Otherness in the Workplace among Highly Skilled Labour Migrants: Swedes in Germany and the UK

Ylva Wallinder
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract
The conditions for intra-European labour mobility have changed significantly during recent decades, mainly due to the European Single Market. Despite this, internationally mobile and highly skilled intra-EU migrants from West to West have not received enough attention in the sociology of work. The present article focuses on highly skilled labour migrants with a university degree from Sweden, currently working in Germany or the UK. Swedish migrants feel they challenge specific norms related to hierarchies in the workplace, behaving according to their own ‘taken-for-granted’ norms concerning the ways in which work is organized and tasks are assigned. Their privileged position as educated Swedish migrants is an important part of their self-image and enables them to challenge norms. Furthermore, they also deal with self-perceived otherness while making sense of their experiences of contradictions and norm-breaking. The findings highlight their self-definitions, according to which they are simultaneously (by default) insiders and/or (superior) outsiders.

Keywords
habitus, highly skilled migrants, impression management, otherness, privilege, transnational labour market, workplace norms

Introduction
With a focus on the mobility of highly skilled Swedish labour migrants, the present article examines implicit assumptions connected to norm-breaking behaviour in the workplace and explores the strategies used to deal with potential norm-breaking behaviour. It is argued that transnational labour market mobility can render visible hidden
norms and default modes of behaviour in professional settings, due to outsiders’ ability to question social norms. But not all migrant employees challenge norms due to a self-image of superiority, wherefore the article distinguishes between privileged and less privileged outsiders.

The conditions for transnational labour market mobility have changed radically during recent decades, particularly in the European context. Since the establishment of the European Single Market and the four freedoms connected to it (i.e. free movement of goods, capital, services and labour), intra-European labour market mobility has increased (Eurydice, 2012). Besides the European legislation allowing and facilitating mobility, existent norms and values of Western European dominance are believed to affect the situation for European Union/European Economic Area (EU/EEA) migrants and to be of importance for individuals’ transnational mobility; white middle-class Western Europeans, compared to non-white, are more likely to feel at home and be recognized worldwide (Faist et al., 2013). Such embedded histories affect the self-image and expectations of white, Western migrants (Ahmed, 2007). Nevertheless, real-life experiences may turn out to be more difficult than expected (Wallinder, 2019). By leaving behind habitual social contexts embedded in the native language, modes of behaviour and cultural praxis, previously ‘taken-for-granted’ behaviours may feel inadequate and lead professionals, educated and trained elsewhere, to feel that their core identity as a successful worker is being called into question (Huot and Rudman, 2010).

It is argued here that we need to understand how labour migrants perceive norms and the implications of norm-breaking behaviour in the context of the workplace as well as their self-image and expectations. It is likely that labour migrants perceive themselves as something ‘other’ vis-a-vis their (local) colleagues abroad, the implication of norm-breaking being ‘otherness’ (see Schütz, 1944). The present article draws on a study of highly motivated and educated Swedes with different class- and ethnic backgrounds,2 employed in London and Munich in the IT sector, engineering, finance/banking, public health or international relations (i.e. globally recognized and legitimized qualifications, see Weiss, 2005). All interviewees moved for career reasons following graduation and subsequent employment experience in Sweden. The aim is to uncover implicit assumptions among the highly skilled Swedish migrants employed in the UK or Germany, and, further, to explore the strategies used when confronting potential norm-breaking behaviour in everyday life in the workplace.

Previous studies of (educated) Turkish and Kurdish women migrating to Germany or the UK suggest that migrants’ professional ‘success’ abroad is something that occurs ‘against the odds’ (Erel, 2010: 650). In the case of highly skilled Swedish migrants, however, their professional mobility (and recognition) abroad may often be more taken for granted, and even anticipated or expected. As shown, highly skilled Swedish migrants’ superior position is tied to their self-image. This self-image reflects an expected ‘privileged otherness’ among many of them that may be deeply bound to norms and values affecting both their conditions for mobility (see Ahmed, 2007) and their perceived ability to exit when required (Hannerz, 2006). In this respect, Swedish migrants do not consider themselves as immigrants (Wallinder, 2019).

In the following, a background to the study is provided, along with a short review of previous literature, emphasizing that social status and cultural practice are contextual.
Thereafter, methodological reflections are offered. Finally, a brief description of the main results is provided, followed by a concluding discussion.

