

A theory of skilled migrant organisational attachment

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986), 'skill-discounting' (Reitz, 2001), and job embeddedness theory (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski & Erez, 2001), we argue that the migrant desire to reduce the skill discount (applied by recruiters and employers) prompts migrant employees to view each job, not just as a source of income, but as an opportunity to develop skills (i.e. social capital) to obtain a another job that make *better* use of their pre-arrival capabilities. Thus, whereas for non-migrant employees each job is more likely to be a destination in itself, for the migrant employee facing skill discounting each job is an interim step in the journey towards the elimination of the skill discount. As a result, migrants and non-migrants are likely to have different linkage, fit and sacrifice on-the-job embeddedness. This paper sketches a theory which argues that the effects of job embeddedness are contingent on migration status.

Keywords: embeddedness, migrants, skill discounting, retention

In global terms, immigration into Australia has positive effects on our economy, with skilled migrants making a positive overall contribution to Australia's productivity (Productivity Commission, 2006). Successful migration, that is, better labour market outcomes are realised when, over time, "the differences [between the Australian-born and migrants] become smaller" (Productivity Commission, 2006: xxii). However what is missing from this classic labour market approach is a way of understanding how the process of career development in migrants occurs. We draw on Bourdieu's (1986) notions of field, habitus, and capital (e.g. social capital) to expand the theories of job-embeddedness (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski & Erez, 2001) and skill-discounting (Reitz, 2001), as we sketch out a theory on why non-migrants and non-sponsored skilled migrants might have different job embeddedness attachments to their job. In this theory, a key objective for the migrant is to obtain full recognition for their pre-arrival knowledge, skills and expertise in a suitable job.

On arrival in a new country, non-sponsored migrants may experience 'skill discounting,' where recruiters and managers evaluate the skills of migrants as 'worse than those of locals, even if they are factually of the same quality' (Dietz, Joshi, Esses, Hamilton & Gabarrot, 2015, p. 1319). As part of the migrant's acculturation strategy (Berry, 2005) through integration and assimilation (Winterheller & Hirt, 2017), we assume that migrant organisational attachment and job search behaviour is driven by a desire to reduce the skill discount. Here the motive force is the wish to find a

suitable job - with all the implications for family security, income and stability, as well as self-respect, after a time of great upheaval and transition (See, for example, La Barbera, 2015) - that better utilises the migrant employee's self-perceived, pre-migration expertise and status. Although a job has to meet the need for income (Creese & Wiebe, 2010), each job taken is a platform for the search for a better job that make better use of the employee's capabilities until the skill discount has become negligible (Janta, Ladkin, Brown, & Lugosi, 2011; Tian, Wang, & Chia, 2016).¹

As will be seen later in this paper, there is clear evidence that migrants experience substantial skill-discounting and make substantial efforts to obtain suitable employment (Fang, Novicevic & Zikic, 2009). However, as noted by Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin and Suutari (2012) and Winterheller & Hirt (2017), there is little research on the career development of migrants. This paper looks at one specific issue: Do migrants, with their needs for economic and personal stability, and facing skill-discounting, connect their employers in the same way as non-migrants? In the model proposed by this paper, when viewed from the perspective of Bourdieu's (1986) framework, the migrant uses their employment to develop their social, cultural and symbolic capital, to attain a better match with the habitus of their chosen field (Erel, 2010). To achieve this alignment, the migrant employee can be expected to attach to their employer in different ways than non-migrants. This paper will draw on the on-the-job embeddedness components of job embeddedness theory (JET, Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski & Erez, 2001) to highlight the differences in employee attachment between migrant and non-migrant attachment. We assume that the behaviour of non-migrants will follow that explained by the JET literature, and predict that while a skill discount exists, migrant employees will operate in a different way to the manner predicted by the classic embeddedness theory, with on-the-job links, fit and sacrifice having different practical meanings for migrant job seekers.

This paper makes at least two contributions. First, despite a large literature looking at the processes of skill discounting, relatively little is understood about how migrants settle into the workforce in their adopted country (Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin, & Suutari, 2012; Winterheller & Hirt,

¹ It is true that not every migrant will seek to remove the skill discount. Two examples of this are when a migrant prioritises their family duties and does not seek a job that fully utilises their skills; or when the migrant *settles* for a job that does not fully utilises their skills but provides sufficient satisfaction. Fuller and Martin (2012) identifies six different pathways of migrants into (and out of) the labour market, and Al Ariss (2010) suggests four 'modes of engagement.'

