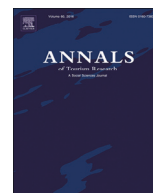




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## Migrant mobility and value creation in hospitality labour

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines diverse forms of value that migrant workers create through their employment in hospitality. The paper draws on insights from valuation studies and research on migrants' transnational resources to consider the experiences of Kenyans who worked in the hospitality sector while abroad. The paper introduces the notion of 'indefinite capacities' to conceptualise the amorphous nature of skills, capabilities and resources that may be developed through hospitality work. The findings explore how value is constructed and negotiated within occupational, cultural and psychological domains, examining how and why indefinite capacities are (de)valued in specific moments, and how they are (re)appraised in the wider context of migrants' careers and lives.

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## Introduction

Migration provides important pathways for knowledge development and transfer (Williams & Baláž, 2014). Working abroad creates opportunities for labour migrants to expand skills and obtain competencies that they can mobilise and exploit in their current and subsequent lives, including in their home countries. Research on knowledge acquisition and transfer has traditionally concentrated on measurable, 'formal' skills while overlooking soft skills and tacit knowledge accumulated during migration (Baláž et al., 2021). These informal capabilities are often not validated or 'certified', but can become useful across multiple socio-economic contexts (Lulle et al., 2021; Moroşanu et al., 2021). These informal forms of migrant resources are amorphous, and conceptualised in this paper as 'indefinite capacities' that are reified and enacted, and the value of which is contested and thus negotiated, through actors' 'identity work' i.e. ongoing reflective and performative practices through which identities are constructed (La Barbera, 2015; Netto et al., 2020). Importantly, indefinite capacities are acquired and refined through a range of inter and intra-organisational experiences. Given the limited understanding of such indefinite capacities, this paper sets out to examine what types of value are created by and for migrants through their employment abroad in hospitality, which encompasses accommodation, restaurants and other foodservice outlets, bars, cafés, and entertainment venues (Page, 2019). However, the emphasis here is not on the work experience itself, but rather on how migrants subsequently conceived the value they developed and mobilised from those experiences. Moreover, it attempts to account for how such value is understood, assessed and negotiated in specific ways by different actors.

Migrants often enter labour markets in 'host' societies through the hospitality sector, and working in these areas has been shown to facilitate their transition and settlement, especially in the early stages of migration (Backman & Klaesson, 2021; Filimonau & Mika, 2019; Janta, Ladkin, et al., 2011). Reciprocally, much of the international hospitality sector relies on immigrant

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workers, partly to fill gaps where domestic labour supply cannot meet demand, but also because migrants are seen to add value through their flexibility, cost and work ethic (Baum, 2012; Erdem et al., 2021; Joppe, 2012; Lozanski & Baumgartner, 2022).

Employment in hospitality is frequently viewed as problematic in general, and particularly for migrants. Commentators regularly observe that hospitality work is often highly pressurised, working conditions are difficult, pay and conditions are highly variable, and the sector is characterised by low levels of unionisation (Baum, 2015; Joppe, 2012; Jordhus-Lier & Underthun, 2015). Migrants are likely to be more exposed to problematic aspects of human resource and organisational practices. Studies frequently highlight migrants' negative experiences of marginalisation, exploitation and discrimination (Jayaraman, 2013; Kensbock et al., 2016; Slavnic, 2013). Consequently, hospitality work is persistently conceived as low status and low skilled, and employment is thus viewed as a necessity rather than a positive choice or an opportunity for value creation (Baum et al., 2016; Williamson, 2017; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011).

However, as critics have argued, it is important to problematize widely circulating assumptions about hospitality work (Ioannides & Zampoukos, 2018; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011). While it is possible to claim that many jobs in the sector may be considered low skilled insofar as entry does not require extensive qualifications, it is necessary to disentangle this from the notion that the enactment of hospitality labour is low skilled. Multiple studies have shown the diverse emotional, psychological, cultural and physical skills that hospitality workers have to develop and deploy as part of their work, including in areas such as frontline service and housekeeping (Burns, 1997; Kensbock et al., 2016; Lam et al., 2021, 2022). Moreover, a small number of studies have suggested, albeit through limited evidence, that working in hospitality provides migrants opportunities to develop and refine multiple capabilities and resources that would not be possible in other sectors, even though employment conditions may not have been positive (Janta, Brown, et al., 2011; Janta et al., 2012; Ladkin, 2011; Lugosi et al., 2016).

Finally, while it is crucial to remain critical of exploitative labour conditions, it is also important to avoid perpetually constructing migrants as marginalised, exploited 'victims'. As previous work has shown, it is essential to recognise migrants' agency in negotiating their migration and employment experiences (Rydzik et al., 2017; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). It is also necessary to acknowledge that hospitality work can be a positive component of migration and mobility (Duncan et al., 2013; Rydzik et al., 2012), and that these spheres of social, cultural and economic activity can be pathways for value creation for migrants over longer career timeframes (Lugosi et al., 2023; Lugosi & Allis, 2019).

Nevertheless, dominant conceptions of these spheres of employment dismiss the value for migrants, and therefore there is limited understanding of the potential for value creation. Consequently, this paper examines intersections of migration experiences and 'indefinite capacities' developed through hospitality employment. Drawing on qualitative research with Kenyan hotel workers previously employed in the United Kingdom, it explores how a variety of skills and capabilities relating to occupational, cultural and psychological domains of practice mediate migrants' mobilities and experiences. The discussion suggests reassessing the knowledge and resources acquired through such employment. Moreover, it considers how work in the hospitality sector, and the capacities developed through them, may become malleable devices deployed within and across migrants' careers.

