“One Improves Here Every Day”: The Occupational and Learning Journeys of “Lower-Skilled” European Migrants in the London Region*

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Abstract

This paper examines narratives of learning and occupational advancement amongst migrants employed in “low-skilled” jobs, based on in-depth interviews with secondary-educated East and South Europeans living in the London region. We show how many participants achieve varying degrees of professional gratification, progress and skills development within occupational sectors typically associated with unattractive conditions, limited benefits or opportunities to get ahead. Their narratives of achievement expand the relatively limited literature that challenges common perceptions of occupational mobility and professional development as the terrain of the “highly skilled”. Furthermore, we examine how migrants make sense of their work opportunities and success. We discuss two discourses, centred on “hard work” and “creativity” respectively, through which participants challenge and reconfigure traditional “high”-“low-skilled” divides. Our findings contribute to critiques of traditional understandings of migrant human capital and simplistic “high”-“low-skilled” distinctions in two ways: by documenting the less visible experiences of learning and career progress amongst European migrants who come with secondary education and enter “low-skilled” employment abroad, and by calling attention to subjective understandings of occupational mobility and the new symbolic boundaries around skills, broadly construed, that migrants redrew in their attempts to explain and evaluate career progress.
Introduction

Work is central to migration aspirations, and often tops the list of reasons why people move abroad. EU migrants in Britain are no exception, with 69 per cent arriving for work-related reasons in 2016 (Vargas-Silva 2017). Despite their unrestricted access to the labour market, significant numbers are concentrated in the “least skilled” occupations, and the most common industries employing EU migrants are retail, wholesale, and hospitality (Rienzo 2018). There is, undoubtedly, considerable stratification within the EU migrant category. If most studies have emphasised the disadvantaged labour market position of East Europeans from the “new” EU member states vis-a-vis their “old” European counterparts, one of the few analyses which disaggregates further confirms a “division of labour”, with West Europeans concentrating in the highest-ranked occupations, and East and South Europeans in bottom and intermediate ones respectively (Felbo-Kolding et al. 2018).

By focusing on secondary-educated East and South Europeans, more likely to work in “lower-skilled” jobs in Britain, we examine how these migrants fare occupationally, and the extent to which they establish fulfilling careers. As Hagan et al. (2011) observe, migrant workers with lower levels of education tend to be considered “low-skilled” and regarded as “trapped” or exploited in temporary, precarious, low-paid jobs, with limited opportunities for progression. Studies on occupational mobility tend to focus on “high-skilled” migrants\(^1\). Accounts of job satisfaction and professional development are also more common amongst this group (e.g. Cieslik 2011). Whereas high-skilled migrants have sometimes been shown to experience downward mobility and status loss, the reverse processes, whereby the less-skilled upgrade their skills, occupational, and social status, have received comparatively limited attention (Hagan et al. 2011, 2015).

This paper contributes to recent attempts to redress the balance and explore the less visible professional trajectories of the “lower-skilled”. We focus specifically on young EU
migrants in Britain, who typically completed secondary schooling and sometimes vocational training. Our research initially considered the conventional threshold for “high-skilled” as based on possession of tertiary-level educational qualifications, with “lower-skilled” or “lower-educated” corresponding to those educated below university level. In the analysis presented here, however, we problematise this education-skill equivalence, and view human capital and skills endowments as ongoing processes rather than fixed categories. We highlight the manifold skills, learning ventures, and career opportunities that feature in the accounts of secondary-educated European migrants employed in lower-skilled occupations; we additionally call attention to migrants’ own understanding and use of skills to draw new boundaries, as they evaluate and explain career success.

**Skills and occupational mobility in the context of migration**

Occupational mobility and career success are typically associated with “high-skilled” migrants, most often defined as possessing university education or “extensive experience in a given field” (Iredale 2000: 883). Although high-skilled migrants may encounter difficulties in transferring their skills and qualifications abroad, and take up jobs below their qualifications (Nowicka 2014; Parutis 2014), existing research indicates that once they develop language skills, knowledge and credentials specific to their place of settlement, they have easier access to higher occupations and earnings (Hagan et al. 2011: 152-153; Hagan et al. 2014: 78; Portes 1995: 23). By contrast, studies of “low-skilled” migration appear to leave little room for hope in terms of career advancement. As Hagan and colleagues note, migrants with lower levels of education, often depicted as “unskilled” or “low-skilled”, tend to be seen as largely confined to low-paid, precarious jobs, with difficult, exploitative conditions, limited benefits and progression opportunities (Hagan et al. 2011; Hagan et al. 2015). Whilst the challenges and
injustices affecting “low-skilled” workers are undoubtedly real and consequential, analyses that foreground them do not fully reflect all migrants’ experiences in these sectors.

Despite their drawbacks, precarious, low-paid jobs may offer certain benefits, depending on previous economic and employment circumstances, workplace relationships, recognition and other non-material features of work that affect individuals’ wellbeing (Monteith and Giesbert 2017). Furthermore, migrants may strategically use low-wage jobs to pursue other (non-economic) aims (Alberti 2014) and develop various skills that can help secure “good jobs” either abroad (Parutis 2014) or at home (Hagan et al. 2015; Williams and Baláž 2005). Yet, as Hagan and colleagues (2011) observe, occupational progress within lower-skilled sectors remains little explored; the lower-educated migrants, who typically (although not exclusively) populate them, are broadly depicted through the lens of precariousness and “blocked mobility”. Where present, skills development and occupational mobility opportunities tend to be related to ethnic networks and entrepreneurship, rather than mainstream occupational sectors (Hagan et al. 2011; Portes and Bach 1985).