2017). This paper provides a framework for how migrant employees might approach their employment. Second, this paper proposes that the effects of embeddedness on employee outcomes and behaviours may be distinctly different between groups of employees - in this case between migrants and non-migrants, and provides a theoretical case for this difference.

This paper will first introduce the salient points of skill discounting and JET before proposing the differing behaviours of non-migrants and migrants. However, before we can discuss this, we need to introduce Bourdieu's notion of field, habitus, and several types of capital.

THE VARIOUS TYPES OF CAPITAL

The argument of this paper will be presented using several concepts first proposed by Bourdieu (1986): field, habitus and economic, social and cultural capital (Navarro, 2006; Mayrhofer et al. 2004). In the case of this paper, a *field* is the socially-constructed terrain in which jobs exist - the labour market made up of jobs vacancies created and filled, the employers who create and fill these vacancies, and the (potential) employees who could fill these vacancies, and carry out the job responsibilities inherent in these vacancies. Each field has its own (or several) *habitus*, the socially accepted cultural norms, preferences and dispositions possessed by within the field, especially that version(s) of those making decisions about hiring and firing, promoting and rewarding employees. Habitus reflects the unconscious assumptions and rules of the game as well as performance standards within the relevant field. Those job seekers who possess a better sense of the prevailing habitus, and possess the attributes privileged within the habitus are more likely to attain job search success than those with a weaker grasp.

Every job seeker and employee possesses some measure of each of these capitals. *Economic capital* relates to money and wealth. This form of capital can confer authority and influence in its own right, but can facilitate a potential employee cultivating social capital and cultural capital. *Social capital* relates to the social networks that the individual is able to access. Those with greater social capital are more likely to find out about jobs and career development opportunities, have people speak on their behalf and assist their passage into better employment opportunities than people with less social capital. *Cultural capital* relates, first, to the institutionalised form, of skills, knowledge and attributes that the employee possesses that are of potential interest to an employer, such as licenses to

practice, degrees and titles. It relates to the *embodiment* of capital in language, accent and body language (Erel, 2010); and the *enactment* of those capital (such as books, articles, paintings). Al Ariss and Syed (2011) draw on Özbilgin and Tatli (2005) and supplement these forms of capital with *symbolic capital*. This form of capital arises when economic, social and cultural capital give rise to signals of the inherent merit and value of the bearer.

THE SKILL DISCOUNTING OF MIGRANT KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND EXPERTISE

Migrants experience 'skill discounting' when the skills, knowledge and expertise acquired before arrival in the host country is devalued by employers during the employee life cycle - such as during recruitment, in performance review, task assignment or promotion (Elrick, 2016) - or in the case of highly regulated professions such as law, engineering and medicine, through formal accreditation and skill recognition processes (Reitz, 2001). For example, studies of eastern European migrants found the majority of migrants into European Union countries experienced under-utilisation of their pre-migration skills, regardless of language skills (Danzer & Dietz, 2014; Felker, 2011). Similar results were found in Canadian immigrant populations, with immigrant credentials were considerably undervalued compared to the equivalent qualifications held by native-born Canadians (Anisef, Sweet & Frempong, 2003; Li, 2002). The skill discount literature has found that (i) female migrants and (ii) migrants from visible minority groups were further undervalued (See, for example, Ireland, 2005; Webb, 2015). Importantly to our theory, studies across several countries have found this initial discounting between immigrants and native-born is reduced over time. For example, the typical skill discount of about 30% of wages fell to an average of 3% five years later in both Canada (Alboim et al, 2005) and Australia (Mahuteau & Junankar, 2008). Likewise, Brenzel and Reichelt (2017) examined German longitudinal data and found that the migrant and non-migrant wages gap erodes over time if migrants are free to move to new jobs. These studies show that the initial differences do indeed decrease over time.

Of the factors leading to skill discounting (Alboim, Finnie, and Meng, 2005; Fosslund, 2013; Syed, 2008), several are beyond the control of the migrant job seeker. The various forms of discrimination experienced by migrants - potentially racial, ethnic and religious - is typically inherent within day-to-day cultural practices of members of the community despite statutory prohibition

(Esses, Dietz & Bhardwaj, 2006). In some cases, pre-arrival qualifications and experience may be of an objectively lower standard than that of an equivalent of similar standing in the host nation (Friedberg, 2000). Employers in the host country may have imperfect information about the value of a migrant's credentials or capabilities (Somerville & Walsworth, 2009).

