 'practice' in contemporary social theory, we conceptualize service nepotism, a routinized marketplace phenomenon which involves the bestowal of relational benefits or gifts on customers based on a perceived socio-collective identity, as a social practice. Temporally unfolding and permeating almost every part of social life, a 'practice' is described by Reckwitz (2002, p. 249) as:

> A routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, background knowledge in the form of understanding, know how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

Driven by a shared background of understanding, Schatzki (1985) refers to practices as "organized human activities" made up of "an organized, open-ended spatial-manifold of actions". Placing emphasis on actors' *actual* activities in practice, *what* those activities are, and *how* these activities are enacted, he suggests a temporal interrelatedness of discrete activities that define a practice, and argues that such activities also serve as a context within which other activities occur (Schatzki, 1996). From this perspective, the activities that come together to form the nexus of the practice of service nepotism may include perceived commonality and relational cueing, gift giving, and the provision of unusual and often unsolicited help to particular groups of customers. Note that such activities are not to be understood as mere 'building blocks' of the practice of service nepotism, nor are they enacted simply for the sake of providing good customer service; rather, their enactment is goal oriented and based on the intelligibility of the actors concerned.

The role of intelligibility, we argue, brings to the fore issues related to the enactment and identification of commonality and relational cues by ethnic employees, their cognitive representation of existing and emerging social orders, and the contextual role of mental organisation in practices. Thus, service nepotism as a practice not only provides the context for *activities*; it also serves as the context in which arrangements exist for the *transformation of the social*. Schatzki (2001: 49), in accounting for this, refers to mental phenomena such as desires, hopes, fear and anxiety as fundamental "*states of affairs*" that enable actors to 'cope' with their involvement with the world (Heidegger, 1977; Rasche and Chia, 2009). Expressed in behaviour, we argue that such phenomena inform and drive service nepotism in multi-ethnic marketplaces by extending understanding and determining the actions of people during service encounters. Furthermore, Barnes (2002, p. 20), delineating the scope of practice, claimed that "to engage in practice is to exercise power". This power, exercised by service employees in the multi-ethnic marketplace, we suggest, is made manifest through the discretionary authority vested in service employees to customize or alter a service provision or product without reference to superiors.

Thus, discretion by their embodied knowledge is culturally situated, salient, and actualizes its effect by empowering service employees to bestow relational benefits or gifts on like customers during service encounters.

While we treat issues related to propositional knowledge, skills intertwined with perception, and goals as matters reserved for participants engaged in the practice of service nepotism, note that practices as an articulate form of social action are flexible and transient (De Certeau, 1984), but can also be durable and institutionalized (Giddens, 1984). In this regard, we argue that nepotism in service encounters as a social practice is an outcome of routines and activities enacted on an everyday basis, sometimes with very little reflection, often profoundly independent of participants' conscious thought processes, and frequently propelled by seemingly blind action. Bearing in mind that practices by their discursive nature are frequently performed in discourse (Phillips *et al.*, 2004; Tsoukas, 2005), we draw on the interpretive tradition (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Reckwitz, 2002) in theorizing the social influence behind service nepotism in our multi-ethnic marketplace. In this regard, we deployed language and the constructive effect of text to produce, maintain and make apparent the constellation of localized patterns of activities that give form to service nepotism in practice.

Research methodology

Given the paucity of empirical research emphasizing the multi-ethnic marketplace as the site for the emergence of service nepotism, we adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach to advance insight into the social context in which the practice is enacted. In developing our contribution, the study benefits from its empirical focus on West African migrant employees in an advanced industrialized society. We chose to study this group of migrants because they share a common or similar descent, history, culture, and some degree of solidarity (Milton, 2005; Smith, 1986). Often disadvantaged in the marketplace (Adkins and Jae, 2010), they also represent one of the growing and distinct minority groups living in urban areas of the developed world

(Watson, 2009; Wilson, 2007). We conducted our study in the city of Bristol, one of the UK's eight 'core cities', where 16% (69,200) of the city's population belongs to a black or minority ethnic group (Bristol City Council, 2013). We selected two of the most popular African charismatic churches in the Greater Bristol area as prime sites to recruit research participants, on the grounds that these regularly attract large numbers of West African migrants to their congregations. The two churches combined had an average of 100 people attending church every Sunday. More than 50 people expressed an interest in participating in the study by completing a short questionnaire detailing their jobs/professions and availability for interviews. We then devised the following purposeful sampling criteria (Patton, 2002) to select the participants. First, participants needed to be first-generation West African migrants living and working in the Greater Bristol area. Second, participants were required to be employed in a service-related industry. Third, their jobs must involve direct contact and interaction with customers or service users on daily basis. Fourth, participants needed to occupy roles that afforded them some degree of discretion where they can exercise judgement in altering a service package or provision without reference to superiors. In all, 21 individuals originating from three different countries who were gainfully employed in diverse service industries ranging from health care to retail met our sampling criteria. Reflecting West African migrants' disadvantaged position in the marketplace in advanced industrialized societies, 85 percent of our research participants were employed in lower-rank service jobs (OECD, 2008). Aged between 25 and 56, the average age of our participants was 38, and they reported an average of 8 years living in Europe.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data for the study were collected over a six-month period, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, individually and in private. All informants agreed to have their interviews digitally recorded and each lasted approximately two hours. We began each interview with confidentiality assurances and the collection of relevant socio-demographic data. Following this, the concept of service

nepotism and the general purpose of the research were explained to interviewees. We drilled down into explanations of why they were keen to provide a genuine or otherwise experience to particular customers so as to garner their thoughts on specific aspects of their own behaviour during service encounters, thereby generating reflective data on their experiences by isolating the kind of relational actions that were meaningful to them without removing them from their context (Alvesson, 2003; Hartley, 1994; Whittmore *et al.*, 2001). One of the researchers was born and raised in West Africa and therefore shared a common ethnicity with the research participants. This not only reduced the psychological distance between interviewees and investigators, but also helped us to identify recurrent discourse features necessary to extend our understanding of the relation between the linguistic forms of texts generated and the broader socio-cultural world in which they were produced. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim within 24 hours of collection, and interviewees accorded pseudonyms to guarantee their anonymity.