## Literature

### *Hospitality labour*

Before considering existing conceptions and critiques of hospitality labour, it is important to recognise that employment in this sector involves a wide variety of jobs, practices and thus competencies. These include some positions that are more technical and involve less contact with guests and other workers, for example, facilities management, cleaning, back office administrative tasks, and cooking. Other roles involve greater levels of contact with guests, members of the wider public, fellow staff, suppliers and service providers. This complicates matters because these require diverse training, qualifications and skills sets; so, in effect, it is difficult to talk definitively about hospitality labour as a singular type of work.

However, critiques levelled at these general areas of work are usually aimed at what are labelled 'low skilled' jobs – positions that do not require specialist qualifications. Moreover, critiques of hospitality labour usually discuss the nature of work in the context of, and thus interchangeably with, those of employment conditions, frequently describing them as low status, low paid, precarious and unsustainable (Baum, 2015; Duncan et al., 2013; Robinson, Martins, et al., 2019). The risk is that such discourses have a framing effect on conceptions of hospitality labour, and thus the skills and capabilities involved in working in the sector. More broadly, following Moroşanu et al.'s (2021) critique, such approach to hospitality reflects limitations of work that draws simplistic distinctions between high and low skilled spheres of labour, and the capabilities of migrants employed in these sectors (see also Ioannides & Zampoukos, 2018; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011).

Commentators on hospitality have similarly criticised such discourses of low skilled labour (Baum, 2006; Burns, 1997). In part, these critiques have recognised that interactive hospitality work, particularly among frontline service staff, requires considerable emotional and cultural intelligence, alongside various forms of interpersonal and cross-cultural competencies. These commentaries also appreciate that past critiques stressing the 'low skilled' nature of hospitality work are based on western-centric conceptions of skills, abilities and competencies generated from work experience (Baum, 2008; Ioannides & Zampoukos, 2018).

These studies appear to recognise the wider capabilities that are required for many types of hospitality work (e.g., Baum, 2006). Some scholars have also speculated that competencies developed through hospitality work may extend to other life domains, particularly for young people who often enter the labour market through the sector (Golubovskaya et al., 2019; Robinson, Baum, et al., 2019). Nevertheless, work on hospitality labour tends to focus on existing capabilities, failing to consider sufficiently the types of competencies and capacities developed through engaging in hospitality employment, particularly as they

are redeployed beyond these employment spheres. In part, this refers to 'hard' skills and technical competencies, developed through formal training and development, which are potentially easier to document and evidence post-employment. It also refers to a range of soft skills and tacit knowledge, which are developed through experiential learning in the context of hospitality jobs. Again, these may become manifest in work experience that can be captured in a professional resume. However, hospitality labour may also facilitate the development of inter and intrapersonal capabilities, including various forms of cultural and emotional intelligence, that are more difficult to articulate or evidence, even though they are fundamental to everyday work practices (see e.g., Luthans et al. (2007) more generally; and Koc (2019) specifically in hospitality).

The diversity and amorphousness of these capabilities and resources makes it apt to conceptualise them through the notion of 'indefinite capacities'. Invoking this term helps to stress that these are not a fixed set of traits or dispositions, but encompass multiple competencies, experiences and resources including forms of social capital, that are open to development or refinement, and have the potential to become deployable assets. Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that the value of these capabilities or experiences, insofar as they are reified, enacted and redeployed in other work or life domains, may only become apparent over time, through migration and transnational mobility. This serves as a reminder of the indeterminacy of these capacities; and it foregrounds the need to appreciate that the value of these capacities is context dependent. In order to better understand 'indefinite capacities', which then allows us to examine them empirically, it is useful to consider how valuation and migration-related resources have been conceptualised and how they potentially intersect.

### *Value, valuation and migration*

Within the context of this discussion, we adopt a definition of value as something that has the perceived quality of being worthwhile or important because of its potential use or benefits (Ng & Smith, 2012). Three specific components of this conception of value are particularly important. Firstly, the notion of 'something' should be seen as inclusive in terms of its form, referring to tangible objects and assets, and to intangible things such as psychological or cognitive capacities. These encompass resilience and problem solving, life and work experiences, alongside capabilities including technical skills, (inter or cross-) cultural sensitivities and linguistic knowledge (Moroşanu et al., 2021; Williams & Baláz, 2014). Secondly, invoking the term 'perceived' is used deliberately to stress that value is not a stable or fixed quality of tangible or intangible 'assets' (Ng & Smith, 2012). Rather, value is negotiated and thus subject to transformation and contestation, which leads to the third feature – 'potential use and benefits'. Foregrounding this stresses that value is subject to 'valuation': dynamic social processes where different actors may have complementary or diverging interpretations of form and worth (Codina et al., 2020; Kjellberg et al., 2013; Ren & Mahadevan, 2018). Different actors may therefore (re)construct notions of value, using alternative indexes. Consequently, value (as outcome) is context and actor dependent, but valuation (as process) should also be seen as social construction insofar as different actors negotiate and attempt, to some extent at least, to harmonize their evaluations of assets, experiences, skills and capabilities (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Callon et al., 2002).

Value, in its intangible, ephemeral forms, arguably has a performative, enacted dimension. In the context of global mobility and processes of transnationalisation, exposure to foreign cultures, and corresponding intercultural competencies, including language proficiency, have been conceptualised as migration-specific, transcultural, transnational or cosmopolitan capital (Carlson et al., 2017; Erel, 2010; Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Weenink, 2008). Knowledge, understanding and effective deployment of multiple forms of (transnational) capital thus shape people's travel, settlement and career experiences. Moreover, the value of capabilities developed abroad, and migrants' ability to exploit these, is always subject to negotiation.