Several factors, however, *are* within the control of the migrant job seeker (Halvorsen, Treuren & Kulik, 2015). Language skills can be developed with practice over time (Pendakur & Pendakur, 2002; Creese, 2010; Timming, 2017). These can be developed inside and outside the workplace, through formal learning, through day-to-day living, through involvement in community activities - such as social clubs, sporting, religious and cultural groups, or through the migrant's social life. The migrant may acquire local knowledge and skills, through paid work, work experience, and through additional formal and informal training. As the migrant gains more knowledge of local business and work practices, he or she may become better able to demonstrate the relevance of their imported knowledge and skills. Thus, a migrant can potentially develop their cultural capital. An employee can also intentionally act to build up their social capital, and in so doing, build social networks that provide information about career and development opportunities that enable the migrant employee to advance themselves (Syed, 2008). And in some cases, the growth in their cultural and social capital may lead to the growth in their symbolic capital.

REDUCING THE SKILL DISCOUNT THROUGH CONGRUENCE WITH HABITUS

Following Bourdieu (1986) and Al Ariss and Syed (2011) we can conceptualise these efforts as attempts by the migrant to reduce the skill discount by obtaining greater congruence with the prevailing habitus of their intended occupational group. The challenge for the migrant can be understood in terms of developing their own economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital to attaining better alignment with the prevailing set of cultural norms (*habitus*). Figure 1 depicts the general relationship between the employee's perceived level of knowledge, skill and expertise, the level of expertise recognised by employers and the relevant labour market over time.

FIGURE 1 here

The literature suggests that migrant job seekers pragmatically use their existing forms of capital to obtain the best opportunities available to them (Sardana, Zhu & Van der Veen, 2016). Typically, this involves the use of multiple forms of capital. In the classic example, economic capital (such as money) can be used to obtain entry into specialist schools and colleges, that confer cultural capital in the form of qualifications and knowledge of the prevailing habitus, and social capital, through the acquisition of networks (Mayrhofer et al., 2004). The research suggests that migrants more commonly use migrant community social networks - at least initially - to obtain information about job and development opportunities, such as job openings or training programs (Ryan, Sales, Tilki & Siara, 2008). Cultural capital assists in acquiring additional social capital which can assist in obtaining additional cultural capital as well as symbolic capital (Thondhlana, Madziva & McGrath, 2016). In turn, the growing accumulation of the different capitals can enable increases in economic capital and symbolic capital - signals of compliance with the prevailing orthodoxy.

Many migrant employees quickly develop strategies for entering and improving their position within the labour market of their new adopted country (Fuller, 2015; Qureshi, Varghese & Osella, 2013; Ramboarison-Lalao, Al Ariss & Barth, 2012). For example, strategies include generating social capital by deploying available capital (social networks from home and new country) to acquire additional capital (e.g. entry into college, internships and jobs to acquire of new country-relevant cultural capital) (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin and Game, 2013). Demonstrating the importance of stepping through jobs in generating capital, Malagasy migrant doctors in France counter skill-discounting by taking bridging jobs enabling them to eventually meet stringent French registration requirements (Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012). Similarly, international students internationally undertook work-integrated learning assignments to cultivate their employability, and acquiring their new country's valued cultural and social capital (Tran and Soejatminah, 2016). Overall, migrants to undertake a variety of strategies to increase their

employability, demonstrating that this process is common across the migrant experience (Ressia, Strachan and Bailey, 2017; Winterheller and Hirt, 2017).

One example of a specific strategy used is the ‘survival’ job which provided opportunities to improve their local language proficiencies, such as within the hospitality industry (Janta et al., 2011; 2012; Creese & Weibe, 2012). These jobs were initially found through their migrant social networks, usually based on pre-migration networks and developed while in their new countries. Over time, the social networks of individual migrants expanded, as a result of their working with others outside their nationality and social interaction outside work. Over time, the employee would have acquired cultural capital to be competitive in better jobs, and the social capital to direct towards better job opportunities.

THE JOB EMBEDDEDNESS OF MIGRANTS AND NON-MIGRANTS

JET holds that the leaving decision is constrained by the idiosyncratic set of connections the employee has with their job and the organisation (on-the-job embeddedness), and their life out of work (off-the-job embeddedness) (Mitchell et al., 2001). These connections can be understood as a form of adhesive, binding the employee to the organisation through an idiosyncratic collection of fits, linkages and opportunity costs. More embedded employees have denser, stronger sets of connections and, as a consequence, are more ‘stuck’ to the organisation than less embedded employees. Highly embedded employees find it more difficult to break free than less embedded employees (Zhang, Fried, & Griffeth, 2012).