Highly skilled and mobile employees in Europe

The existing European mobility agenda promotes international transportability of expertise and competences. The Bologna Declaration, agreed upon by European Ministers of Education in 1999, aims at a united European university system (i.e. the European Higher Education Area) (Eurydice, 2012), and the standardization of qualifications to facilitate transnational labour market mobility among highly skilled individuals. The standardization of qualifications has led to a more intense focus on individual aspects and opportunities in a transnational labour market (Lindberg, 2009). Whether these attempts to standardize higher education qualifications actually have caused greater de facto transportability of qualifications and competences does not seem to be measurable as yet. However, equality of mobility will probably never be achieved, notwithstanding the great amount of ‘European rebranding’, which will not be able to disguise the actual inequality found among European citizens (Burrell, 2016: 5). This inequality mirrors the fact that transnational mobility (and/or labour migration) can be seen as a question of access to social space, such as informal belongingness and connections to relevant transnational networks (see Faist et al., 2013).

Although the European Union is based on the idea of free movement of labour, aiming for an integrated Europe, most Europeans remain rather local and apply for positions in their country of birth (Andreotti et al., 2015: 2). However, highly educated migrants often have access to the silent knowledge – savoir faire – that accompanies language and educational training. Sklair (2001) and others have defined highly skilled migrants as a transnational class, arriving from privileged backgrounds that grant access to transnational class privileges. Thus, the social position in the country of origin appears to be of importance, and many (upper-middle-class) transnational Europeans only ‘partially exit’ their original social position and location in their country of origin (Andreotti et al., 2015: 12, 177). For less educated migrants, several factors restrict European free mobility; for example, lack of financial resources and international connections.

However, the question of access to social space in workplace contexts needs to be recognized as an intersectional component (Tatlu and Özbilgin, 2012): it is not only educational qualifications that matter for achieving social recognition abroad, but also other kinds of privilege and resources, embedded in implicit ideas about Western European worldwide dominance – ideas that shape individuals’ expectations of experiencing social recognition across national borders (Erel, 2010; Samaluk, 2016). While some migrant groups are defined as ‘problems’ in local society, others are classified as ‘expatriates’ and face no devaluation based on, for example, their alleged unwillingness to integrate. Thus, ‘expatriates’ experience personal recognition abroad (Weiss, 2005). Western/Eastern European markers encompass on-going colonial relations within Europe beyond the question of whiteness, as migrants from Eastern to Western European countries tend to be de-skilled and/or devalued in the host society (Currie, 2007). Skilled migrants from Eastern European countries may choose self-deskilling, indicating a perceived self-inferiority as compared to an ‘imagined Western superiority’ (Samaluk, 2016: 460). The
Western European highly skilled Swedish migrants in the present study are thus privileged and mobile in relation to their transnationally recognized qualifications and national origin. These privileges are believed to affect not only their formal mobility opportunities, but also their self-image and expectations (Wallinder, 2019).

**Theoretical framework**

This section provides theoretical tools useful for understanding the privileges and specific norms and values experienced by the highly skilled Swedes in their workplaces in Germany and the UK. For the understanding of the interviewees’ strategies and experiences of norm-breaking behaviour in the workplace, Goffman’s theories of *frame analysis* and *impression management* (Goffman, 1986, 1990) were useful, in combination with Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990). These concepts will be distinguished below and further discussed in relation to the empirical analyses.