Our analysis of EU migrant workers in Britain contributes to recent efforts to offer a more nuanced understanding of lower-educated migrants’ professional trajectories. In the US context, notable contributions belong to Hagan and colleagues, who challenge sharp distinctions between “high-” and “low-skilled” migrants and the predominantly “bleak” accounts of the latter’s work experiences (Hagan et al. 2011; Hagan et al. 2014; Hagan et al. 2015). Instead of seeing their occupational mobility stalled, the lower-educated Latino workers they studied, often mislabelled as “unskilled”, developed and mobilised multiple skills and strategies to “escape bad jobs” and advance their careers abroad or on returning home. In the UK too, several studies showed how migrants working in hospitality, domestic or other low-paid sectors could approach their jobs strategically to pursue other aims, develop skills to advance, and abandon, rather than tolerate, unfavourable conditions (Alberti 2014;
Parutis 2014; Williams and Baláž 2005). However, the European migrants in these studies are often highly educated or from specific, usually East European, countries.

We contribute to the relatively limited literature that highlights a much-neglected side of “low-skilled” employment by documenting experiences of career satisfaction, learning, and progress amongst secondary-educated migrants from six East and South European countries in and around London. We additionally problematise notions of skills by exposing migrants’ own perspectives on their learning and career success. Drawing on “boundary work” perspectives (Lamont 1992, 2000), we show how these offer further challenges to traditional understandings of skills, yet draw new symbolic divides around more generic personal skills.

Various scholars criticise tendencies in migration studies to draw too-sharp distinctions between “high” and “low-skilled” migrants, based on educational qualifications, language ability, income or occupation, reflecting traditional human capital measures (Hagan et al. 2014; Williams and Baláž 2005). This polarised view not only misses the many “in-between” categories of migrant workers (cf. Favell et al. 2006) but also projects a static and partial picture of skills, overlooking a whole range of cognitive, social and personal skills, for example, related to communication, teamwork, leadership, initiative, conduct or presentation, which may be embodied and hardly gauged from one’s education history, yet often valued by employers, and mobilised by migrants for career advancement (Hagan et al. 2014, 2015; Kurekova et al. 2013; McDowell et al. 2007; Newman 1999; Nowicka 2014; Williams and Baláž 2005). Evidence shows that many “unskilled” jobs actually require multiple skills, which may be enhanced and utilised in the pursuit of better opportunities (Newman 1999; Kurekova et al. 2013). Furthermore, rather than being an “elite” practice and done in specific environments, learning is, Williams (2006) argues, an ongoing process, which occurs across multiple domains of activity and types of migrants. Hagan et al. (2015) likewise show that
migrants gain skills in diverse settings beyond work or schooling throughout the lifecourse. Although human capital theory has long recognised that multiple “investments” in the individual (beyond schooling or formal training) bring economic returns (e.g. Becker 1962), the difficulty to measure them means they are often omitted from analyses (Williams 2006; Hagan et al. 2011; Hagan et al. 2015).

Reflecting these critiques, our analysis of lower-educated Europeans in Britain illustrates the wide and versatile nature of “skills”, from technical to social and personal ones (Hagan et al. 2014: 81), acquired within and beyond the workplace, as well as the learning potential of all migrants. In addition, it calls attention to how migrants’ own understanding and use of skills may redraw traditional distinctions and hierarchies.

“Old” and “new” European migrants’ work trajectories

The literature on intra-EU mobility has expanded considerably over the past decade, reflecting the growing importance of migration from the East European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, as well as the post-2008 “crisis-driven” migration from South Europe to more affluent and less severely affected regions. With its widely-spoken language, prestigious universities and buoyant labour-market opportunities, the UK, and particularly London, has figured as an important recipient of both “old” and “new” Europeans on the move (Lafleur et al. 2017; Recchi 2015). In 2017, the UK was the second major destination, with 3.6 million born in another EU country, surpassed only by Germany (4.8 million), and followed by France (2.2 million), Spain (1.9 million), and Italy (1.8 million) (Eurostat 2018). About a third of the UK’s EU population lives in London (Sturje 2018). Whilst Britain’s popularity as a destination has started to dwindle with the threat of “Brexit”, the already large numbers of Europeans there pose important questions about their labour market incorporation.
When examining “low-skilled” work experiences, studies on intra-EU movers have typically focused on migrants from the “new” member-states, which partly reflects their higher concentration in lower-skilled occupations, although they are often overqualified for them; by contrast, “old” EU movers are known to possess higher qualifications and be more successful overall in converting them into commensurate occupations abroad (Ciupijus 2011; D’Angelo and Kofman 2017; Recchi 2015; Johnston et al. 2015). Extant research on this latter group thus tends to capture the experience of highly educated youth (e.g. King et al. 2016; Bartolini et al. 2017; Favell 2008; Jendrissek 2016; Lafleur et al. 2017). Compared to their “new” (East European) counterparts, much less is known about “old” Europeans who come with lower levels of education and join the ranks of restaurant, cafe, hotel, construction or low-paid administration staff in various EU destinations. This is also the case in Britain, where there is extensive research on East European migrants filling lower-paid roles (e.g. Datta and Brickell 2009; Janta et al. 2011; McDowell et al. 2007; Vasey 2017), yet little on “old” EU migrants in similar positions (but see, for a quantitative analysis, Felbo-Kolding et al. 2018, and on Italians without university degrees, Varriale 2019).