The full data analysis then followed three steps. First, following our theoretical perspective, the initial textual analysis focused on mapping the 'doings' and 'sayings' of interviewees onto the 'organizing logics' of human activities, values and beliefs, relationships, 'practical coping', and background knowledge (Schatzki, 2002), which served as our basic social processes (BSP) (Glazer, 1996). We did this by engaging in an iterative line-by-line coding of our data to ensure the relevance of our BSP. This was also an opportunity to identify some recurrent phrases which were also 'analytically converted' (Strauss, 1978, p. 30) to fit into these categories. Here, the analysis explicitly focused on the elucidation of those situated activities and practices that had the potential to enhance or impair the service experience of like customers, producing a broad array of segments that were further categorized based on their similarities and analytical connexions. Drawing on theoretical insights from the extant literature, the identified segments were then analysed and interpreted iteratively until common themes emerged and became saturated (Suddaby, 2006). These themes were then sorted, reconstituted (Strauss and Corbin,

2008), and indexed to generate the analytical categories of marginal revolution, imaginary 'gemeinschaft', pandering for recognition, and horizontal comradeship. Probing further the connections and conceptual properties of the respective categories, we developed the aggregate theoretical dimensions of motivations and mentalities which we used to explore viable theoretical explanations.

Insert Table 2 about here

Following this, the final categories in the form of thematic frameworks were applied to the entire dataset by annotating them with numerical codes which were also supported with short descriptors elaborating the headings. Indexing here was also about making sense of the gaps between identified themes in order to develop a meaningful and more robust understanding of the data to enable subsequent interpretation and verification of meanings. Systematic and rigorous comparison of the indexed themes with the existing literature enabled us to build up understanding of how the various research participants experienced the world and the identification of logical patterns to produce generalities (Miles and Huberman 1984; Ritchie and Spencer, 1993). Finally, drawing on Maclean *et al.* (2012a), the data were then re-arranged under the key themes in a matrix. Typologies were generated and causal association between the various themes were made. Emerging patterns were then used to develop greater insight and form descriptive explanations as to why our research participants may engage in service nepotism even when they know well it is against organizational policy.

Research Findings
Analysis of the data collected revealed insightful findings regarding the enactment of service nepotism in the multi-ethnic marketplace. First and foremost, our data evidence suggests that service nepotism is real, systematic and rife to the extent that it is almost taken-for-granted. Second, ethnic employees (un)purposefully engage in the practice even when they know that it transgresses organizational policy. Interviews with research participants revealed that more than 90% of them perceived service nepotism as 'normal', almost a cultural norm, conceding that they

frequently offer unsolicited help or bestow unsubstantiated gifts and other relational benefits on like customers during service encounters. When we gently challenged some of our interviewees that some of their actions were likely to violate the ethical standards of their organizations, they readily recounted the 'bright side' of service nepotism, suggesting that their actions are 'normal' and consistent with the unwritten service rule of being nice to customers. Others even argued that their actions should be interpreted as a type of 'affirmative' action, latently promoting equality in the marketplace. Nevertheless, we observed that while relational benefits are not based upon tenure and reciprocal disclosure, the length of time an individual employee had spent residing in the UK appeared to have a marked influence on his or her propensity to enact service nepotism under the radar. Those with short tenure (less than five years) were more willing to bestow gifts and other relational benefits on other ethnic migrants in addition, such as Pakistanis and Chinese. We inferred that those who had stayed considerably longer exhibited an 'illusion' of control with regard to their nepotistic actions in such a way that they seemed to believe they were not so overt as to be readily observed by bystanders. Analysis of our data evidence in extending the previous work by Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) suggests that the desire and motivation of ethnic employees to engage in service nepotism manifested themselves in closely related forms of activities that constitutively operate in combination or serially to encourage the enactment of potentially nepotistic actions during service encounters. We delineate these activities around four specific lines of attention: marginal revolution, which in the broadest sense denotes situated agitations on the fringes aimed at overthrowing an established social order; reciprocal altruism, the urge to aid a like customer on the basis that it could result in a mutual benefit in the future; the contextual pandering for 'fame' and recognition; and horizontal comradeship which encompasses the forging of transient, yet potentially durable, short-term relationships between people by virtue of shared fraternal, ethnic or historical ties. We now present the fine details of our findings.

The 'lone wolf' on a marginal revolution

The term 'marginal revolution', as used in organizing our findings, refers to a self-imposed mission or a personal initiative to overturn an existing social order that excludes individuals belonging to underrepresented groups from gaining relational, symbolic and material benefits in the marketplace. We found that the perceived vulnerability or marginality of ethnic customers as a basis of identification tends to modify ethnic employees' framing of their entitlements (Hollinshead and Maclean, 2007), such that employees were more prone to engage in exceptional actions to enhance customers' service experiences.