International mobility creates multiple pathways for the accumulation and (re)deployment of capital, and for value creation. Past research has often focused on the importance of migrants' economic remittances, but it is important to recognise that beyond monetary outcomes, migrants develop a range of skills and capacities (King et al., 2016; Moroşanu et al., 2021; Williams & Baláz, 2014). These include occupation-specific and entrepreneurial capabilities that rely on job-related experience, knowledge of professional fields as well as cultural capital that have been accrued during time spent working abroad (Janta et al., 2012; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Lugosi et al., 2016). They also extend to psychological resources, including confidence and cross-cultural orientation (Williams & Baláz, 2005, 2014). It is important to note two things. First, this is likely to include explicit forms of knowledge, including training and experience, which can be 'objectified', for example through certification; however, it may also include tacit forms of knowledge that are difficult to account for or evidence (Baláz et al., 2021). Second, the value of these resources and competencies are assessed and realised through their transfer across borders, as migrants attempt to resettle into past (or possibly new) socio-economic landscapes and networks (Anghel et al., 2019; Farrer, 2021; Liu-Farrer et al., 2021; Olivier-Mensah, 2019; Olivier-Mensah & Scholl-Schneider, 2016). The valuation (as process) and value (as outcomes) of resources, including various forms of capital, thus continues to be relational, performative, co-constructed and subject to contestation, with the potential for devaluation or value destruction. This reinforces the necessity to consider these in the context of the current study as 'indefinite capacities'.

In summary, past work has recognised that hospitality employment provides opportunities to develop and deploy a range of transferable skills and capabilities. Research has also stressed the interdependencies of migration and hospitality employment, insofar as foreign workers make up a large part of the workforce in many destinations and employment is often a crucial part of migration, particularly in facilitating labour market entry. Previous studies have demonstrated that hospitality employment can create various challenges for migrants, but research has also stressed the need to appreciate migrants' agency in negotiating these. Finally, past research has recognised that migration provides avenues for value creation, while acknowledging that value is enacted and negotiated as explicit and tacit skills and resources move across borders. However, there remains insufficient

knowledge or understanding of how resources and capabilities, developed through hospitality employment, translate into value creation (as process) and value (as outcome) through migration. This study therefore explores the linkages between migration and value creation in relation to the experiences of migrants who were employed in hospitality sectors when abroad.

## Methods

### *Research approach*

The wider study from which the data are drawn adopted an interpretivist position, with the aim of eliciting lengthy, detailed narratives using qualitative interviews to gain insights into individuals' subjective experiences. The interviews focused primarily on examining participants' work in the hospitality sector, within the context of their migration. The objective was to generate reflective accounts of work-related activities and experiences, and to locate these within wider mobilities. These rich accounts thus help to identify significant events and triggers for change, in this case relating to migration, mobility and sector-specific employment, while encouraging participants to contextualise these in their unfolding careers and lives. This helped to understand the implications of specific encounters, actions and practices including thoughts, meanings and feelings that individuals attributed to them.

This research approach was deemed particularly apt to study migrant workers' skills and capacities for several reasons. First, this strategy was not reliant on any restrictive theoretical framework, so the researcher could adopt an open, inductive approach to data collection, giving the interviewee greater scope to drive the discussion, and providing opportunities to capture unique, personal insights. This was necessary for studying the relatively under-researched and amorphous phenomenon of tacit knowledge and skills acquisition through hospitality work. Second, the reflective, narrative focus of this approach encouraged interviewees to view their experiences across a longer temporal frame, thus enabling them to reflect on and to account for how events, actors or specific decisions influenced their careers. Again, this was important because interviewees assessed over time what they learnt or what capabilities they developed, and their implications, for example on their subsequent employment, relationships and mobilities.

However, in the construction of this manuscript, it was decided not to present the findings according to the conventions adopted in many life history or biographical studies, focusing on the lengthy narratives and detailed experiences of a small sample of individuals and charting their work and life histories (e.g., Ndiuini & Baum, 2021; Rydzik et al., 2017; Slavnic, 2013). Instead it was decided to present findings thematically. This allowed us to delineate and present several meta-themes from across the wider data set. It also enabled us to distinguish between different domains of value or value creation, which provide potential analytical lens that future research could adopt in building on this study's findings.

### *Sample and data collection*

The study was conducted in Kenya and the United Kingdom (UK), and combined purposive and snowball sampling strategies in identifying suitable participants. Initial participants were recruited through the second author's professional networks, which was particularly useful given the inadequate Kenyan statistical data on (returning) migrants. Subsequent participants were identified and contacted through existing interviewees. The primary inclusion criteria were that they were migrants who had: a) previously been employed in the hospitality sector in a foreign country before either settling abroad or returning to Kenya; and b) entered the country and gained jobs legally. There were attempts to recruit male and female participants. The final sample consisted of thirty-two participants, with an equal split between workers who had returned to Kenya and those who had continued to live and work in the UK. There were 18 females and 14 males, with ages ranging from 31 to 62 years. Their work experience encompassed diverse operational and functional areas, including a variety of roles i.e. housekeeper, waiter, chef, head chef, receptionist, accounts clerk, restaurant supervisor, and hotel manager.

The majority of the interviews were carried out face-to-face, but six utilised video calling services where physical meetings were not possible. The interviews were conducted in English, lasting between 1.5 and 2 h and were digitally recorded. In the spirit of the inductive, qualitative approach, the interviewer asked participants to talk about their experiences of working and migration, focusing on the time they left education to the present day. The researcher tried to avoid prompting, and only interjected to encourage participants to elaborate their accounts in specific incidents, for example, when the interviewee raised a potentially interesting point briefly or began to digress from the topic thread. Notes were taken during interviews and recordings were transcribed by the second author in preparation for analysis.