Our paper also addresses this gap, focusing on young, secondary-educated migrants from six East and South European countries (Greece, Italy, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain), who enter lower-skilled occupations in and around London, and present intriguing commonalities in terms of migration and work trajectories, such as contentment with their work conditions, the positive turn their careers took in a short span of time, and chances for progression. Our analysis is guided by two questions: (1) what contributes to participants’ overall positive work experiences, and (2) how do they make sense of their career progress and success in lower-skilled work environments?

We first examine the factors shaping migrants’ widespread perception of “opportunities”, job satisfaction and prospects in Britain. This is not to neglect the difficulties
and exploitative conditions that many undoubtedly encountered, nor to “glamorize jobs which may involve drudgery, and routine tasks” (Williams 2006: 596), but to offer a more nuanced picture of “low-skilled” work, which attends, where relevant, to positive experiences and degrees of occupational attainment. We then turn to how those who advance occupationally interpret their career progress. Here, we discuss two discourses, centred on “hard work” and “creativity” respectively, which highlight the broad and varied nature of skills migrants invoke, develop, and use to advance occupationally, including generic ones connected with identifying and pursuing promising routes for upward mobility. We argue that, although different in emphasis, migrants’ discourses around skills and career progress question simplistic “high” versus “low-skilled” distinctions based on educational qualifications but simultaneously redraw boundaries around skills in ways that downplay the structural factors contributing to their “success”. Finally, we explore some of these less visible factors that underpin many participants’ career progress, and set them apart from other “low-skilled” migrants.

Methods

The paper is based on 37 interviews with secondary-educated European migrants from Greece (6), Italy (5), Latvia (9), Romania (6), Slovakia (5) and Spain (6), living in London (23) or nearby towns, i.e. Brighton and Oxford (14). We consider these part of the London region, which we define flexibly as the wider area including towns well connected to London through commuting and other regular links. The participants were recruited as part of two studies on intra-EU youth mobility, one focusing on crisis-driven migration from Greece, the other on a mix of nationalities. Both studies sampled three categories of movers: students, “lower-skilled” and “higher-skilled”, depending on whether they possessed university degrees or not, and covered similar topics, including migration motivations, work and non-
work experiences, transnational engagements, identity, and future plans. The participants were recruited through personal contacts, snowballing, and social media, and interviewed in their native language by bilingual researchers, who transcribed the interviews directly into English. We focus here on the “lower-skilled” sub-samples, from the East and South European countries mentioned above. These included 24 men and 13 women mostly in their 20s and 30s, averaging 29 years of age. Most participants (27) had spent more than four years in the UK. The rest were more recent arrivals. The vast majority completed secondary education, and several started university degrees at home but dropped out before migrating. In the UK, most worked in lower-skilled occupations in hospitality, retail, construction, or front-office jobs when the interviews were conducted (Autumn 2015-Spring 2016).

“You don’t need a degree to make it”: career opportunities and progress

Asked about their migration decision or experience, many participants enthusiastically stressed the plentiful opportunities to work, develop new skills, and build a career in London and around, irrespective of their education level. Dusan, a 38-year-old Slovak who worked as a welder, nicely captures this widely shared view: “This is a country that gives more opportunities to people… even me, with my [limited] education, I still have a chance to build something here”. Reflecting on his career progress, Stefano, an Italian manager of a fashion store, remarked that “not everyone can afford to study”, yet “for working in retail you don’t need a degree”. Even those who had not reached their aspirations and earned a modest salary felt optimistic about their career prospects, especially compared to those at home. For example, Adriana, a 27-year-old from Slovakia who was a waitress and “lived off tips”, worked “hard” on her career, hoping that one day she would secure employment in the media sector:
England has quite a lot of opportunities for people who want to change their lives. Even if you don’t have higher education... it doesn’t mean that I can’t achieve anything in life. It doesn’t apply in England. If you have skills and confidence, you can achieve anything you want… it’s like a little American dream.

Echoing Adriana’s optimism, Daniel, a recent migrant from Spain, who made burritos in a Mexican restaurant, thought there were “lots of opportunities to get promoted, lots of job opportunities” in Britain, and generally “no barriers for young people who wanted to come to study or work here”.

The refrain of “opportunities” in Britain was often seconded by positive workplace experiences, marked by skills development, growing income, employment stability and progress over time (also Moroşanu et al. 2019). Many aimed for managerial roles or starting a business. Stefano, who managed the clothing shop, described his professional life as a “bed of roses”, whereas for Dusan, the welder, life was “never better”. Monika, another Slovak who became team leader in a café, after changing several jobs, was “completely happy” with her current role, and felt she was constantly developing and rewarded for her efforts: “one improves here every day… when they see you are trying, then you get a better and better position, if you are good enough”.

These examples of positive work experiences, progress, and enthusiasm towards career opportunities stand in stark contrast with common accounts that describe “low-skilled” migrants as enduring difficult and demeaning conditions, exploitation, and “blocked mobility” (e.g. Vasey 2017, and, critically, Hagan et al. 2011). This is, of course, not to say that our participants were complete strangers to such experiences. Some expressed considerable frustration or disillusionment with the low pay, precarious contracts, stress or exploitation at work. Such negative aspects, however, were more common amongst very recent migrants, employed in elementary jobs, typically in hospitality and cleaning. The
longer-term migrants, who formed the majority of our participants (27 out of 37), and often started in similar jobs but progressed over time, usually portrayed their employment in dramatically different terms.