> Some Africans come in and I feel they get a raw deal because of language difficulties. For other customers, my colleagues take their time and advice, "you got to do this, and you got to do that". That's why I always ask them to give me my 'people'. I understand them better; I have patience with them, and make sure they get the best of everything. [Akora, 26, auto mechanic]

In this extract, aligned with his own conviction of ethnic customers' vulnerability in the marketplace, the employee signals he is prepared to 'do more' for ethnic customers than he would do for a mainstream customer. This was the case when one of our interviewees recounted how she broke her company's cardinal discount policy predicated on enhancing the customer's experience.

> I know I abused the system, you know, the customers were visiting the UK and she wanted to buy presents for their families back home. She's missed the sales, so I took the money from her and paid the goods with my staff discount card to enable her to buy the items at a reduced price. This saved them about £70. You know, I did it because there is so much poverty back home, and one has to exchange so much local currency for a few British pounds; that's why I decided to help out to reduce their expenditure. [Cecilia, 42, retail assistant]

Acutely aware that she could have been sacked or faced disciplinary procedures if her action in this particular instance were to come to the attention of the organization, the employee is nevertheless nonchalant and barely concerned about creating 'revolutionary' spaces of possibilities to aid the like customer she perceives as being 'vulnerable' to a fluctuating and disadvantageous currency exchange regime (Stringfellow and Maclean, 2014). As suggested by one of the reviewers of this article, Cecilia's action is akin to the legendary Robin Hood. She's

simply 'stealing from the rich organization and giving it to the poor'. Caught in a web of anxiety and resentment about inequality in the marketplace, such 'revolutionary' actions on the periphery may sometimes fuel the desire of ethnic employees to transcend their legal obligation of serving a like customer such that they bestow additional benefits as a way of exerting an influence which they do not in fact possess. The relevance and importance of such commitments were prevalent in the response of some interviewees when they tried to justify and rationalize their nepotistic actions as mitigating some of the disadvantages experienced by vulnerable ethnic customers in the service marketplace.

> I've covered up for some of our Africans using our shelter when they default in paying their bill. If the manager picks it up, I say, "oh, the week's been stressful, you know, I have been dealing with many things… I missed it; I'll have a word with them again". I sometimes do that because I don't want to see this guy go and start on the streets again, you know. It's dangerous on the streets, he's an African, and he may not survive in the cold for even a week! [Bangoura, 34, home support worker]
> This Muslim patient refused to take his food at 6:00pm. He was fasting at the time and requested to be served later, which is not allowed. The nurse in charge insisted I throw the food away. I knew he did not take lunch as well, so I hid the food in the fridge for him. He was able to eat later. [Gladys, 28, hospital catering assistant]

The efforts of these two employees highlight the violation of a prior managerial order to achieve 'legitimate' goals in illegitimate ways (Mainemelis, 2010). They also draw our attention to the wider implications of the dynamic interplay between organizational prescribed rules and the individual's inclination to exert control, perhaps for the purposes of meting out a form of natural justice which goes beyond organizational regulations, in situated service work contexts.

Reciprocal altruism in the marketplace
Our analysis also revealed that our ethnic employees tend to favour 'like customers' during service encounters with the expectation that ethnic customers might act in a similar manner at a later date when interacting with other ethnic people in the marketplace. Following Trivers (1976; 2006), we refer to this phenomenon as 'reciprocal altruism'. One manifestation of this, we observed, is the (misplaced?) sentiment that: "I have a moral responsibility to help those in need"; "she would have done the same for me if she were in my position". The following excerpt provides an illustrative example:

> One of my African customers lost her job a few months after she got pregnant. I felt she could not afford to fix her hair. I was ready to fix it for her for free, but she couldn't afford the creams and hair extensions she needed. I decided to use some left-over cream and hair to braid her hair, so she can stop thinking of fixing her hair again for some months. I braided her hair twice when she was pregnant, and fixed it for her again when she gave birth – all free of charge. I'm sure she would have done the same for me if I were the one in need of that help. [Alima, 27, hairdresser]

Prevalent, albeit not universal, the perception that the ethnic customer 'would have done the same for me' was frequently driven by employees' personal moral qualities and life courses. While this assumption may be misplaced, we found that the incorporation of ethnic others into one's extended self in a fractured marketplace encourages altruistic acts of generosity and kindness towards like customers (Cova and Cova, 2001). As if socially imposed, the provision of generosity to a like customer, we found, is often conflated as an important device for signalling commonality ties and reciprocating with regard to analogous help an employee's immediate family member has received, or might receive in the future, from an ethnic employee in another, similar context.

> I recently had to spend a lot of time on an elderly African patient. She had difficulty understanding the nurses and vice versa. I ended up being a translator for her and the nurses throughout her treatment at the hospital. I was quite happy to help because one of my cousins lives in France and her French is very poor. She may need the same help from somebody one day. [Eno, 50, registered nurse]

Clearly, Eno's voluntary decision to help this patient is not neutral. Broadly conceived, of salience here is the desire to have one's 'genetic material survive', as it were, by benefiting from similar help at an unspecified point in the future. While her cousin may not in fact receive such help from an ethnic employee, such assumed or imaginary reciprocity accentuates demands placed on ethnic minority employees to appear helpful to like customers in the course of service encounters. In this case, the more time Eno spends talking to the patient, the more likely she is to become emotionally attached and hence to experience difficulty in not transgressing the sanctioned service script by bestowing unauthorized benefits on the patient.

If the notion expressed by our research participants that ethnic employees are likely to 'help' one's kin in a different context in the future is accepted as true, then we can safely assume

16

that ethnic customers' expectations of ethnic employees is that they are likely to be 'helpful' (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2013). From this perspective, ethnic service providers are seen all too often by ethnic customers as the 'human formaldehyde' expected to preserve the imaginary 'potlatch' or gift-giving feast in the multi-ethnic market place.