The first type relates to the *links* - the connections, friendships and interactions - of the employee to the workplace and the people of the workplace, as well as their life out of work. These linkages can be formal or informal, actual or perceptual (Mitchell et al., 2001; Ramesh & Gelfand, 2010). The second type of attachment relates to the *fit* of the employee to the job and organisation, and to their life outside work (Mitchell et al., 2001). This fit relates to the congruence of employee skills, attitude, approach, values with the organisation, the job and other employees, and to their life out of work (Hom et al., 2009). The third type of attachment – *sacrifice* – is concerned with the real or imagined loss the employee would experience on leaving the organisation (Ramesh & Gelfand, 2010). This sacrifice may be financial, social or through quality of life.

The organisational attachment of non-migrants

In the classic JET account of employee attachment, employees with higher levels of on-the-job links, fit and sacrifice embeddedness are more likely to stay with the organisation than employees with lower levels of embeddedness, regardless of employee dissatisfaction (Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004), the availability of job alternatives and the occurrence of unfolding theory of turnover- shock events (Burton, Holtom, Sablinski, Mitchell & Lee, 2010). Each of the employee embeddedness components impacts on employee decisions in a different way.

The linkage embeddedness of a non-migrant.

Employees who have greater on-the-job linkage embeddedness are generally better connected with more people and more aspects of the organisation than employees with lower levels of linkage embeddedness. The myriad connections add to the attachment of the employee to the organisation. Employees who know more people, and have stronger relationships, are less likely to want to leave, as leaving necessitates breaking those connections and the risk that the new job will offer equivalent opportunities to connect with people. Employees who are more involved with the activities and process of the organisation find leaving difficult in other ways. Involvement over time creates personal investments - Becker's (1960) 'side-bets' - in the various activities of the organisation, and - presumably - an interest in the ongoing development and success of those activities.

From the perspective of the more recent conservation of resources strand of JET research (Kiazad, Seibert & Kraimer, 2014), employees with greater linkage possess the potential to access organisational resources of increasing degrees of exclusivity. As argued by Treuren (early view), employees with greater levels of linkage embeddedness may be better able to access flexible work arrangements or additional training, than employees with poor organisational connections, or less local knowledge.

The fit embeddedness of a non-migrant.

JET theory holds that employees with greater levels of on-the-job fit embeddedness are more likely to want to remain with the organisation than employees with lesser fit. Employees with greater degrees of fit experience a greater harmony between themselves and their job, as well as with the activity and the broader atmosphere of the organisation. For these people, carrying out their work is relatively

easy, compared to employees with poorer fit; requirements to take on more responsibilities and get involved in new activities are likely to be less stressful. Employees with greater organisational fit do not experience as great a discrepancy between their personal values and expectations, and the activities of their organisation, and their role within the organisation.

For employees with greater fit embeddedness, the thought of leaving raises the question: will the replacement job and organisation offer a similar comfort and ease, or will I experience a bigger discrepancy? The greater the fit embeddedness, the greater the likelihood the employee will not find a role elsewhere of equivalent or better fit. Consequently, the JET literature assumes that the typical employee will have a negative relationship between on-the-job fit and, turnover intention and actual turnover.

The sacrifice embeddedness of a non-migrant.

On-the-job sacrifice embeddedness reflects the cost to the employee of the leaving the organisation. Membership of an organisation can create entitlements, actual or assumed. Some of these entitlements may be tangible: convenient car parking, a co-located childcare centre, tenure-linked pay and bonuses, for example. Other entitlements may be intangible, such as work colleagues, involvement in an important and challenging project, the prestige of the organisation. Typically, the more entitlements that would be lost by leaving, the less likely the employee would want to leave.

The organisational attachment of migrants

Faced with skill discounting, the challenge for the typical migrant is to develop the capital that reduces that skill discount. The desire to remove this discount may lead migrants to develop a different attachments to their employing organisation. As a consequence, the on-the-job embeddedness components have a different significance for migrants than for non-migrants. The following section sketches the likely character of these differences.

The linkage embeddedness of a migrant.