### *Analysis*

The analysis involved three rounds of data reduction, (re)coding and reordering, which were conducted independently by two authors. The original data set (205,402 words) comprised chronological narratives in which participants discussed their lives, with particular reference to employment and migration-related areas. The initial round of analysis conducted by the second author adopted an open coding process, categorising general issues such as motivations, drivers of mobility, expectations of work and migration, and views of professions. In a subsequent round of analysis, the second author extracted from this wider set of narratives a smaller data subset of 8296 words that referred more explicitly to respondents' perspectives on what they learnt while working abroad and how these shaped subsequent experiences of mobility, careers and, in some cases, return to Kenya. The

next round of focused analysis conducted by the first author reduced this subset to 4137 words, reordering the data under a higher order theme of 'resources' which comprised occupational, (inter or cross) cultural and psychological resource domains as sub themes. A further thematic area of findings concerning return migration were created that included as sub themes migrants' reflections on their post hospitality/return experiences, including interactions with people from their past and/or employers, their conceptions of selves and their decisions related to life and career choices.

## Findings and discussion

The findings and discussion initially distinguish between occupational, cultural and psychological domains through which valuation was performed and value was reified or enacted. The subsequent part considers in further detail how value was assessed and re-evaluated, particularly through return migration.

### *Occupational domains of value/valuation*

Interviewees identified capacities that were explicitly linked to their occupational fields and which could subsequently be mobilised in work settings. One of these was the contacts and business-specific networks that were established through past employment, which could be utilised in pursuit of business interests. For example:

When I was in UK as a chef, I had very good contacts with the companies that we were buying goods from: Nisbets, Aslotel, very good contacts. In fact, when I came back to Kenya and I called them. They were like 'Are you on holiday?', and I was like 'No, it's a different ball game now, I'm buying from you.', and it was easier for me to get the contracts because now we sign distributor contracts with them so when they have enquiries they tell them 'Look we have got an agent, he knows our products, he has used our product, he's based in Nairobi, go to him.' And when they sell products to them, they even send them extra; they say 'These are for spare.' so I find it very, very easy.

[(Charlo, male, chef entrepreneur)]

As Erel (2010) argued, social and (sub)cultural capital intersected to create a unique set of migratory resources according to the person's distinct situation and positionality. For Charlo, his previous sector-specific contacts and experiences became valuable assets within new, yet related professional domains of practice. Following Çalişkan and Callon (2010), valuation relies on qualification of worth by different actors involved in their assessment, who adopt common indexes and signifiers of value (see also Callon et al., 2002; Cochoy, 2008). It is therefore possible to argue that, for these migrants and the sector-specific actors they encountered, the potential value of knowledge and experience was thus assessed against occupationally defined indexes of worth. Value was reified by those sharing the same lexical and professional reference points, and was arguably restricted to these fields of practice and relationships.

Many of the capacities referred to more subtle business and occupational knowledge or market awareness. For instance:

And the way I want to set up whatever I'm setting up now, is to make sure that those chefs appreciate that for you to get ahead with this job you need to be very fast and you have to move with the trend. We have systems that tell you food allergies, calorific value, we have them all.

[(Charlo, male, chef entrepreneur)]

Knowledge about and effective communication of food allergies has become an important aspect of risk management for many businesses, especially in countries where these have become enshrined in law (Weber & Lugosi, 2021). Moreover, nutritional information on menus have become important consumer engagement strategies (Bray et al., 2019). Understanding their significance, and effective management of operational and marketing strategies, informed migrants' business development practices, thus offering potential avenues to gain competitive advantage.

In other examples, the capacities were articulated in relation to alternative occupational fields, for example concerning operational or management practices.

One of the things I would say that is very positive from my experiences and life in the UK is schedules. Though I have some free time here and there, I do everything on schedule. I schedule everything, I plan my time and everything I can within the times that I have allocated. So that is one positive aspect, I keep my time and I work within timeframes.

[(Izo, male, hospitality entrepreneur)]

Anthropologists and researchers of cross-cultural management have identified cultural differences in perceptions of and attitudes towards time, including how it shapes work routines (Fulmer et al., 2014). It may be possible to argue that Izo's observations regarding the use of schedules to structure his time and activities reflect Western-centric conceptions of administrative order (ing), which he perceived to be distinct, transferable capabilities to be deployed in work and non-work life domains. However, it is important to avoid reductive conclusions regarding the superiority of one culture's norms and its wholesale adoption by

people from other cultural or national groups. These data point to the potential benefit of conceptualising them as 'indefinite capacities'. These tacit forms of skills and sensitivities, which were bound up in occupational practices, should not be conceived through reductive, culture-bound categories of stronger or weaker practice. Rather they became valued in migrants' subjective experiences, in particular as these came to inform their subsequent professional practices.

Another interviewee similarly commented: 'I think the best benefit, is being able to work there, learning to have a work ethic and a productive one at that' (Kubz, male, hospitality entrepreneur). Highlighting these acquired sensitivities and dispositions reflected cross-cultural knowledge and awareness, the value of which was realised as principles and practices from one occupational sphere (i.e. hospitality work abroad) were assessed in relation to another (i.e. in their subsequent life and career domains).

However, it is important to recognise the informal and ephemeral nature of the professional insights and capacities migrants acquired and developed through work experiences abroad.

There were some small hotel or restaurant. I used to see there where we used to buy our food and the way it was operated. I used to admire and I was saying - one time, I am going to do it, and I'm doing it now. It influenced my decisions. It inspired me.