> When a student comes from my native area our relationship goes beyond student-lecturer relationship. They begin to think, "But I know you personally, you're my guy, you're my mate". They expect you to even proofread their essays for them, and when you say, "No, I cannot do this", they sometimes feel you are not helpful. The fact is what you're asking me to do is not acceptable; it undermines academic integrity. They put you in a very difficult situation, which means I sometimes end up providing help beyond my remit. [Bansa, 38, university lecturer]

The experience of Bansa, a lecturer, may be personal and idiosyncratic, but its causes are social and systematic and open up new possibilities to understand the often conflicting demands placed on ethnic employees to appear helpful to ethnic customers. Subject to numerous socio-cultural contingencies, ethnic customers in the marketplace have a natural inclination to forge transient 'friendships' with ethnic employees in the hope of receiving unsubstantiated benefits from ethnic employees. This impulsive opportunism may be driven by the inability of members belonging to underrepresented groups to use their social ties to access the centre of societal networks (Mehra *et al.*, 1998). An employee's self-determined choice not to use his or her position to advance the interest of ethnic customer(s) might therefore by interpreted by others as a symbolic rejection of identification with his or her kin or ethnicity. It therefore follows that ethnic employees' natural response to this type of 'familial coercion' is to comply with such cultural demands to 'help' customers with whom they may share characteristics that are relatively rare during service encounters. This ultimately requires them to break sanctioned organizational rules and service scripts.

Breaking free in the moment − pandering for recognition

Most of our research participants occupied precarious positions lower down their organizational hierarchies. Employed in lower rank jobs, they are less likely to exert influence in their organizations, and their potential temporarily to break free from the shackles of managerial

control, we argue, is limited. In this situation, their daily interactions with customers as frontline staff serves as a forum for them to reclaim some form of autonomy and transient opportunities to exert some form of influence on the way work is organized. Consequently, some of our respondents viewed service encounters, particularly with ethnic service users, as personal '*escapades discrètes*' to strategically garner influence and enhance their status in the moment.

> They come in [Africans], you don't even know them but they look at you and say, "Hello sister" and you say in your head, "ah, do I know the guy?" They'll pick you out to help them with something they are not familiar with, or with something they can't express themselves with vividly, you understand. If there's a promotion, I go, "oh, we can offer that", or "have you looked at this? They're three for the price of two". In the end, they thank you and you feel happy helping a poor 'brother'. [Diana, 40, retail supervisor]

Ethnic customers facing language difficulties, for example, frequently require high levels of assistance in the marketplace. Such moments of generosity as described by the respondent may result in an exchange of pleasantries which drives the employee to transgress the boundaries of the service script his or her job demands to bestow additional relational benefits on the like customer. Similarly, the level of vulnerability of the customer, and the amount of help he or she may require during the service encounter to navigate the "servicescape" (Klinner and Walsh, 2012) could also drive an ethnic employee (un)consciously to attempt to break the organizing rules, sometimes risking his or her own job in the process.

> A Nigerian sectioned under the Mental Health Act will ask: "Why am I here for two months? I'm getting better. Why can't they let me go?" He will try to confide in you to actually know why they are keeping him for six months, you know, believing that as a 'brother' you are the only person in the hospital to tell him the truth. It's not my job but I will explain things to them, encourage them to engage with the doctors and nurses. In the end they get the best treatment. They don't 'kick off' when I'm around. I've become an unofficial ambassador for our African service-users. [Emeka, 42, health care assistant]

Here, the logic of status enhancement is as follows: delivering a better service experience to a disadvantaged like customer results in the like customer 'liking' the employee. Likeability, as argued by Cialdini, (2009), may produce influence, which in turn can lead to gaining respect, making more friends, and bolstering self-esteem. Nevertheless, just as our service employees' desire for recognition and influence drives them to transgress organizational rules to confer relational benefits on ethnic customers, there were also instances where this transgression might

also drive ethnic employees to mistreat like customers in ways inconsistent with the service script their job demands. The account of a retail assistant is indicative of this phenomenon:

> People normally pack their own goods into their carrier bags but I volunteered to pack his stuff for him. While packing, this guy started kissing his girlfriend in my presence. I said to myself "no way, this is disrespectful. That is not how an African should behave". I stopped the packing and pretended I had to attend to something else. He asked me a question but I ignored him because I thought he was disrespectful. He was younger than me, kissing his girlfriend before me. [Bobby, 44, retail assistant]

Two things can be unpacked here. First, by (mis)judging the customer's disposition in the course of the service encounter as disrespectful, the employee creatively used his discretionary authority to diminish the customer's experience. We concur that such acts of 'reverse nepotism' are likely to be more prevalent in marketplace spaces where managerial control is more limited. Our findings here have parallels with Rosenbaum and Walsh's (2012) discovery that some Chinese travellers often mask their identity of Singapore Airlines, in order to receive better service. Second, the scope of discretion available to employees serves as both source and outcome of enacted nepotistic actions in the multi-ethnic marketplace.

Horizontal comradeship and imaginary friendships

Real and imaginary cultural ties have been noted as important markers employed by people to identify themselves and others as belonging to a possible ethnic group (Rossiter and Chan, 1998; White and Dahl, 2007). Our interview evidence gives credence to the relevance of such socio-cultural ties in negotiating ethnic identities in the marketplace, indicating what we refer to as 'horizontal comradeship' as an idiosyncratic vehicle for ethnic identity categorization by ethnic employees which bonds them together with like customers within the often short service encounter moment (Kanno and Norton, 2003). Our conceptualization of horizontal comradeship is grounded in the African organizing concept of *Ubuntu* which gives ontological priority to a universal bond of sharing that symbiotically connects humanity and gives form to being (Mangaliso, 2001). In accounting for this horizontal comradeship, we found that ethnic employees frequently cue like customers to celebrate their ethnic identification (Grier and

Deshpande, 2001), emphasizing their distinct heritage and shared culture (Hirschman, 2001). This may involve the forming of quasi-family relationships with ethnic customers.

