Making sense of new career and work environments: The experiences of South Asian migrant managers in Australia

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this paper is to examine the sense-making experiences of migrant managers from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as they adapt to their new work and career environment in Australia. Data was collected by conducting thirteen in-depth interviews with people who had at least one year supervisory experience in their home country and in Australia. The data was analysed using the constant comparative method to examine how these people made sense of their new work environment. The results suggest that South Asian migrant managers face significant challenges that result in varying degrees of career progress. Problems experienced in the sense-making process can lead to difficulties in acculturation resulting in people becoming chronically disembedded from the employment market.

Key words: Acculturation, Disembedding, Migrant managers, Sense-making, Socialisation, Work environment

Over the past decade the levels of migration of highly qualified and experienced people to Australia from South Asia has been increasing (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007). According to the latest published statistics South Asia accounted for 13.6 percent of the total migrants arriving in the financial year 2006-7, this translates into a total of 16,507 skilled migrants (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008). The focus of existing research on migrants and particularly skilled migrants is based upon pre-existing ethnic and race relations, government policies and the changing nature of international boundaries (Reitz, 2002). Although these areas are important, there is also a need to understand the perspectives of skilled migrants regarding their endeavours to gain acceptance and progress in their careers. According to Nagel (2005) there are some misconceptions in the existing literature that skilled migrants are high-flying corporate executive elite being aloof from the local life. She further explains that this limited view does not capture the diversity of experience among skilled migrants or the wider socio-economic disparities that exist for them.

There is a wide body of research examining the migrant experience in Australia and elsewhere. The conventional view is that people who are born into one culture and then move to another undergo a linear process of acculturation which ends in assimilation. This has been criticised by many researchers including Bhatia and Ram (2001) who question its monolithic perspective. Peeler (2002) argues that the process is much more complex because cultural identity is fragmented and incomplete consisting of multiple identities, interests and beliefs. Hermans and Kempens (1998) maintain that acculturation is
very much a dialogic process of negotiation and mediation between sometimes incompatible positions resulting in that which Bhabha (1994) claims is a situation where migrants are at the same time assimilated, separated and marginalised. In the context of Australia, Iredale (1999) argues that this experience is shaped to a large extent by a persistent Anglo-Celtic mono-cultural bias in the job market, organisations, institutions and occupational assessment. This characteristic can lead to discrimination and the non-recognition of skills that often lead to unemployment and under-employment of migrants. This is dubbed ‘brain waste’ by Salt (1997) who posits that there is a deskilling of such migrant workers causing career stagnation.

Existing research evidence also suggests that migrant managers experience barriers to entering employment (referred to sometimes as the ‘glass door’) at beginning of their job search in Australia. According to Watson (1996) a major reason for this is that local managers in Australia prefer to hire ‘clones’ (people very similar to them) which can put overseas born managers at a disadvantage. Even if they do get hired, Watson (1996) points out that managers from different ethnic backgrounds are marginalised by the Australian sporting and drinking cultural practices which can make it difficult to penetrate the inner circle of an organisation. For South Asian immigrant managers this leads to a mismatch between educational success and managerial success. Watson (1996) highlights that Australian companies insist that overseas-born managers should have lived in Australia long enough ‘to understand the Australian psyche’, one consultant suggested that after five years in Australia, immigrants become more competitive in the employment market. According to Watson (1996), many managers in organisations believe that Asian managers are too authoritarian to manage the Australian workforce, do not sell themselves well and are too arrogant. In the light of these trends and issues, the aim of this paper is to examine the job searching and employment experiences of migrant managers from South Asia.

The analysis is located within the theoretical frameworks of sense-making (Weick 1995; 2001), acculturation (Sakamoto, 2007) and disembedding/re-embedding (Beck, 1994). Sense-making is a process that is grounded in both individual and social activity (Weick, 1995). After joining an
organisation, individuals rationalise events and actions happening around them (Weick, 2001). For migrant managers this means coming to terms not only as a newcomer to an organization but also to a new cultural context. In terms of organisations, Louis (1980) argues that an individual passes through different stages of socialisation starting with being a newcomer to becoming an insider. She further explains that newcomers become insiders when they are given more autonomy and broader responsibilities and entrusted with ‘privileged’ information through informal networks, encouraged to represent the organisation and are asked for advice by others. Louis (1980) provides a comparison of the sense-making processes of a newcomer and an insider, arguing that the experience of newcomers differs from the insiders in three important ways: first the insiders normally know what to expect in and of situations and therefore little is surprising or needs to be made sense of. Second when surprise occurs an insider has sufficient history to make sense of that immediate situation and third, when surprises arise insiders usually have other insiders with whom to compare their perceptions. For newcomers, Louis (1980) argues that a lack of such insider knowledge causes problems because meanings are attached to actions, events and surprises using interpretative schemes developed through their experiences in cultural contexts and therefore may produce inaccurate understandings.