[(Aggyie, female, restaurant owner)]

Migrants thus sought to use their experiences abroad to shape their professional decisions, whether in employment in established hospitality organisations or in their entrepreneurial choices. Moreover, it is necessary to stress that experiences were not always positive, although they could still inform the professional capabilities that migrants developed from them. As one respondent noted: 'Ramsay, when he had this restaurant in Glasgow, [it taught me] how not to run a restaurant, it opened my eyes' (Kubz, male, hospitality entrepreneur). For Kubz, witnessing poor practice appeared to shape wider reflective processes informing what type of owner-operator he sought to be in his future endeavours.

#### *Cultural domains of value/valuation*

The findings in the previous section highlighted how occupation-related capabilities utilised other forms of cultural knowledge, for example concerning specific foodstuffs and cooking styles. The utility of this type of cultural capital, reflecting their gastronomic cosmopolitanism or omnivorousness (Ray, 2016), extended beyond their professional spheres.

I tell myself that my travelling around has really helped me because I can go to a restaurant right now and someone will ask me whether I will have tapas and I will know what Tapas is. But if I didn't travel, then I would start Googling what Tapas is, so the exposure is good.

[(Charlo, male, chef entrepreneur)]

Arguably, these types of reflective claims were bound up with class-based self-expressions regarding the value of some exoticised 'other', knowledge of which was deployed to articulate social distinction (Ray, 2016). More importantly, in the context of the current analysis, this reflects how the valuing of indefinite capacities, in this case concerning knowledge of foodways, is relational and situational. The value of such knowledge, and thus cultural skills, is reified in social interactions as competencies become enacted or performed.

Significantly, for the current analysis, these types of perceived cultural capabilities, which could become resources to be deployed across domestic and social fields, had the continuing potential to shape professional opportunities and inform work-related domains of activity. For example:

The beautiful thing about being in the hospitality industry in Britain, is it exposed you to so many cultures. The Spanish, Russians, we learnt how to communicate even with a non-English speaking guest and somehow you get the message across. I will give you an example, how I manage to communicate with the Chinese right now here [in Kenya] is because of my exposure to the orientals [sic] while in Britain. I mean, you are talking to somebody who at most probably has 30 words in English; you have almost an entire dictionary but you get the message across. Guys look at me, [asking] 'How?' I'm like, 'Don't worry I studied with them.' It shapes your worldview.

[(Kubz, male, hospitality entrepreneur)]

The benefits of encountering people from other nations and cultures through interactive service work, in frontline hospitality employment has been identified elsewhere, albeit briefly (Lugosi et al., 2016). Many of the respondents highlighted cultural sensitivities and cross-cultural competencies as being important capacities they developed from their time working abroad. For instance:

I got exposure, I have learnt a lot of things. They are kind. You appreciate something, I had to learn to appreciate, you know something here like us Africans we don't even say thank you, but for them, it's a big thing. You have to appreciate like someone has opened the door, or someone has offered you something, you have to say thank you. So, I learnt that.

[(Gatavi, female, foodstuff retailer)]

These observations reflect the findings of other studies (e.g., [Olivier-Mensah, 2019](#)), which suggested that the value of this type of cultural exposure was assessed and thus realised, in this case through return migration, as culturally specific practices were (re)appraised in relation to norms and behaviours observed at home. Arguably, transnational, or more specifically, transcultural mobility was therefore key to valuation as practice, and value as outcome. However, it is necessary to question whether these culture-related capacities were developed exclusively or uniquely through hospitality employment. Intercultural encounters and cultural exposure are likely to be features of any migration or even travel experience. It is perhaps more useful to think of migration-hospitality employment experiences in terms of intersecting influences. Specifically, migrants in previous studies highlighted that the work conditions in interactive service jobs in hospitality forced them to learn faster; and that these opportunities were less possible in non-hospitality or in back-of-house hospitality jobs that restricted social and cultural exposure ([Janta et al., 2012](#); [Lugosi et al., 2016](#)). Hospitality employment intersected with more general migration experiences to have co-amplification/co-dampening effects, according to the work and migration context, and the capabilities that migrants could utilise, for example language skills. Just as cultural exposure through work for migrants with language skills could accelerate their learning, poorer linguistic skills and intercultural knowledge, in addition to restricted work-based socio-cultural exposure, limited the possibility to develop capacities.

Within the current findings, it is interesting to observe how the value of (inter)cultural experiences and competencies could still be framed in terms of professional fields of practice, while recognising that these cultural capacities extended beyond work spheres.

So, I'm relaxed, I know the UK, I have been there. So, the experience is of massive benefit in our hotel industry. That one goes without saying. Even when we don't realise it, the experience Kenyans are getting is massive. It is really beneficial to the industry back home. Because even as you talk about that person, I have lived there, I have transported them in my taxi (laughs), I have fed them, you have sat with them in the class, if you are in Kenya serving them, it's a normal person. What I'm saying, the experience is very good. They have made us appreciate who we are plus the integration of many communities has also helped me know something that to me was an assumption, unknowingly that even when we call them whites there is Poland, Switzerland, UK, US and they are all different in their own right.

[(WaKevote, male, transport services provider)]

WaKevote's reflections point to range of cultural sensitivities, stemming from his international experience, which he saw as sources of value for him individually and potentially for the wider hospitality sector. This serves as a reminder of the utility of conceptualising these as 'indefinite capacities'. First, a somewhat implicit part of his observation is that this type of (inter or cross) cultural competence becomes useful, or valued, as it is deployed in subsequent service interactions. In short, it is not a stable or fixed asset, but it may become one, depending on the interactional context. Second, his observations are based on his perception of such capabilities and their potential for deployment; they are thus subjective, individualised, and psychological, despite having a basis in (inter)cultural practice, which add to their indefiniteness.