> I mentioned earlier I have sometimes broken some rules in helping out Africans, but I consider them to be minor rules. I had to do that because, you know, we are all strangers on a foreign land, and we can never be equal to the nationals in certain aspects of life. Therefore there is the need for us to help each other. [Gladys, 29, waitress]

Despite the acknowledgement of breaking sanctioned organizational rules, the sentiment that 'we are all migrants' Gladys expresses is neither isolated nor a symptom of a personal narrow perspective, but constitutes rather a systemic feature of ethnic employees' cognitive cueing and connecting with like customers during service encounters. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in an era of rapid modernization (Stern, 1995), nationality, something Anderson (1991) describes as an 'imaginary' construct, has become a marker of collective and shared interests among individuals irrespective of their 'tribes' and local allegiances, especially when they migrate to other countries. Thus, African migrants as a structured group relate to each other as inclusive members, rather than as members of a narrower sub-group (Turner, 1969). Typifying this inclusiveness as a pre-condition for the enactment of nepotistic actions by ethnic employees, the following story recounted by one of our interviewees is indicative of the constitutive effect of horizontal comradeship in practice:

> I saw this kid shoplifting on our CCTV cameras. I apprehended him right in the car park. The good was worth about £200. He was likely going to get a criminal record, a caution or a ban from entering our shops if I had called the police or taken him to my supervisor. He was genuinely sorry for his action and he was calling me "uncle". I thought this boy is already vulnerable, so making him get a criminal record might destroy him forever. I checked his ID and oh my God, he had a Ghanaian surname. I just took the good from him and warned him not to do that again [Santo, 38, retail security guard].

Santo explains that what really prompted him to let the boy go was the fact that he shared the same indigenous surname with his grandfathers. Having the boy arrested, he felt, was akin to 'shopping' his own granddad. This peculiar episode fits with Burger *et al.'s* (2004) observation that incidental similarities such as initials or birthdays can induce people to offer unsubstantiated help to others. Thus, the (un)conscious escalation of commitment to the shoplifter, we surmise, was not only driven by the shoplifter's physical attributes but also by the latent communal bond

20

forged between the guard and the shoplifter which is sufficiently overt as to be readily discernible by onlookers. For the ethnic employee, service nepotism may be a desirable way forward, as a token means of addressing the vulnerability of fellow comrades.

Conclusions

This study has investigated why ethnic employees may engage in service nepotism even when they understand it transgresses organizational policy. Confirming our belief that the practice of service nepotism in the marketplace is real and operates unseen and unobserved, paradoxically in plain sight yet hidden from view, a majority of our interviewees conceded that they frequently bestow unsubstantiated gifts or relational benefits on customers with whom they share a perceived common ethnicity. Our conceptualization of service nepotism draws from a 'practice' approach which offers us the possibility to delineate the logics or 'paradessence' of service nepotism among West African migrants who served as our prime research focus. At its core, our research shows that relational benefits are not based upon tenure or reciprocal disclosure (Hennig-Thurau and Gwinner, 2002; Price and Arnould, 1999). Customers may receive relational benefits that may not be organizationally sanctioned not because they are 'conspirators' (Brady *et al.,* 2010). Rather, as illustrated by the incident when an employee gave her company discount to a stranger, employees are willing to risk their jobs to provide aid to customers because they share an overt perceived socio-collective identity (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2013).

Our study highlights the occurrence and complexities of service nepotism by shedding light on how underrepresented groups, who are often marginalized and overlooked in Western society, may become *agents of marginalization* themselves in the multi-ethnic marketplace. In this regard, we open up new potentialities for rethinking the influence of service nepotism on Western organizational egalitarian ideals which seek to promote ethically responsible behaviours from front-line employees that require equal treatment for all customers, regardless of their religious beliefs, nationality, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation (Arnould, 2007; Barry, 2013). This calls into question the very nature of the supposedly inter-national marketplace as a social

space where customers and sellers meet on an equal footing. Our findings suggests four practices (marginal revolution, reciprocal altruism, pandering for recognition, and horizontal comradeship), that give form to ethnic employees' motivation and desire to engage in service nepotism even when they know well that it transgresses organizational policy. The salient precondition to the enactment of nepotistic actions gleaned from our interviews was perhaps ethnic employees' sense of vulnerability in the marketplace which served as a basis for identification with others perceived to be like themselves. Also important in extending our understanding of the situated practices of our research participants was the discretionary authority vested in them to customize or alter a service provision or product as they saw fit and without reference to superiors. In combination, the desires and motivations that drive ethnic employees to engage in service nepotism, we argue, challenge fundamental egalitarian principles in the multi-ethnic marketplace given that majority of our research participants had control over their nepotistic actions. In this regard, service nepotism seems to operate in all societies and tend to manifest in transient social spaces when the desire among like-others to support each other is seen as a potential means to ameliorate their real or imaginary alienation or marginalization by society. Hence, our findings are of particular interest given that we know little about the form and dynamics of the practice in our cosmopolitan marketplace. In this regard, our research contributes to the emerging literature on service nepotism by explicating the practices that drive people to engage in the practice − a crucial lens that remains under-researched.