Where present, migrants’ contentment with less desirable jobs has long been explained in relation to economic and work conditions in the country of origin, including lower wages, limited job or professional development opportunities, exploitation or unfair treatment in the workplace. For example, Hagan et al. (2014) found that lower-educated Mexicans in the US may report job satisfaction even when conditions are exploitative, given the income or appreciation gained. Flexibility and language practice are other benefits of low-paid jobs migrants may invoke (Janta et al. 2012; Parutis 2014). Whilst these aspects clearly had relevance for our research, several additional factors emerged.

First, many were uplifted by the fast hiring and promotion process they or their acquaintances experienced in Britain. The ease and speed of finding a job, often within days of arrival, and then receiving a promotion, within months of being employed, stood out in many accounts, renewing migrants’ energies and motivation, in sharp contrast with the situation in their home countries, where these were much more strenuous, administratively complicated, if not impossible, ventures. A telling example is Marco, a 27-year-old Italian who had come to London on impulse, following his former girlfriend. He had little work experience and weak English skills but quickly found a bartender job, then switched to waiter and progressed steadily to supervisor, assistant manager, and finally general restaurant manager, all within five years. At present, Marco seemed quite satisfied with his salary, role, and supportive employer, who “pressured” him to move up, offered training, and introduced measures to protect managers’ time and limit excessive working hours. Similarly, it took Andrés from Spain three days to find a food stalls vendor job in Brighton. From “zero prospects” at home, his situation improved rapidly after coming to Britain: “I found a job in
three days, stayed with my friend and his girlfriend, and ten days later I had my own place”. Andrés had a “very good time” making crepes, doughnuts, and churros at the food stalls, and gradually started helping a friend with his business, where he later became a partner. Monika from Slovakia, who modestly described herself as a “simple person” when asked about skills, started in housekeeping, changed jobs after she had “had enough of cleaning”, finding work in a café and progressing “step by step”. After two years and a half, she was “already” team leader, and aspired to become a manager. Makis, a 31-year-old Greek pastry chef, experienced a similarly rapid progress:

I have been here for one and a half years, and I have already changed two jobs and I am now moving to the third one, each time with a higher salary. My English is getting better, I study a lot… I have learned so many things. 

Such stories are not unique to our research. Studying Polish and Lithuanian migrants in Britain, although mostly university-educated, Parutis (2014) provides analogous examples of career advancement and promotion, particularly in the hospitality sector, from entry-level to management roles (also Janta et al. 2011). Datta and Brickell (2009) note how Polish construction workers in London gradually moved from “unskilled labourer” to more skilled jobs, such as carpenter, bricklayer or decorator. And previous research on Romanians in Britain provides examples of career success amongst secondary-educated migrants, alongside tertiary-educated ones (Moroşanu and Fox 2013).

Second, migrants’ perception of opportunities and career satisfaction needs to be related to the broad array of training courses provided by employers or pursued independently outside work (see also Cieslik 2011: 1374), which created space for learning and occupational mobility. Many interviewees proudly enumerated the various certificates, diplomas or licenses they had accumulated in this way, enhancing their professional competences and reputation. These covered fields as diverse as cooking, business
management, accountancy, interior design, and constituted, for some, alternative pathways to occupational mobility, compared to traditional routes via higher education. Lenka, a 28-year-old from Slovakia, who worked as a receptionist in student accommodation, praised the training her employer offered, claiming: “when you leave the course you feel like, ‘wow, I can do anything. I have learned a lot’”. She aspired to build a career in real estate, and had little interest in pursuing higher education, preferring instead shorter courses, to gain skills directly relevant for her field of work:

I don’t want to study at university anymore. I’d like to focus more on the courses that would help me with my future career. Like some that are focused more on sales, on real estate… to get into it more. [...] When you get a new job, they usually train you… and I really appreciate this.

Many others commended their employers for encouraging training, and interpreted this as a sign of appreciation and concern about their professional development. Dusan, for example, praised his company for funding his current and previous training: “It’s a good company. They invest in people a lot. I’m satisfied there”. This echoes broader research on perceptions of “good work”, shaped not only by economic returns but also meaningful activities, learning opportunities, respect, recognition and other aspects connected to individuals’ wellbeing (Monteith and Giesbert 2017). Such features were prominent in our participants’ perception of opportunities but also positive accounts more generally, alongside actual earnings (see also Parutis 2014). Adriana, who was team leader in a café and aspired to become an events organiser, emphasises how stimulated she felt at work: “when they see you are good, you get opportunities for professional development, and that motivates you”. She didn’t see herself “studying at any school” but emphasised her continuous learning: “Here you learn every day. You improve the language… it’s not school but it’s still learning”.

13
The continuous learning Adriana refers to also unfolded *informally* in the broader domain of social and personal skills, beyond technical job-specific knowledge and formal training (see also Datta and Brickell 2009). The words of Ines, a Spanish fitness instructor, reinforce this point, highlighting the skills gained on the job, from collaboration to confidence and professional conduct:

In my job, I am learning every day… what I have learned here is to value myself as an employee, to know my rights, I have also learned to work in a team… I have learned to work in a more professional way…

Andrés similarly indicated how working for his partner’s business helped him become more independent, confident, and responsible, whereas Kostas felt his shift manager role in a coffee shop chain taught him the “ropes” of this kind of work. Thus, migrants accumulated manifold skills through training, employment or general socialisation abroad, illustrating the continuous and varied nature of learning, outside traditional educational contexts (Williams 2006; Hagan et al. 2014).