The concepts of disembedding and re-embedding have been used by social theorists (eg Beck, 1994 and Lash, 1999) to explain the effects of globalisation on the lives of people. Disembedding refers to the up-rooting of individuals from the familiar structures and cultures that defined their lives and the re-embedding that follows is the process by which individuals develop new biographies to suit their new situation. In terms of migrant managers, it is argued here that the very act of migration disembeds them from their familiar life-world and sets in motion a process of re-embedding of which, work and career is a central element. However, Baumann (2001) suggests the possibility that those who cannot or choose not to develop these new biographies may become chronically disembedded. According to Baumann (2001: xvi), for these people there is ‘no rest and no satisfaction on arrival, no comfort in reaching the destination where one can disarm, relax and stop worrying’. Whilst Baumann was expressing himself metaphorically, for migrants this can be a concrete reality. These feelings of disembeddedness are described by Peeler (2002) who argues that migrants walk in two worlds, yet walk in none; they are
uprooted from their home culture and struggle to feel at home in any other. This state of disembeddedness can be connected to the struggle which migrant managers go through in their professional lives. This effort can be elaborated using the concept of acculturation that falls into four categories: integration (accept old culture, accept new culture), assimilation (reject old culture, accept new culture), separation (accept old culture, reject new culture), and marginalisation (reject old culture, reject new culture) (Sakamoto, 2007). This acculturation process in the context of career and employment is examined by Lewis (2005: 96) who maintains that ‘migrant staff undergo a complex process of orientation and learning’ as they try to ‘adapt to the interpersonal practices of learning and teaching, care and professionalism and quality management in a large organisation’.

**METHODOLOGY**

The data was collected by conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants from the South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The basic theme of the interviews was the employment experience of participants and its impacts upon their managerial career. The participants had a range of professional backgrounds and were selected on the basis of having significant managerial experience in their home countries and at least one year’s employment in Australia. Of the thirteen participants in this research seven were from Pakistan, four from India and one each from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The ages of the participants ranged from 35 to 70, nine of whom had been living in Australia for between eight and eleven years, three between eighteen and twenty years and one for thirty years. All but one of the participants was male. The difficulty in recruiting females is probably a result of the relative lack of migrant women in managerial positions (Kofman and Raghuram, 2005). The data was analysed using the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) using the NVIVO7 software package. The data were coded by firstly reading the interview transcripts to achieve an overall sense of the data. Then, the data were reviewed a number of times to compare and contrast the responses of participants. Initial codes were developed that referred to the similarities and differences between the interviews.
Using the sense-making framework proposed by Weick (1995), the initial code list was then categorised to reflect the experiences of the participants. By using sense-making, the internal, self-conscious processes used by people to develop a coherent account of what is going on can be identified and environmental cues that they use in this process can be illuminated (Fiss and Hirsch, 2005). Using sense-making it is possible to understand how people rationalise their actions in an ongoing way based on the interplay between a person’s identity (their personal beliefs and perceptions), extracted cues and plausibility. For Weick (2001), sense-making is a dynamic process influenced by social comparison, expectations, experience and action.

According to Schwandt (2005) sense-making does not provide connection between cognition and actions based upon set of prescribed, functional or predictive formulas. Rather, the connection focuses attention on subjective interaction, multiple socially constructed realities and embeddedness of the process with its context for example power, culture and social structures. It can also be then argued that sense-making is an on-going process which depends upon an individual’s socialisation. This leads to constructing meanings of events by placing them into frameworks of understanding. Thus the way on which migrant managers make sense of their environment can have a significant impact on the way they adapt to their new work environment. In the following section the interplay of some of the sense-making factors in the process of adaptation is examined. To preserve confidentiality, the names of participants have been changed.

**HOW MIGRANT MANAGERS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR ENVIRONMENT**

The analysis revealed six major themes relating to the interplay between factors influencing sense-making and their influence on the acculturation process. Most clearly evident in the data was the interplay between identity and plausibility. The managers interviewed believed that they had no problem in becoming part of the administrative structure of the organisation they worked in but due to perceived cultural and religious differences it was difficult for them to become a part of social structure. As Imran, a manager from Pakistan living in Australia for fifteen years stated:
I liked to socialise with my colleagues in my previous job but due to some cultural constraints – for example, I might fund an after hours party and not attend it if drinking (alcohol) is the main part of celebration – I can’t be a part of that. In my culture the concept of celebration is different. The cultural gap has always existed. It is not created by the management but it is always difficult to overcome.