While we acknowledge that the complexity and durable nature of service nepotism makes it difficult to develop simple managerial formulae or recipes, our research holds some implications for practicing managers. First, managers should be aware that some types of organization, by the nature of the services they offer, may require them to invest high levels of discretionary authority in their employees. In this regard, efforts to curtail service nepotism might be synonymous with 'using a sledgehammer to crack a nut'. It could discourage employees to bring their all-important demographic and cultural knowledge and awareness to work

(Janssens and Zanoni, 2014), and severely damage employees' efforts to nurture and develop treasured trust relationships with customers, which arguably improve the quality of their service and working lives. Efforts to promote reflexivity in the workplace may play a role here (Maclean *et al.*, 2012b). One strategy might be for managers openly to communicate to employees the possible adverse effects of service nepotism *vis-à-vis* the organization's customers, with attendant implications for the organization's value system, reputation, and competitiveness (Brady *et al*, 2012; O'Reilly *et al.*, 1991). Second, we are also not so bold as to call on managers to reluctantly accept the benefits of service nepotism or have explicit zero-tolerance policies for service nepotism. While such zero-tolerance policies could protect the organization against allegations of discrimination, favouritism, or differential customer experiences, nevertheless just as the latitude and room for manoeuvre afforded to managers in identifying and dealing with service nepotism in practice may be limited, it is unlikely that any formal policy could fully circumscribe the range of nepotistic actions employees can enact in the marketplace. A better course of action might be for managers actively to pay attention to employees' doings and possible mis(use) of discretion in ways that have the potential to enhance customers' experience at the expense of others, and to caution employees that, at a time when legislation against inequality is on the increase, as exemplified by the 2010 Equality Act in the UK, differential treatment of customers could be legitimately construed by others negatively as favouritism.

Most importantly, our paper contains some lessons for international marketing. In particular, our research suggests that there are clear limits to the globalization of markets. In this instance, the appearance of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, blended marketplace is belied by unobserved activities which are ethnically and tribally rooted and which favour certain types of consumer over others. In a setting where all customers are ostensibly equal, rewards and at times even minor punishments are being meted out unbeknownst to Western managers because they do not meet the eye. Some players are playing by different national rules in a supposedly inter-

national marketplace. Western managers would do well to bear in mind that in the multi-ethnic marketplace, theirs are not the only rules which may apply.

Despite the present study offering several insights into the motives behind the enactment of service nepotism in the multi-ethnic marketplace, it is not without its limitations. In the first place, all our research participants are first generation migrants. Our findings may not hold for second and third generation migrants whose previous socialization experiences may be significantly different to those of their West African parents. Given the particularities of the sub-group involved, their distinct cultural traits and relational positions within their organizational hierarchies, care should be taken in generalizing the nepotistic behaviours we observed across different cultures and sub-cultures. Analogous studies with respect to other ethnic groups from different parts of the world, such as ethnic Indians or Chinese, may be necessary to ascertain whether additional insights and findings can be observed or generated. We encourage such studies to strive also to account for the level of acculturation of such ethnic migrants, as a result of the time they have spent living in industrialized societies which may potentially have an influence on their propensity to engage in service nepotistic in the marketplace. Unfortunately, we were unable to account for this from our interview evidence. Such studies might also build further on existing research (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012) to explore service nepotism in greater detail from the opposite perspective of customers. This is a line of enquiry that may help persuade practitioners and academics alike to pay more attention to service nepotism in the multi-ethnic marketplace. Finally, rather than questioning the rights or wrongs of service nepotism, future research might concentrate instead on opening up new possibilities for rethinking the service experiences of minority groups living in urban areas of the developed world.

In the meantime, we hope that our exploratory study of the motives and intentions behind service nepotism serves as a useful foundation for future research on the practice in our cosmopolitan marketplace. Relegating service nepotism to silence will condemn efforts to

suppress obvious forms of favouritism in the marketplace, such that opportunities to learn about the nuances and ramifications of the practice and engage in much-needed critique of its influence on marketplace egalitarianism may be missed. As a result, we encourage management scholars to embrace the topic of service nepotism as a new research frontier, especially since it has the potential to spark scholarly debates and discussions on the service experience of ethnic consumers domiciled in industrialized societies, a growing phenomenon. Specifically, it raises potential ethical questions on organizing practices in an era where Western democratic ideals, founded on engineered equality, continue to drive mainstream organizational policies.

References

Adkins, N. and Jae, H. (2010), "Marketplace vulnerability of limited English proficient consumers: opportunities to increase knowledge in macromarketing", *Journal of Macromarketing*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp.93–104.

Anderson, B. (1991), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London.

Arnould, E.J. (2007), "Service dominant logic and consumer culture theory: natural allies in an emerging paradigm research in consumer behaviour", in Belk, R.W. and Sherry, J.F. (Eds), *Consumer Culture Theory (Research in Consumer Behaviour Vol. 11),* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, London, pp. 57–76.

Alvesson, M. (2003), "Beyond neopositivists, romantics and localists: a reflexive approach to interviews in organisational research", *Academy of Management Review,* Vol. 28 No. 1, pp.13–33.

Barnes, B. (2002), "Practice as collective action", in Schatzki, T.R., Knorr Cetina, K. and Von Savigny, E. (Eds), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Routledge, London, pp. 17–28.

Barry, B. (2013), *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

Becker, G.S. (2010), *The Economics of Discrimination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Billet, S. (2009), "Relational interdependence between social and individual agency in work and working life", *Mind, Culture, and Activity,* Vol. 13 No.1, pp. 53–69.

Brady, M.K., Voorhees, C.M., and Brusco, M.J. (2012), "Service sweethearting: its antecedents and customer consequences", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 76 No. 2, pp. 81–98.