**Making sense of career success**

To counter the generally negative picture of “low-skilled” migrants’ work experience, a number of studies have highlighted migrants’ agency in managing low-paid employment and advancing their careers, from transferring skills from home to developing new ones abroad, chasing better jobs or entering entrepreneurship (e.g. Alberti 2014; Hagan et al. 2015; Parutis 2014). But how do those who achieve occupational mobility make sense of career progress and success? In this section, we concentrate on two discourses around career advancement articulated by our participants: first and most widespread, one centred on “hard work”, seen to guarantee career progress in a perceived meritocratic system; and second, one that invokes personal skills to differentiate those who succeed occupationally from those who remain
“stuck”, including articulations of creativity, courage, and ambition. Inspired by Lamont’s (1992) work on “symbolic boundaries”, i.e. how people evaluate their worth vis-à-vis others, and the criteria they use to draw such distinctions, we show how both discourses redraw skills-based divisions, shifting the boundary line between “high” and “low-skilled” grounded in educational attainment to a symbolic one, between those claiming a strong work ethic and creative generic skills versus those deemed to lack these, and disparaged for their conduct and failure to succeed.

“I’m trying to learn as much as possible”: “hard work” and skills development

Narratives of “hard work” are a commonplace in migration studies. Migrants are often praised by employers for their strong work ethic and in turn are keen to present themselves as “hard workers”. Our participants similarly underlined how they worked “very hard”, “non-stop”, “like crazy”, stressing the rewards enjoyed by those who “want to work”. For example, Valentin, a 31-year old Romanian, saw his career spiral up from a driver position to luxury car salesman, with a generous bonus, as a consequence of hard work: “In this country, if you work hard, you have results. If you want to get somewhere, you can really get there” (Moroşanu et al. 2019: 1562).

Participants’ “hard work” went beyond the constant effort and dedication put into performing their day-to-day job, mirrored by references to the excessive hours worked, intensive work rhythm and tiring physical demands. Another face of “hard work” was manifest in eager investment in skills development, seen as vital for career advancement. Reflecting on what she would need to fulfil her plans, Lenka illustrates this point well:

Work hard. It’s all about having to work a lot. I don’t see any other way. You need to work non-stop, non-stop. It should then reflect in your life when you get older... Yes, education, to constantly move forward... I’d like to learn another language…
This theme of “learning” runs through many other interviews. Ines emphasised that “in my job I am learning everyday”. Monika was also “learning slowly but steadily” at work, motivated by her growing understanding of her company’s organisation and financial arrangements, as well as English proficiency. As discussed earlier, aside from workplace learning, the numerous training courses pursued were regarded as an important boost for self-development and career progress. Valentin, initially sceptical about the courses his company provided, came to appreciate them for enabling him to relate to and understand his clients’ “psychology” better. Some studied independently to enhance their skills. Makis, the Greek pastry chef, spoke passionately about new trends in cake decoration and presentation styles, and the importance of constantly “renew[ing] and update[ing] [his] knowledge”: “I really want to learn things about my work”.

“Hard work” in this double sense of job performance and skills development was thus one of the major ways in which migrants made sense of their career success. Indeed, many believed it was “impossible not to achieve”, if one worked hard, in a perceived meritocratic system (Fox et al. 2015; Jendrissek 2016; Lopez Rodríguez 2010; Moroşanu et al. 2019). Although some reported negative experiences related to ethnic or migrant origin, the broad consensus was that this did not impede career progress (Moroşanu and Fox 2013; Fox et al. 2015; but see Antonucci and Varriale forthcoming, on non-white EU migrants). Valentin was explicit about this, pointing to his remarkable performance in car sales despite his weaker language skills and migrant background: “If you work, you have results; [the English] are not racists”. Stefano, the Italian fashion store manager, similarly mentioned the successful careers many migrants established, regardless of migrant origin or educational level:

Here I see all the migrants, all the foreigners, they all work! We all work. And also, we have good jobs, we can be proud of ourselves… The majority of us... Look at my
company, it’s French, there are 22 shops, and I think that there are... three English managers. All the others are foreigners.

To dispel any doubt that this may be an exception, Stefano also named a friend, who started as shop assistant in a high-end fashion store and became an area manager in five years: “[He is] French, so… If you want, you can”. It was not only ethnic or migrant background but also other aspects, such as career track or age, which were perceived as irrelevant. For Ines, not having a stable career in your thirties was impossible to rectify in Spain, where one was considered “old” and “without experience”. In contrast, age did not pose barriers in Britain for those keen to work or retrain. This is, of course, not to discount migrants’ experiences of discrimination or exploitation, but to reveal the positive spin many gave to their demanding, long-hours jobs, often against their pre-migration experience. Their “hard work” narratives intriguingly stressed achievement, bearing little recognition that this may involve and even enhance exploitation, as revealed in research on employers’ perspectives (MacKenzie and Forde 2009).

Whilst seeing occupational mobility through the lens of “hard work” in a perceived meritocratic system enabled migrants to articulate a positive work identity, this discourse often relied on implicit or explicit distinctions between those who “wanted to work” and those perceived as less industrious, disengaged, or even dishonest (see Lopez Rodriguez 2010). The line was sometimes drawn between migrants and natives. “Britain was built”, according to Valentin, “with the sweat and work of migrants”. Without them, “London’s economy would collapse”, another participant warned. Compared to the effort, care, and commitment shown by migrants, natives were disparagingly described as having a poorer work ethic. Marco, the restaurant manager, provides a good illustration of this contrast:

I always work 15-16 hours more [per week] than I get paid for… An English manager, if he works from 8 to 5, he works from 8 to 5. He is at the restaurant at 8
and leaves at 5, no matter what. Even if the restaurant is on fire. Instead, I go there at 8.30 and I stay there until 9 because I don’t want the waiters to be too stressed or because there is more work than we had thought.