Imran’s self-perception about his identity (who he is and what he thinks) plays an important role in the socialisation process, particularly with regard to him becoming an insider in the organisation. He feels that he is barred from reaching the level of insider in the organisation. To him, the most plausible explanation for this is the perceived cultural gap between him and his co-workers. As such he is experiencing separation (Sakamoto 2007), in that he is rejecting the local cultural practice of celebration and suggesting it is an obstacle that is difficult to overcome.

Another Participant expressed similar perceptions. Shoiab, from Pakistan who has also been in Australia for fifteen years said:

*The only gap might be because they might not be able to fully understand you. What your cultural, social and religious requirements are and how you think it’s difficult for them to comprehend.*

This experience is not only about identity and separation but also sheds a light on what leads to difficulties of these participants when attempting to re-embed in the Australian organisational context. Shoiab is assuming perhaps incorrectly that local people in his organisation are unable to understand (and accept) him because of cultural differences.

A second theme that emerged from the data was the interplay between identity and cues extracted from the environment. The people interviewed revealed a set of ideas about the attitudes of locals to them through experiences and events to which they gave particular meanings. Of particular importance was
that in spite of being qualified and experienced, they found it difficult to secure employment. According to Danish (who migrated from Pakistan a decade ago):

*Initially it was difficult to enter an organization. Personally, perhaps it was because of my background … I think it was because of my ethnic origin. I had the same qualifications and experience like everyone else but I was only offered a short-term contract.*

In the above case the Danish has extracted a cue from this experience that it is his cultural background and ethnicity rather than his skills and qualifications that prevented him getting a permanent job. According to his experience the preference of employers were for local workers having local qualifications and experience. Here the interplay between identity and extracted cues is one that creates a situation that this participant has made sense of his failure to secure long-term, secure employment in terms of his different cultural identity.

In a different experience Yunasul who arrived in Australia ten years ago from Bangladesh, demonstrated another dimension to the interplay between identity and extracted cues in making sense of events. Yunasul extracted cues from his experience that in his job he could not delegate when in fact he could but not in the way he was accustomed to. As a manager from South Asia, he tended to be familiar with a more authoritarian identity as a manager and thus missed the more subtle social cues used to delegate in a low power distance cultural context such as Australia. As Yunasul, explained:

*In our country as a manager … you have more authority to work and here as a manager we have to share the authority. If your subordinate is not following you they cannot be forced here. If someone does something wrong the responsibility come on your shoulders. On the other hand you have no authority but in our country we have full authority.*

It is interesting to note here that Yunasul referred to authority but missed the notion that as a manager he could delegate and had authority to do so but because the cues to his authority he was familiar with in his own cultural context was missing, he interpreted this as having little of no authority. Yunasul’s experience also illustrates a similar interplay between identity and extracted cues as Danish. However
in Yunasul’s case he made sense of his perceived lack of authority as a manager in terms of his home cultural identity. Even so, for both participants the experience of marginalisation is similar.

A third major theme that emerged related to the way sense-making involves the use of prior knowledge to assign meaning to the new information that is placed into existing sense-making frameworks (Schwandt 2005). Without any prior knowledge of the Australian context, participants in this research tended to process information about their environment using the cultural frameworks of their home country. There were participants who were of the view that they were underachievers in that they believed that would have achieved more in their career had they stayed in their home country as they looked at their experience in retrospect. After living in Australia for around thirty years, Srinath (from Sri Lanka) looked back at his experience in retrospect and considered himself to be marginalised:

*I am a bit disappointed that I have not achieved at the end of my retirement. I finally ended up in middle management level … with my experience I believe that I should have ended at a much higher grade of management because I had done much more complicated managerial situations of work in my home country.*

As a manager in this example, Srinath believed that he was capable of handling more complicated jobs. He believed that his experience in his home country should have given him an opportunity for a rapid rise through the organisation he worked for. The reason for what he considers as career underachievement was his ethnic background rather than any lack of skills or qualifications. Srinath appeared to be chronically disembedded as he had not escaped the culturally specific framework of his home country work environment. This phenomenon was also experienced by Dharmaimdar who migrated to Australia from India twenty years ago:

*I think there is always the hesitation that you don’t know how to communicate so you tend to hold back. So the problem was with culture … So I think I held back for too long. … I think I held back and kept quiet for long. For a very long time I did not make my opinions known whether it was about work or personally. So I think those things don’t work in your favour if you don’t communicate.*
Looking back, Dharmainder believed that he did not achieve his goal of entering a senior management position because he did not market himself well enough due to a lack of confidence in his communication skills. This was not due to his English language skills not being of an acceptable standard, it was more to do with a concern about being able to communicate in a culturally appropriate way.