One of the challenges for the skill-discounted migrants is to acquire necessary cultural and social capital, such as knowledge and skill in business processes, cultural norms the language, and language, and develop the social networks enabling career advancement. For a migrant employee, increased link embeddedness suggests a greater and denser set of connections to people in the workplace. These

connections - friendships and involvement with non-migrants and other migrants - represent development opportunities. Through conversation, language skills can be developed and develop greater familiarity with cultural norms. Greater involvement in organisational activities deepens the social networks of the migrant. Increased interactions create opportunities for coaching and mentoring. It can be expected that migrants will seek out opportunities to develop and prize relationships in the workplace. Although this will be the case also for non-migrants, the need to develop these networks will not be as strong as it might be for migrants. Consequently, it is proposed:

H1: The negative relationship between on-the-job linkage and intention to leave will be stronger and more negative for migrant employees than for non-migrant employees

The fit embeddedness of a migrant.

Because of skill discounting, the migrant is likely - at least in the beginning - to be unable to win jobs that fully utilise their skills. The migrant job seeker is likely to find themselves in a job not requiring their full capabilities, where they easily meet the requirements, and where they quickly exhaust the development possibilities offered by the role. For the under-utilised migrant, job fit is likely to signal over-capability. In addition to the boredom and frustration from underutilisation of capability, good job fit in a job that uses a fraction of the employee's capabilities may be a signal to continue searching for a better job that makes better use of the full range of employee skills. Consequently, it is proposed:

H2: The negative relationship between on-the-job fit and intention to leave will be weaker (and possibly even positive) for migrant employees than for non-migrant employees

The sacrifice embeddedness of a migrant.

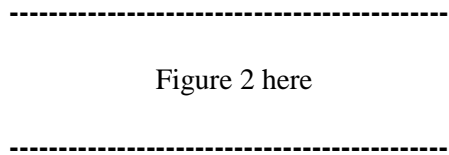
We distinguish between jobs won while the employee still experiences skill discounting, and jobs reached where skills have been suitably recognised. Until skills are fully recognised, a job is merely an interim step, providing opportunities to develop and acquire additional cultural and social capital to enable winning a job with a lower skill discount. The employee is likely to follow the job attachment behaviour of non-migrants when skills are fully recognised,.

The implication of this argument is that on-the-job sacrifice has less salience for migrants until the equilibrium point has been achieved. The skill-discounted employee is not seeking to build up organisational-specific entitlements. Instead, the migrant employee is scanning the environment for

career development opportunities that will enable the employee to develop their cultural, social and symbolic capital, and assist the employee to reduce the skill discount. In any case, the accumulated benefits are likely to be relatively significant compared to the benefits that would be accumulated once the migrant had attained their discount-free job. Accordingly, the relationship between on-the-job sacrifice and turnover intention is likely to be weaker for migrants, than it would be for non-migrants.

H3: The negative relationship between on-the-job sacrifice and intention to leave will be weaker (that is, more positive) for migrant employees than for non-migrant employees

Figure 2 depicts the three proposed hypotheses.



Overall, we are proposing that the effect of job embeddedness on employee turnover intention is contingent on the migrant status of the individual, so that the effects of the different components of job-embeddedness shift when the person experiences skill-discounting common to the migrant. Further, these propositions would also hold for people who also commonly experience skill-discounting, such as women (in male dominated organisations or industries) or minority groups.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper presents a theory of migrant turnover. It assumes that a migrant is more likely than a non-migrant to experience skill discounting. This discounting results in the migrant employee being unable to win suitable jobs that fully utilise their pre-migration knowledge, skills, and expertise, and therefore satisfy their status expectations. Consequently, the migrant employee is concerned to reduce the skill gap - the difference between their perceived labour market value and entitlement, and the jobs that employers and the labour market are likely to offer them. Although this skill gap may be created by racist, sexist attitudes by employers, and as a result of institutional forces that regulate the recognition and valuation of skills, typically a migrant employee will seek to find ways of developing their social, cultural and symbolic capital to better fit within the prevailing set of cultural norms and expectations within the prevailing culture. Or in more explicitly Bourdieusian terms, to acquire

sufficient capital to bring the migrant employee into closer alignment with the habitus of the field in which they seek recognition.

In so doing, however, the migrant employee attaches to their employing organisation in a different way to the typical non-migrant. The non-migrant is less likely to face skill discounting, and for these employees, the task is to find the best job and stay with that job. For these employees, acquiring better linkage, fit and sacrifice embeddedness all contribute to the task of maximising the quality of their lived experience in their job. For the migrant facing skill discount, the three components of on-the-job embeddedness have a discernibly different meaning. Fit with a job that under-utilises one's skill is a signal of the adequacy of the migrant, and a sign to look for another, better job. Thus, for the migrant, high levels of fit signify that it is time to get a more challenging job. For the opportunity-hungry migrant, increased linkage suggests greater opportunities to develop one's capital, and leads to greater attachment to the organisation for the migrant until such time as the migrant can no longer develop. Finally, sacrifice embeddedness is of much less significance for the migrant employee. Whereas the non-migrant is likely to be held to the organisation by the opportunity costs of leaving the accumulated benefits, the migrant is likely to be leaving for a better job, with better medium term entitlements and opportunities.