Others compared themselves favourably with other migrants (including coethnics), whom they presented as lazy or welfare-dependant, borrowing from wider “cultural repertoires” (cf. Lamont 1992) circulating in Britain that stigmatise these groups. Such discourses are not new, as demonstrated by research on East Europeans in Britain (Datta and Brickell 2009; Fox et al. 2015; Lopez Rodriguez 2010; Moroşanu 2016; Nowicka 2014; Vasey 2017) but also elsewhere. In rural Arkansas, for example, Hallett (2012) similarly draws on Lamont to show how Salvadoran migrants, confronted with the stigma of “illegality”, claim belonging by recourse to work ethic, drawing boundaries between “hard-working” migrants and “poor Whites”, disparaged for their conduct, in ways that reinforce neoliberal values. What interests us here is how such discourses blur traditional distinctions between high- and low-skilled migrants, redrawing symbolic boundaries around “hard work” but obscuring the structural factors that may impede occupational mobility.

“Creative” work

If career progress is often attributed to hard work and professional development, in some cases, a distinct set of skills was invoked to explain career advancement, more generic and personal in nature (see also Datta and Brickell 2009; Nowicka 2014). These included the creativity needed to identify promising career pathways, the ability to avoid or escape employment likely to impede mobility, and the ambition to “become someone”, condemning those who “stagnate” in jobs with limited prospects.

The ability to avoid the peril of “dead-end” or potentially exploitative jobs was evident, for example, in negative appraisals of the “ethnic economy” and coethnics who took
this route, working in Italian, Spanish or Greek businesses, associated with undesirable conditions and low pay. Ines, the 32-year old Spaniard, was one of the most outspoken critics of “ethnic economy” or “migrant” jobs, blaming those who remain “stuck” in low-paid employment for lacking initiative and imagination. Although starting in similar jobs, she was able to move up, once she improved her knowledge of the country, changing careers and becoming a fitness instructor, which reflected her passion for sport. Her career advancement is thus linked to a different set of skills than those specific to particular jobs, namely, the creativity and courage to look beyond conventional routes and identify occupations with better opportunities for progression, drawing on one’s talents and interests.

It was relatively easy to find a job in London, probably a badly paid job but something that enables you to survive while you start realising how things work in this country, how things are done, where to look for things… because there are people who stay in these “shit” jobs… and suffer there but they get stuck and don’t see further than the routine of going to work and then going home to sleep… I wanted to move forward, and I had this type of job too but only at the beginning, while I was learning the language and getting used to how things work here… My job of fitness instructor… was not difficult to find… but it’s a job that Spanish people don’t usually think about…

Other migrants echoed Ines’s disapproval of “conformist” or “flat” work trajectories, stressing instead their “ambition”, “vision” or “mission”, which animated their efforts to advance. Alex, a Romanian who worked in emergency interventions and proudly enumerated his multiple skills and qualifications, derided other Romanian migrants who were “still labourers” after twenty years in Britain, blaming their occupational immobility on “laziness” and lack of ambition to “strive for something better”. Likewise, Valentin, who built his successful career in car sales in less than two years, expressed puzzlement at his brother’s
limited progress, despite his longer residence in Britain: “He did not have so much ambition, as much ambition as I had, I don’t know why… I can’t really explain why he stayed in the same place for two years”.

Others did not avoid low-paid employment altogether but approached it strategically, whilst pursuing specific career plans (Alberti 2014; Janta et al. 2011; Parutis 2014). Kostas, for example, undertook voluntary work in children’s education, his desired field, in a local community centre in London, whilst earning an income as a shift worker in a coffee shop. Despite the low wage, he enjoyed the flexibility, and initially declined a promotion offer, to avoid additional responsibilities (see also Alberti 2014: 873). Other migrants boasted an entrepreneurial spirit, sometimes reflecting pre-migration experience, putting their “hard work” in London in the service of accumulating the capital needed to implement their business projects, such as “buy-to-let” property investments, envisaged to bring about more rewarding, and sometimes more relaxed, future lives.

Like the previous discourse centred on “hard work” and learning, such examples of working creatively or strategically to improve one’s career prospects offer further emic challenges to rigid distinctions between high- and low-skilled workers. Furthermore, by depicting their career trajectories in this way, these migrants drew a new, troubling divide around individualised creativity and ambition, in contrast to the perceived conformism or inertia of others, allegedly accounting for limited achievements. As in the case of “hard work”, career stagnation becomes a personal failure associated, in a manner reminiscent of “neoliberal scripts of the self”, with a supposed lack of skills, “moral and intellectual deficiencies” (Lamont 2018: 424; see also Hallett 2012). Yet, as Portes recalls, migrants are not “simply […] individuals who come clutching a bundle of personal skills, but […] members of groups and participants in broader social structures that affect in multiple ways their economic mobility” (1995: 24). Following analyses of structural factors that help or
hinder occupational mobility (Alberti 2014: 873-874; Hagan et al. 2014: 90; Newman 1999: 150-185), we next illustrate what contributed to participants’ positive labour market experiences, yet remained hidden in their interpretations of success, centred on individual effort, skills or qualities. Our discussion is not exhaustive but covers some key differences that emerged when comparing migrants’ trajectories.