#### *Psychological domains of value/valuation*

The previous observations regarding professional and intercultural competencies also highlighted how hospitality employment abroad had the potential to influence migrants' self-assurance and self-awareness. This was reflected in several of the interviews. For example:

Because, you see, sometimes, somebody may tend to think in the first world [sic] this happens, so I'm like no, no it actually doesn't work that way. So, this thing in England, this happens; I can actually comfortably tell somebody 'No it actually doesn't work that way, in reality this is what happens.' [...] It has also given me a bargaining chip in my current work, because people think, which is true that when you have international exposure you are more of an asset than somebody who has worked locally. So, it's part of the reason that I am where I am at the moment because I have experienced having worked abroad for 3 years, I have experienced dealing with different cultures, handling different people. [...] So I'm better placed, it gives me that confidence to say you are not telling me anything new; you know the way somebody can tell you 'I'm from England', I'm like, yeah, been there, done that. So, you are not giving me anything new. So, it kind of gives me that confidence to be able to perform my current duties.

[(Wanjira, female, personal assistant in information technology firm)]

These types of observations reflect that extended cross-cultural exposure afforded by intersecting migration and hospitality work experiences underpinned wider psychological capabilities. Moreover, it also highlights how these capacities were entangled in migrants' identity work as they negotiated their professional selves and career trajectories. As [Weenink \(2008\)](#) concluded in relation to what he called the 'cosmopolitan capital' of migrants, the development of transnational competencies afforded increased flexibility, which translated into greater levels of confidence that in turn facilitated their career mobilities. It is also important to stress the fluid, ongoing, reflexive nature of valuation as migrants (re)assessed what they gained from their transnational (work) experiences, even when they were not wholly or consistently positive.

Sometimes it's good to sit and reflect cos it gives you strength, cos when you reflect what you have been through and up to where you are you gain more courage and know that life can still go on. And despite the fact that I have had difficulty with my career, I still have hope that I can still prosper and go back to my career and be what I want. I can still achieve my dream or goal. Never give up in life. I really appreciate that I did housekeeping and the hotel industry. Dealing with the complaints, it challenges you and you learn quite a lot. How you deal with different type of people that you come across.

[(Wandiri, female, care worker)]

Resilience and adaptability were identified by many of the respondents, which reflected the challenging nature of work practices and pressures encountered by migrants in hospitality employment (Janta et al., 2012). This helps to stress that examining the value gained from migrants working in hospitality is not based on an uncritical view of the sector. Nevertheless, it does highlight how intense work pressures and poor organisational arrangements can still contribute to the development of value for migrants.

I also learnt that you don't have to be a professional, you can always learn on a job. Like when I came here, I have never worked in reservations department and when I got here, I worked in reservations like I have worked for 10 years. And I think I shaped the reservations here because it was one without a direction. Although it is a one-man department, I can say I run it professionally the way it should be. [...] It prepared me for most of the things I had never thought I would ever do. Sometimes you even find that you can make a soup but you are not a trained chef; you can make a sandwich, can fix a quick meal cos even the fast-food café it was just you. You are the cashier, the waiter and you are at the counter, you are taking orders. So, you have to do everything at the same time, the chef is overwhelmed, you have to fix a coffee, or a sandwich, at least you become an all-round person.

[(Wambui, female, hotel sales manager)]

The skills and capacities identified by Wambui, for example, adaptability and problem solving alongside resilience and the confidence that comes from negotiating workplace challenges are often difficult to document and thus evidence. As Baláž et al. (2021) and Williams (2007) observed, this type of tacit knowledge and intrapersonal capability is highly subjective and embedded in migrants' everyday practices. Their form may thus remain abstract and indefinite, although they are perceived as valued assets by the migrants who experience them and attempt to redeploy them in their subsequent lives, professional practices and self-conceptions.

#### *Re-valuation, devaluation and ambiguous value*

The previous discussion of occupational, cultural and psychological domains of value and valuation foregrounded migrants' perspectives on the perceived utility of their employment experiences. It argued that valuation (as practice) was relational insofar as migrant workers assessed through their encounters with others what they gained from working in hospitality while abroad. However, it is also important to restress situational and interactional aspects of valuation. More generally, following Çalıřkan and Callon (2010), processes of valuation operate on the basis that multiple actors interact and adopt shared frames of references to qualify and assess worth. Considering the valuation of amorphous resources – in this case, competencies accrued through hospitality employment abroad – the creation of shared frames of reference is complicated by transcultural mobility. More specifically, indexes of worth and thus the qualification of value are influenced by, among other things, potential changes in the socio-economic landscapes to which people return, perceptions and expectations of returnees among those living in their places of return, as well as the changing worldviews and attitudes of the returnees (Anghel et al., 2019; Olivier-Mensah & Scholl-Schneider, 2016).

In practice, this meant that others had the potential to perceive international experiences in different ways and thus assign different value to what was gained or lost through the sojourn. For example, several interviewees highlighted ambiguities in the value of transnational experience.

So, when I came back I immediately got a job in Rwanda, not even here in Kenya, and actually it was because here in Kenya it was becoming a little bit difficult to settle down at first with a job because employers could not relate. But why I got the job in Rwanda because the managers of that hotel in Rwanda were actually British, so they appreciated my experience than my own Kenyan employers. [...]

I saw the reason as to why they were more appreciative of my Rwandese experience than to my UK experience because they can't relate. In fact one told me, 'I can't relate', in an interview.