This, however, is merely a theory. Although this argument is consistent with empirical research into migrant behaviour, further examination is needed. This testing needs to obtain evidence from individual migrant job seekers about their acculturation strategies, and the approaches used to improve their labour market position. Further comparative testing is needed to clarify whether these proposed behaviours manifest. The benefits of examining the migrant vs native-born experience offers significant insights into the theory of job-embeddedness. In particular, our theory suggests that the current understanding of job-embeddedness theory is contingent on the expectation of the employee as a non-migrant; this paper examines this assumption and draws on a classical sociological theory to extend job embeddedness theory. This paper, first, provides a framework for understanding the under-studied migrant career path, and second, helps to draw attention to a significant contingent factor which shapes job-embeddedness theory.

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Figure 1. The skill-gap

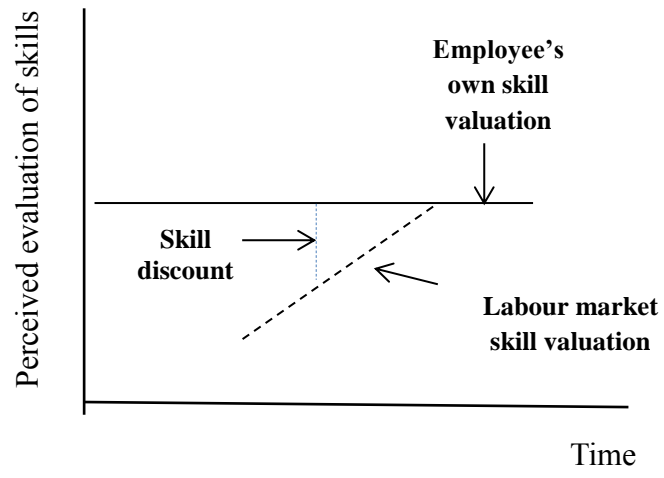
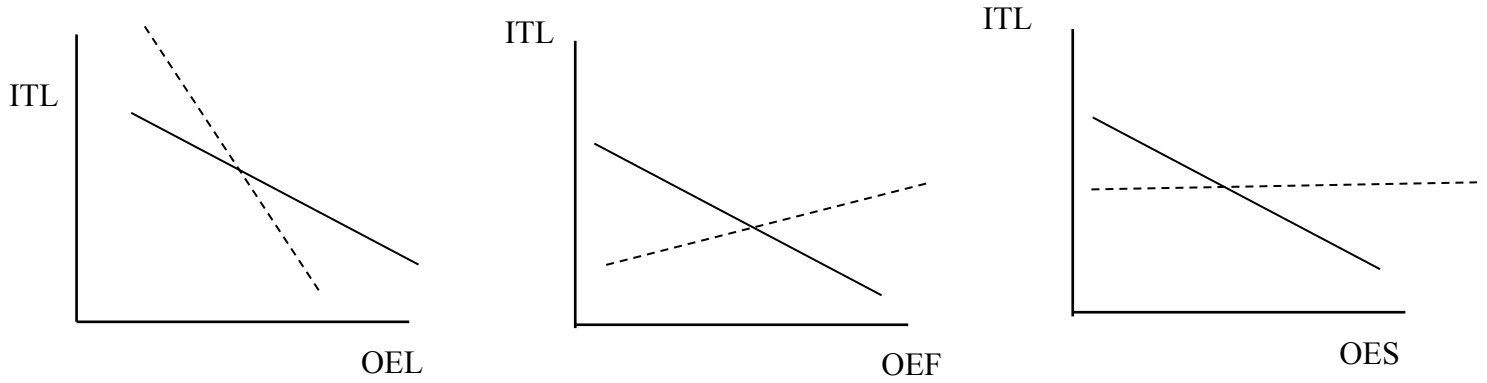


Figure 2. The hypothesised relationships between intention to leave (ITL) and on-the-job embeddedness components for migrants and non-migrants



Notes: Migrant: broken line; non-migrant; unbroken line; OEL - On-the-job linkage embeddedness;

OEF - On-the-job fit embeddedness; OES - On-the-job sacrifice embeddedness;