The many freedoms of young European movers

Our participants’ career progress and satisfaction were undoubtedly aided by Britain’s, and especially London’s, dynamic labour market, known to draw heavily on migrant labour at both ends of the occupational hierarchy (Datta et al. 2007: 409-410). Limited job availability may play a critical role in locking migrants in “dead-end” employment, as Vasey (2017) showed in the case of East Europeans in rural South-West England. In addition, although not possessing higher education, our participants’ age, legal status, socio-economic background and networks created significant room for manoeuvre and opportunities in the labour market. Whereas Vasey (2017) showed how social ties can place and keep migrants in low-skilled work, our data suggests, like Alberti (2014), that they may provide support to advance or avoid it.

First, as widely agreed (Alberti 2014; Parutis 2014; Ciupijus 2011), the EU’s freedom of movement considerably eased participants’ migration and work-related pursuits. In contrast to migrants who navigate complex immigration systems or the predicaments of undocumented status (e.g. Hagan et al. 2014: 90), our interviewees often took a swift, spontaneous decision to “pack and go”, in the words of Adriana, the Slovak who worked as a waitress, or left “fast and light”, according to Pablo, a Spanish sous-chef, following friends or family established abroad. Furthermore, fast was not only the process of finding but also changing jobs for migrants unconstrained by visa or work-permit conditions, which may
create dependence on employers and turn even those in high-status professions into precariously, easily exploitable migrants (Anderson 2010). Rather than stagnating in undesirable jobs with no horizons, our participants could leave unpleasant conditions or seek better opportunities (Alberti 2014; Parutis 2014; Ciupijus 2011). A counter-example, which reinforces this point, is Inga from Latvia, one of the few who arrived in Britain before their country joined the EU or when work restrictions were in place. For a (then) undocumented migrant worker like Inga, finding a job was “not fast” and opportunities limited. The sandwich-packing job she managed to secure was poorly paid, “difficult and humiliating”, yet “there was no other choice”, she explained, highlighting the difficulty to change one’s circumstances. In marked contrast to Inga’s experience, most participants could experiment with different jobs and scout better opportunities. For example, Dusan from Slovakia, who worked as a welder, did not take the “first offer” but could afford to wait for a “good job”.

Dusan’s ability to locate desirable jobs was not only aided by his European citizenship but also other resources, which crucially shaped experiences of successful mobility. With a relatively comfortable situation at home, he came to Britain with much-needed skills and financial capital to avoid “dead-end” jobs. Although many participants were fleeing economic precarity or spells of unemployment in their home countries, they often turned to family support, even if modest, to temporarily shun unattractive work, whilst searching for better opportunities. A counter-example is Vlad, a Romanian who had “no one” in London or at home, and endured considerable material difficulties both before and after migration. Despite experiencing some progress abroad, from car washing to kitchen porter and then chef, he seemed discouraged about his prospects in London, where he was just getting by, lived alone, and worried about finance and care following a surgery he needed.

Third, most participants benefited from the time and space to experiment and identify better career opportunities in another sense too. Being young without dependants allowed
considerable flexibility in the labour market (Janta et al. 2011: 1013; Parutis 2014: 47). Ernests from Latvia could switch from full-time to part-time hotel work to pursue an accountancy course, as well as entrepreneurial activities, which brought him greater satisfaction but a fluctuating income. The constraints imposed by dependants are evident in another Latvian’s case, Armins, one of the few participants who had children and needed a steady income. “When a child is born”, Armins warned, “you can no longer rely on kefir and brown bread” (also Parutis 2014: 47-48). The majority, however, were more likely to receive than send money to families at home.

Apart from material support, many migrants enjoyed the psychological comfort provided by the possibility to return home if their migration project failed. Andrés memorably referred to the “bed” and “plate of food” always waiting back home. Marco, the Italian restaurant manager, similarly hinted at the therapeutic function of the return prospect, if things went wrong: “In the back of my head, I think, I can go back home whenever I want, whenever I get sick of this”. Monika too highlights the confidence boost received from her parents, who reassured her before leaving: “If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work… you can always come back”. Some exercised their “transnational exit power” (Alberti 2014), and headed back home or elsewhere in Europe, when they grew dissatisfied with their life abroad. Although return or re-migration may not be straightforward in practice, the idea of moving on, in the context of geographic proximity, free movement and the flexibility of youth, lifted some of the pressure, and positively shaped migrants’ approach to work and career development, in conjunction with other factors discussed.
Conclusion

This paper has shown how young, secondary-educated European migrants in the London region can achieve various degrees of professional gratification, progress, and human capital gains within occupational sectors often associated with unattractive conditions and limited horizons (Hagan et al. 2011, 2014). Their experiences challenge widespread assumptions about occupational mobility and career development as the terrain of “high-skilled” migrants. Admittedly, many studies show that “high-skilled” migrants face barriers in transferring their skills and qualifications abroad, and experience downward mobility, at least temporarily. Yet, as Hagan and colleagues indicate, the reverse processes, whereby the “lower-skilled” develop skills and advance their careers post-migration, have been largely overlooked. Our analysis contributes to the relatively limited literature in this area, which tends to focus on the US context (e.g. Hagan et al. 2011, 2014, 2015) or provide scattered examples of successful migrants in studies of specific national groups, with mixed education levels or working in specific occupations in Britain (e.g. Moroşanu and Fox 2013; Janta et al. 2011; Parutis 2014). We showed how the secondary-educated European migrants we interviewed, employed in Britain’s retail, hospitality, construction or related sectors, often experienced opportunities to learn and “become someone”, aspects rarely captured in accounts that emphasise “low-skilled” migrant workers’ predicaments and stagnation. Compared to the above-cited studies that tend to analyse skills development and strategies to achieve upward mobility, we additionally examined how migrants made sense of their work opportunities and progress.