[(Mutheu, female, lecturer in a hotel school)]

Mutheu's reflections highlight the contextual nature of valuation, and thus the indefinite value of migrants' international experiences, stressing that these could be valued or devalued in specific situations based on actors' invocation of diverging value systems.



A curriculum vitae characterised by mobility was sometimes seen as problematic for employers. In some cases, this may have been because individuals who displayed a proclivity for travel, could leave, so investing in them was seen as risky. For example, as one interviewee noted: "To this day, [the organization] won't give me a job. There is always an excuse of 'You are not married.', 'You are not settled in Kenya.', 'You might just go back to Britain.'" (Kubz, male, hospitality entrepreneur). However, in many other cases, the international experience could have been interpreted as a threat because of the perceived or anticipated expectations of those mobile workers may have of their employers, including remuneration.

So, I just decided to try and do some self-employment. Because you end up telling them that maybe for two years you were in [the UK] and sometimes you don't want even to mention because when you say they will ask you 'What was the salary?'. You know they will be scared of employing, they will say 'Huyu alikuwa ng'ambo, so wako na huo uoga.' [This one was away abroad, so there is that tension].

[(Aggyie, female, restaurant owner)]

Arguably, outbound and return migration both involve forms of othering, as migrants are ascribed perceived identities, which shape people's expectations and perceptions of them (Anghel et al., 2019; Olivier-Mensah & Scholl-Schneider, 2016). Importantly for the current discussion, these processes of identity ascription were embroiled in valuation, and previous experience in hospitality work became a 'contested marker of identity' (La Barbera, 2015). Being defined, in part at least, through their transnational mobility, and thus being excluded from employment opportunities represented devaluation or value destruction. For this migrant, these processes radically changed their subsequent career trajectories, and they pursued entrepreneurial opportunities instead. However, it is interesting to note that negative valuation of foreign employment could also shape migrants' performative identity work, for example in how they presented their experiences and capacities.

But here, I think the expectations are higher, when you come back, you tell people you have worked in the US or UK, they say you are overqualified so getting a job becomes very difficult. At times I had the temptation of actually removing the fact that I have a Master's degree on my CV.

[(Muthama, male, university lecturer in hospitality management)]

The deactivation of certain skills, or at least their obscuration, has been recognised in studies of return migration more generally (Olivier-Mensah, 2019). This helps to stress migrants' agency in their representations of selves, insofar as they were aware and responsive to the potential impacts of coupling valuation practices with identity ascriptions. For some, responses to the re-evaluation of international experience were not restricted to self-presentation but prompted deeper self-reflections on the value of working abroad or of return. For example, several of the participants observed that they felt they were at a disadvantage because their work abroad disrupted their career trajectories:

Remember, all your friends have moved on, others have become CEOs and you are still there [laughs]; they have got better jobs and you are still there clinging on.

[(Wambora, female, chef)]

The people you left here, those are the biggest challenge because honestly you come back, people have moved on and people are doing well materially, career-wise, everything, then you feel like there was a period – it's like you slept and then you woke up. It's like your life took a pause.

[(Muthama, male, university lecturer in hospitality management)]

In some encounters, the impacts of relational comparisons to their peers were amplified, especially if they were seen to present additional tensions or conflicts between those who worked abroad and those who stayed. This a common theme in studies of transcultural return migration (Anghel et al., 2019), but the key issue here is again how these intersected with occupational factors and valuation practices. For example:

I was trying to get a job back in [the hotel] and the head chef told me 'Mr [...], you see the boys you left as cooks, they are now executive chefs; are you going to work under them?' That was one challenge.

[(BobMa, male, chef)]

In specific situations such as this, transnational experiences were devalued and seen as a liability. Moreover, value was appraised in terms of occupational identity; in particular, how expectations regarding professional roles could shape an individual's ability to adapt and integrate into occupational groups. In BobMa's case, the hierarchical and highly interdependent character of chefs' occupational cultures, as identified in past studies (e.g. Cooper et al., 2017), are likely to have amplified the employer's concern regarding the negative value of his foreign experience. However, re-emphasising the indefinite nature of capacities, it is useful

to appreciate the potential for value to change, and thus to view valuation as an ongoing set of practices operating over an extended temporal frame.

Overall, it was a very good experience. I think I wouldn't be whom I am today, despite the fact that initially when you come back it seems like a disadvantage. Eventually it turns out to be an advantage, particularly in regard to attitude, if someone can just accept and stop worrying about what people would say, it actually turns out to be a serious advantage.

[(Muthama, male, university lecturer in hospitality management)]

This type of reflection reinforces the importance, in empirical terms, of appraising value longitudinally, and of contextualising valuation 'incidents' in migrant workers' broader careers.

**Conclusion**

Previous work has argued for the need to examine linkages between migration and knowledge transfer (Williams & Baláz, 2005, 2014), and researchers have stressed the importance of understanding how tacit knowledge and skills may be developed through transnational mobility (Baláz et al., 2021; Moroşanu et al., 2021). Moreover, in studying widely recognised interdependencies between migration and hospitality employment (Baum, 2012; Janta, Ladkin, et al., 2011; Joppe, 2012), a small body of work has called for research to comprehend how migrants develop resources through engaging in these domains of labour (Janta et al., 2012; Lugosi et al., 2016). In the context of these debates, this paper drew on insights from valuation studies (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Callon et al., 2002) to examine the experiences of Kenyan migrants who previously worked in the UK hospitality sector. The data showed how migrant workers exercised their agency in constructing and negotiating value, in particular moments, within the context of transnational mobility. The study's abstracted themes, as summarised in Fig. 1, thus help to conceptualise how value is constructed and negotiated through intersections of hospitality employment and transnational or transcultural migration.