Bristol City Council, (2013), "Some facts about Bristol's population", available at: http://www.bristol.gov.uk/page/population-bristol (accessed 4 July 2013).

Burger, J.M., Messian, N., Patel, S., Del Prado, A. and Anderson, C. (2004), "What a coincidence! The effects of incidental similarity on compliance", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 35−43.

Cameron, D. (2000), "Styling the worker: gender and the commodification of language in the globalized service economy", *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 323−347.

Cialdini, R.B. (2009), *Influence: Science and Practice,* 5th edn, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.

Cova, B. and Cova, V. (2001), "Tribal aspects of postmodern consumption research: the case of French in-line roller skaters", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 1, pp. 67−76.

De Certeau, M. (1984), *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA.

Emirbayer, M. and Mische, A. (1998), "What is agency?" *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 103 No. 4, pp. 962−1023.

Giddens, A. (1984), *Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration,* Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

Glazer, B. (1996), *Gerund Grounded Theory: The Basic Social Process Dissertation*, Sociology Press, Mill Valley, CA.

Goulding, C., Shankar, A. and Canniford, R. (2013), "Learning to be tribal: facilitating the formation of consumer tribes", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 47 No. 5/6, pp. 813−832.

Grier, S.A. and Deshpandé, R. (2001), "Social dimensions of consumer distinctiveness: the influence of social status on group identity and advertising persuasion", *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 38 No.2, pp. 216-224.

Gwinner, K.P., Gremler, D.D. and Bitner, M.J. (1998), "Relational benefits in services industries: the customer's perspective", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 101−114.

Hambrick, D.C. and Abrahamson, E. (1995), "Assessing managerial discretion across industries: a multimethod approach", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 5, 1427−1466.

Hamilton, W.D. (1964), "The genetic evolution of social behaviour, parts 1 & 2", *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, Vol.7, pp. 1−51.

Hartley, J. (1994), "Case studies in organisational research", in Cassel, C. and Symon, G. (Eds), *Qualitative Methods in Organisational Research: A Practical Guide,* Sage publication, London, pp. 208–229.

Heath, S. (2004), "Peer-shared households, quasi-communes and neo-tribes", *Current Sociology*, Vol. 52 No. 2, pp. 161−179.

Heidegger, M. (1977), *The Question of Technology and Other Essays*, Harper & Row, New York.

Hennig-Thurau, T. and Gwinner, K.P. (2002), "Understanding relationship marketing outcomes: an integration of relational benefits and relational quality", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 230−247.

Hollinshead, G. and Maclean, M. (2007), "Transition and organizational dissonance in Serbia", *Human Relations*, Vol. 60 No. 10, pp. 1551−1574.

Jamal, A. (2003), "Marketing in a multicultural world: the interplay of marketing, ethnicity and consumption", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 37 No. 11/12, pp. 1599–1620.

Janssens, J. and Zanoni, P. (2014), "Alternative diversity management: organizational practices fostering ethnic equality at work", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 317–331.

Kanno, Y. and Norton, B. (2003), "Imagined communities and educational possibilities", *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, Vol. 2 No. 4, pp. 241–249.

Kelley, S.W. (1993), "Discretion and the service employee", *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 69 No.1, pp. 104–126.

Klinner, N.S. and Walsh, G. (2012), "Customer perceptions of discrimination in service deliveries: construction and validation of measurement instrument", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 66 No. 5, pp. 651–658.

Louis, M.R. and Sutton, R.I. (1991), "Switching cognitive gears: from habits of mind to active thinking", *Human Relations*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 55–76.

Maclean, M., Harvey, C. and Chia, R. (2012a), "Sensemaking, storytelling and the legitimization of elite business careers", *Human Relations*, Vol. 65 No. 1, pp. 17–40.

Maclean, M. Harvey, C. and Chia, R. (2012b), "Reflexive practice and the making of elite business careers", *Management Learning*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 385–404.

Mangaliso, M.P. (2001), "Building competitive advantage from Ubuntu: management lessons from South Africa", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 23–33.

McIntyre A. (1985), *After Virtue*, 2nd edn, Penguin, London.

Mehra, A., Kilduff, M. and Brass, D.J. (1998), "At the margins: a distinctiveness approach to the social identity and social networks of underrepresented groups", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 41 No. 4, pp. 441−452.

Miles, M. and Huberman, A.M. (1984), *Qualitative Data Analysis*, SAGE, Beverly Hills, CA.

Mainemelis, C. (2010), "Stealing fire: creative deviance in the evolution in the evolution of new ideas" *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 558−578.

Murray, J.B. (2002), "The politics of consumption: a re-inquiry on Thompson and Haytko's (1997) 'Speaking of fashion', *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 29 No. 3, pp. 427−440.

OECD (2008), *Jobs for Migrants: Labour Market Integration in Belgium, France, The Netherlands and Portugal,* OECD, Paris, France.

O'Reilly, C.A., Chatman, J., and Caldwell, D.F. (1991), "People and organizational culture: a profile comparison approach to assessing person-organization fit", *Academy of Management Journal,* Vol. 34 No.3, pp. 487−516.

Patton, M.Q. (2002), *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Phillips, N., Lawrence, T. and Hardy, C. (2004), "Discourse and institutions", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 29 No. 4, pp. 635−652.

Price, L.L. and Arnould, E.J. (1999), "Commercial friendships: service provider-client relationships in context", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 63 No. 4, pp. 38−56.

Rasche, A. and Chia, R. (2009), "Researching strategy practices: a genealogical social theory perspective", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 30 No. 7, pp.713–734.