Our analysis of the diverse range of skills, learning, and career progress amongst secondary-educated European migrants who enter “low-skilled” employment adds to critical perspectives on how skills and human capital are conceptualised in migration contexts (Datta and Brickell 2009; Hagan et al. 2014; Hagan et al. 2015; Nowicka 2014; Williams 2006). The findings echoe the critiques above, which call for a wide and versatile view of human capital
that attends to a variety of skills and learning environments. In addition, they draw attention to migrants’ own perspectives on their (and others’) knowledge and competences. Finally, the paper broadens our understanding of intra-EU mobility and helps bridge the “old”-”new” EU migrant divide, by documenting important similarities amongst South and East Europeans working in lower-skilled sectors, typically associated with the latter’s experience.

We suggested that the fast hiring and promotion process, together with the multiple training incentives on and off the job, crucially shaped migrants’ perception of “opportunities”, a prominent theme in our interviews, and the motivation to develop new skills and advance occupationally. As Williams (2006) recalls, learning and career opportunities in global cities are not restricted to elite movers, and, in our case, they constituted a strong counterpoint to participants’ experiences and prospects in their place of origin. Rather than feeling “trapped” in difficult and exploitative employment, many did not see their education level as impeding occupational mobility, and felt motivated to achieve it. This is not to ignore migrants’ manifold difficulties and disadvantages in the labour market but to nuance broad-brush representations of lower-educated migrants as powerless and limited to unattractive employment (see also Alberti 2014; Hagan et al. 2015). In fact, some of our participants indicated they had accomplished remarkable progress, blurring the well-entrenched “high”-”low-skilled” migrant divide, based on educational qualifications, that prevails in academic and policy debates (see, critically, Hagan et al. 2014; Nowicka 2014; Williams 2006). Such narratives of achievement deserve greater attention, although we recognise, first, that migrants’ optimism can coexist with exploitative practices, and employers’ appreciation of their “work ethic” may actually enhance these; second, it may also decline over time, with obstacles to further progression posed by higher qualification requirements, or changing attitudes and aspirations, known to become closer to natives’ with longer residence abroad (MacKenzie and Forde 2009).
Furthermore, participants’ discourses around career success redrew boundaries around skills in a different, disquieting way. Regardless of nationality, and perhaps reflecting a wider neoliberal ethos, many young Europeans depicted career progress as an outcome of “hard work”, in terms of work performance and self-development (“work on oneself”), and envisaged no barriers to those who maintained a strong focus on work and learning, disparaging those perceived as less committed or industrious. Some additionally associated career advancement with distinct personal skills, including creativity and ambition to identify and pursue promising routes for progression, in contrast to the perceived conformism or limited ambition of others, blamed for remaining “stuck” in “migrant” or “ethnic economy” jobs. Both discourses convey an individualistic take on career progress (“it’s about you, you make the impossible possible”) in a “fair” system which allegedly rewards those who “really want to work”, regardless of ethnicity, age or related factors. If other studies interpret migrants’ emphasis on work ethic, opportunities and merit-based careers in relation to group-specific features (e.g. Datta and Brickell 2009; Jendrissek 2016; Lopez Rodriguez 2010), our mixed sample showed considerable convergence amongst East and South Europeans’ views and vocabularies. Whilst migrants’ evaluations of career journeys challenged the “college-degree divide” (Lamont 2000), they tended to downplay the privileges of youth, Europeanness, family backing or other resources, even if modest, that likely helped them along, allowing them to move “fast and light”, experiment with various jobs or retrain, and advance professionally abroad (Alberti 2014). Compared to studies that document the actual skills and strategies through which the less educated work their way up (e.g. Hagan et al. 2015; Parutis 2014), our contribution to migration and human capital research thus also involved addressing the subjective understandings of occupational mobility and symbolic boundaries around skills, broadly conceived, that migrants inevitably redrew in the process.
As we have seen, migrants’ efforts to establish their worth tended to remain individualistic in nature and reflect neoliberal agendas in their take on socio-economic success (Lamont 2018). Nonetheless, such narratives of achievement offer important avenues for establishing a positive identity, and sound a more general call for expanding notions of “worthy lives” beyond the “top half of the income ladder”, as Lamont suggests (2018: 432), in a context where “low-skilled” migrants are profoundly devalued. Intentions to privilege high-earning “skilled” migrants in Britain’s post-Brexit immigration system are a recent reminder of this devaluation and enduring skill hierarchies. Hagan and colleagues (2014) criticise similar preferences in US immigration policies, which fail to acknowledge many migrants’ abilities and contributions. Foregrounding European migrants’ trajectories and perspectives hopes to bring further nuance and challenges to problematic high-low skilled distinctions.

Notes
1. We put phrases like “least skilled”, “low-skilled”, and “high-skilled” in quotation marks to indicate that, despite their common usage, these are problematic labels. Above all, we contest the dichotomy between “high” and “low” skill. This problematisation will be prominent throughout the paper.

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