The findings foregrounded the relational nature of value and valuation, as migrants articulated and evaluated, through interactions with others, the skills and resources they developed through sector-specific employment. Moreover, because valuation relied on shared frames of reference, assessing the value of international experience was complicated precisely because migrants' resources were developed and subsequently deployed across disparate cultural contexts. This highlights the value of analysing the implications of hospitality work in relation to transnational and transcultural mobility, because these influence how soft skills, tacit knowledge and life experiences are utilised, perceived and thus assessed.

At a theoretical level, we proposed the notion of 'indefinite capacities' to conceptualise the forms of value that are or can potentially be created. Invoking this term stresses that value is amorphous, taking on multiple, changing forms that are difficult to document or evidence, although they are perceived to have utility by those previously employed in the sector. As Baláz et al. (2021) and others argued more generally, tacit skills and knowledge do not necessarily exist as stable objects or devices, for example in the same way as educational certification, which is embedded in a wider institutionalised system qualifying its

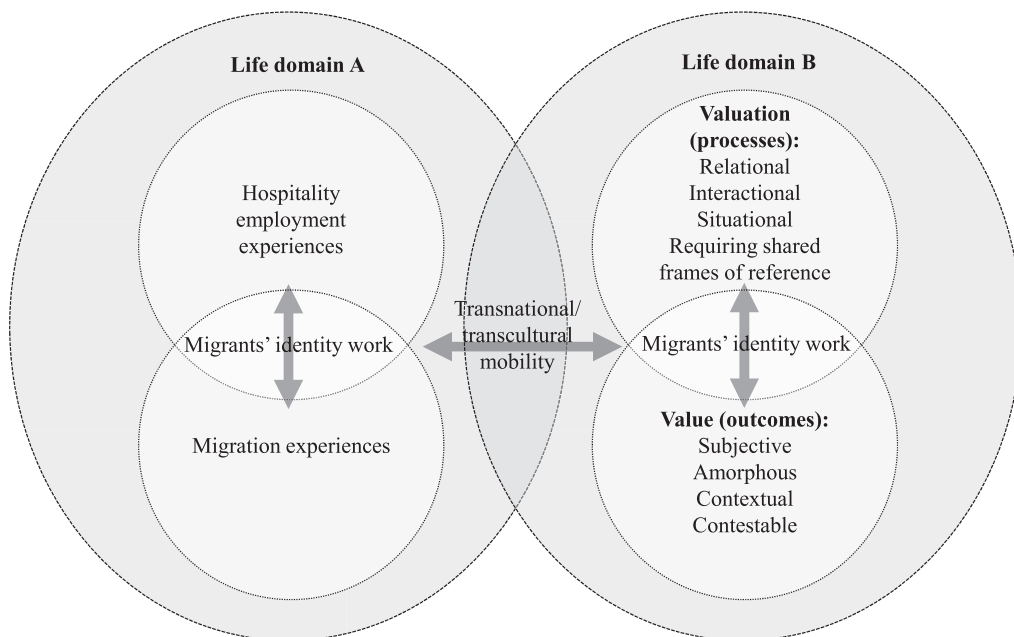


Fig. 1. Conceptualising intersections of hospitality employment, transnational/transcultural migration and value creation.

worth (Moroşanu et al., 2021; Williams, 2007; Williams & Baláž, 2014). Indefinite capacities remain open to contestation. Consequently, the value of resources developed through hospitality work may be embedded in and thus manifests through migrants' everyday practices in the context of their lives and careers. However, the value of these capacities may also become objectified through performative interactions, in specific situations as part of migrants' identity work. The paper has thus argued that, given its fluid nature, 'indefinite capacities' constantly undergo processes of valuation. Echoing previous studies of migrants' skills and experiences that did not focus on this sphere of work (Baláž et al., 2021; Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006; Williams, 2007), the findings of this study further stress the need to appreciate the contexts and processes through which value gained through hospitality employment abroad is recognised, performed, reified or even undermined in subsequent life domains. In this empirical context, the findings have shown how certain capacities could have domain-specific value, for instance in professional interactions, among those who recognised (and appreciated) its forms and substance. Importantly, value was negotiated through identity work, in domestic and professional domains, and value thus had the potential to change at and across different situations and diverse professional and non-professional contexts.

These findings have implications for future research. The current study focused on a relatively small sample of Kenyan migrants who worked in the UK. Expanding the sample to include a wider range of nationalities in terms of sending and receiving destinations could help to understand better the influence of nationality and culture in migrants' experiences and skills development. Considering other issues including gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and disability could also provide further insights on their impacts alone and in combination. Adopting a more systematic sampling approach to the types of jobs migrants occupied as well as the length of time spent in places and positions would enrich understanding of the influence of occupational, organisational, spatial and temporal factors. Diversifying the sample to include migrants who travelled via different migration channels, including legal and non-legal routes, would also help to understand intersections of bordering regimes, migration, employment experiences and skills acquisition.

Finally, this study also stresses the potential of adopting longitudinal, reflective and narrative methodologies in future research for understanding how 'indefinite capacities' are acquired and how they are valued across the life course. Narrative perspectives are particularly useful for capturing the disparate, amorphous forms that value may take alongside the dynamic, performative and interactive processes and experiences through which valuation operates. Utilising longitudinal, life-history approaches in future work could thus help to appreciate how valuation occurs at specific moments and across migrants' lives, to comprehend how and why value is potentially created or destroyed through hospitality labour.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Peter Lugosi:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Supervision. **Ann Ndiuini:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Project administration.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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