Ritchie, J. and Spencer, L. (1993), "Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research", in Bryman, A. and Burgess, R. (Eds), *Analysing Qualitative Data,* Routledge, London, pp.173–194.

Reckwitz, A. (2002), "Toward a theory of social practices: a development in cultural theory", *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 243−263.

Robert, G.J. (2013), *Nepotism in Organizations*, Routledge, New York.

Rosenbaum, M.S. and Montoya, D.Y. (2007), "Am I welcome here? Exploring how ethnic consumers assess their place identity", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 60 No. 3, pp. 206−214.

Rosenbaum, M.S. and Walsh, G. (2012), "Service nepotism in the market place", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 241−256.

Rosenbaum, M.S., Massiah, C. and Wozniak, R. (2013), "An exploratory analysis of social commonalities and subjective discounts", *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 41 No. 5, pp. 671−687.

Rossiter, J.R. and Chan, A.M. (1998), "Ethnicity in business and consumer behaviour", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 42, pp. 127−134.

Shakar, A. (2001), *The Savage Girl.* Scribner, London.

Schatzki, T.R (1996), *Social Practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Schatzki, T.R (2002), "Practice mind-ed orders. In Schatzki, T.R., Knorr Cetina, K. and Von Savigny, E. (Eds), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, Routledge, London, pp. 43–55.

Sirdeshmuk, D., Singh, J. and Sabol, B. (2002), "Consumer trust, value, and loyalty in relational", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 66 No. 1, pp. 15−27.

Smith, A.D. (1986), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Song, M. and Parker, D. (1995), "Commonality, difference and the dynamics of disclosure in in-depth interviewing", *Sociology*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 241−256.

Stern, P.C. (1995), "Why do people sacrifice for their nation", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 217–235.

Stewart, A. (2003), "Help one another, use one another: toward anthropology of family business", *Entrepreneurship, Theory and Practice*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 383−396.

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (2008), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory,* SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Strauss, A.L. (1978), *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientist,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Stringfellow, L. and Maclean, M. (2014), "'Space of possibles'? Legitimacy, industry maturity and organizational foresight", *Strategic Change*, Vol. 23 No. 3-4, pp. 171-183.

Suddaby, R. (2006), "From the editors: what grounded theory is not", *Academy of Management Journal,* Vol. 49 No. 4, pp. 633–642.

Tsoukas, H. (2005), "Afterword: why language matters in the analysis of organizational change", *Journal of Change Management*, Vol. 18 No.1, pp. 96–104.

Trivers, R.L. (2006), "Reciprocal altruism: 30 years later", in van Shaik, C.P. (Eds), *Cooperation in Primates and Humans: Mechanisms and Evolution*, Springer-Verlag, Berlin, pp. 69−89.

Trivers, R.L. (1976), "The evolution of reciprocal altruism", *Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 35-57.

Vanhanen, T. (1999), "Domestic conflict and ethnic nepotism: a comparative analysis", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 36 No.1, pp. 55−73.

Watson, S. (2009), "The magic of the marketplace: sociality in a neglected public space", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 46 No. 8, pp.1577−1591.

Wetherell, M., Laflèche, M. and Berkeley, R. (2007), *Identity, Ethnic Diversity and Community Cohesion*, Sage Publication, London.

White, K. and Dahl, D.W. (2007), "Are all out-groups created equal? Consumer identity and dissociative influence", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp. 522-537.

Whittmore, R., Chase, S.K. and Mandle, C.L. (2001), "Validity in qualitative research", *Qualitative Health Research*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 522–537.

Wilson, R.T. (2007), "Acculturation and discrimination in the global marketplace", *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 67−78.

Table 1: Interviewee descriptors

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Years domiciled in Europe
1. Akora	Male	25─27	Auto mechanic	14
2. Alima	Female	26─28	Hairdresser	15
3. Bangoura	Male	33─35	Support worker	12
4. Bansa	Male	37─39	Lecturer	06
5. Bobby	Male	43─45	Retail Assistant	09
6. Cecilia	Female	41─43	Retail Assistant	08
7. Diana	Female	39─41	Retail Supervisor	12
8. Emeka	Male	41─43	Healthcare Assistant	07
9. Eno	Female	49─51	Registered Nurse	13
10. Epstein	Male	38─40	Healthcare Assistant	04
11. Gladys	Female	28─30	Catering Assistant	01
12. Harry	Male	35─37	Building Handyman	06
13. Joyce	Female	28─31	Hairdresser	09
14. Lordina	Female	34─36	Social Worker	15
15. Mavis	Female	55─57	Retail Assistant	15
16. Nina	Female	24─26	Fast food Waitress	05
17. Tony	Male	37─39	Teacher	06
18. Said	Male	55─57	Retail Assistant	20
19. Santo	Male	37─39	Security Guard	09
20. Violet	Female	25─27	Call centre Assistant	02
21. Zara	Female	40─42	Receptionist	05

Table 2: Overview of data analysis

First-order codes	*Theoretical categories*	*Aggregate theoretical dimension*
▪ Setting one's rules on the service and treatment of like customers ▪ Deliberate violation of organizing rules in favour of ethnic customers	Marginal revolution	*Mentalities*
▪ Altruistic acts of generosity towards like customers ▪ Expressions of perceived reciprocity of goodwill in the present or future	Reciprocal altruism	
▪ Micromanipulation tactics intended to enhance employee's social identity ▪ Ingratiating actions that potentially enhance others' perception of the employee	Pandering for recognition	*Motivations*
▪ Over-emphasis on idiosyncratic associations in justifying help rendered to customer(s) ▪ 'Brotherhood'– emphasis on a common distinct heritage or shared historical ties with customer(s)	Horizontal comradeship	