A further theme that the data analysis illuminated was the on-going and retrospective nature of sense-making. This is best illustrated in the importance of non-recognition of qualifications to participants. The non-recognition of qualifications only became apparent to participants during the search for work after their arrival in Australia. As Imran explained:

I was in a management role in the country of my origin. When I came to Australia I was performing the same role but I was given a job of a trainee engineer. I thought they will always look for an Australian role or experience which was also quite impossible for me to fulfill as a new migrant. Therefore I decided to fill the missing Australian component in my resume and joined the local university and did my bachelors and masters in another industry. I quit my job as a trainee engineer.

The above participant learned through their experiences that no matter how good they were and how good their qualifications were there existed a missing Australian component in their professional experience. Abdulkareem who came to Australia from Pakistan ten years ago recounted that he had abandoned the main stream employment market to work for an institution representing a religious migrant organisation as a result of a process of making sense of his situation in an on-going way. He stated:

As I was working in supervisory role overseas, that was my ambition when I came here. But when I came to know that I am not even accepted [in my chosen profession] that was a huge disappointment for me and my family. The three four years that I spent trying to establish myself, I was under pressure. I was moving back and not moving forward in my profession but
after I moved to this sector that gave me the professional support and satisfaction that I was looking for.

These two participants are similar in that both made sense of their environment in an on-going way and by referring to their experience in retrospect. However there is a difference in their sense-making frameworks. Abdulkareem was not getting out of the cultural frame of previous success in his home country. This led to separation from his chosen career environment. As a result he retreated into a work environment more in tune with his home country experience. Imran on the other hand was attempting to integrate by filling the perceived missing Australian component of his qualifications.

Sense-making is also referred to as ‘meaning making’ and ‘feeling making’ (Schwandt 2005). In this respect an individual gives meanings to their feelings to make sense of events. Sometimes these meanings tend to be based upon plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Sunil, who arrived in Australia from India five years ago, seems to have feelings of not belonging based on assumption and plausibility. He stated:

Being a migrant I would say yes it has impacted my career. Even after working for five years, sometimes I can see in some people’s eyes, ‘What you doing here?’ and that I am not one of them. I can see the subtle differences when they are questioning, They wont say it directly but they are questioning and thinking that, ‘what is this person doing here?’ … And once you start climbing the ladder there is a glass ceiling. That’s my thinking.

On the other hand, one participant believed that their experience in Australia has been positive. Azahar (from Pakistan) who has been living in Australia for thirty years stated:

My scientific ambitions did not require any specific type to socialisation in which you have to market your organisation. So I remained on the scientific end and achieved much. Honestly I feel quite comfortable. I feel I have contributed much here as I came here full of experience. I have gained a lot as well by moving here and I feel very happy that I moved to Australia.
This particular participant is quite happy. They achieved this by keeping away from managerial roles and more towards the technical or scientific roles. To them, integrating was a more plausible possibility if they tailored their career ambitions towards a more individualised occupation requiring technical/scientific skills rather than one which involved managing and supervising others.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this paper was to use the concept of sense-making to explain how South Asian managers perceive the events happening in their career and work environment related to their progress and achievements as migrants in Australia. It may be argued that some of the social barriers that are faced by the people in this research are based on assumption rather than reality. This may be explained in that sense-making is a process in which sufficiency and plausibility take precedence over accuracy (Weick, 1995). In spite of the many opportunities and positive factors working for the participants they sometimes misinterpret events and experiences in ways that compromise their ability to successfully acculturalise to their new work environments. Whilst it could be suggested that participants in this research made sense of their environment in sometimes erroneous ways, the situation is complex in that there may be subtle barriers that affected the participants in their day-to-day working lives. More research is necessary to better establish the dimensions of the problem.

The concepts of sense-making and disembedding provide a good theoretical basis for understanding perceptions and learning of migrant managers. It is not yet clear whether these perceptions are an accurate reflection of the reality they face or are a product of erroneous sense-making. Either way, the results of this research suggest that problems of acculturation are occurring leading to a state of chronic disembeddedness for some of the participants in this research. In spite of the limitations of a small sample size, this research raises questions about the potential contribution of migrants from an important and growing source region can make to address the skills shortage in Australia. Further research needs to more fully address the important question regarding how disembeddedness can be addressed so that local organisations and migrant managers alike can successfully integrate their cultures in ways that benefits both.
REFERENCES