**The trinity of habitus, (trans)national social field and capital**

A social field is a system of relations and positions in which specialized agents (e.g. professionals) compete over the same resources. Such processes take place according to particular field-specific rules (*règles*, or ‘the rules of the game’) that accumulate different forms of (cultural, economic or social) capital into a recognized symbolic capital, a location-specific resource. Local practices of cultural capital recognition, together with implicit and explicit expectations and practices of labour market inclusion and exclusion, constitute important parts of individuals’ labour market opportunities (in line with Nohl et al., 2014). Previous experiences and social contexts create dispositions that are more or less congruent with a social field. Thus, regardless of their qualifications, employees need to present attributes in accordance with the existing norms and values prevailing in the specific context. Meanwhile, individuals have a practical sense – a ‘feeling for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 66) or an embodied habitus – through which they understand and master the surrounding world. Habitus can be organization-specific, varying across sectors and professions (Ashley and Empson, 2017). In the present study, the migrants expect to know the rules of the game because they have a professional status and educational training similar to that of their colleagues. Though they expect their mobility to be rather unproblematic (Wallinder, 2019), workplace problems do occur. The notion of habitus therefore provides an important conceptual framework for the significance of migrants’ self-image, a self-perception of ‘racial’ and Western superiority (Ahmed, 2007). Furthermore, habitus provides an opportunity to analyse internalized norms that are culture-specific: the formative habitus can be shaped by the migrant’s previous educational training and/or employment experience. Therefore, highly motivated individuals might face severe problems when trying to improve their career opportunities by gaining transnational experiences because the logics of symbolic power in one place may differ from those in another place, and expectations may collide with actual experiences (Samaluk, 2016; Spence et al., 2016; Wallinder, 2019). Habitus dislocation can therefore become a professional disadvantage (Lehman and Taylor, 2016). In other words, when migrants transcend social fields, they may need a different strategy for achieving legitimacy and recognition of their cultural capital.
If we possess the appropriate habitus, we can sense what is correct behaviour in a particular situation without risking ‘becoming a stranger’ (e.g. the ability to command a language freely is often taken for granted by insiders in a particular social setting) (Schütz, 1944: 505). Thus, implicit knowledge or habitus is context-dependent, and the specific cultural requirements become visible when norms are broken or violated (Scheer, 2012). For migrant employees, educated and trained elsewhere, the local language-related rules and context-specific silent acceptance may be difficult to understand, perhaps causing them to feel like strangers (Schütz, 1944). Thus, social norms must be maintained in everyday interactions.

Goffman’s (1986) study of ‘everything but ordinary behaviour’ was entitled frame analysis, suggesting that social interaction between individuals is context-dependent and that the interaction is framed (cf. Scheer, 2012, and her definition of habitus). Participants work hard to maintain a shared social frame, but the regulation – or control – of a social interaction occurs consciously or subconsciously. Violation of the common social frame in a certain situation is possible, but this does not happen easily. In everyday activity, however, social frames can quickly be changed, but mainly by socially respectful people, while disrespectful people may be stigmatized as outsiders for breaking the same social frames.

Goffman’s (1986) idea of primary (cultural) frameworks refers to how social events become meaningful within a particular group: the workplace is embedded in a cultural context, wherefore labour market (dis)advantages need to be analysed in its situated and relational context (see also Tatlu and Özbilgin, 2012). In the analyses, such frames for understanding implicit social adjustments (without becoming ‘othered’ or a stranger, see Schütz, 1944) are stressed in combination with Bourdieu’s formative notion of habitus – an internalized sense that shapes our taken-for-granted behaviours and expectations. In fact, habitus can function as an exclusion mechanism (Girard and Bauder, 2007), something that becomes evident when analysing social interaction between individuals from different social groups.

**Prevailing norms and values in the workplace**

While EU/EEA mobility from Central and Eastern Europe is widely explored (e.g. Anderson et al., 2006; Currie, 2007; Samaluk, 2016), research has focused less on EU/EEA migration of highly skilled individuals from Western European countries. For Eastern European migrants in Western societies, destination workplaces can become situations of disjuncture where employees experience social skill mismatch. Along with imperial dominance, Western societies are connected to norms and practices related to, for example, democracy, capitalism, human rights, transparency, accountability and gender equality (Grabowska, 2017). Therefore, migrants from Western societies most likely expect their social skills to be recognized in the abroad workplace setting. This possibility to feel recognized by achieving a balance between the individual’s practical sense and the existent social field can create a feeling of ‘being at home’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 66). Although cross-national diversity in professional behaviour is widely anticipated, research tends to focus on normative differences between the West contra ‘the rest’ (e.g. Grabowska, 2017; Spence et al., 2016). Despite their ethnic privilege (Vershinina et al., 2011), Western migrants may also
experience contradictions and norm-breaking in the abroad workplace setting and the process of meaning-making and perception of a conversation and social settings may be affected (see Marshall and Foster, 2002). However, privilege needs to be understood as relational, as there are multiple relations of power taking place within workplace organizations that are complicated by class, race/ethnicity, gender and/or other differences (Tatlu and Özbilgin, 2012).

By means of impression management (Goffman, 1990: 219), individuals can influence their perception of a person, object or event to suit their needs and goals. Furthermore, individuals’ performances are managed during a particular period in front of a particular set of observers (Goffman, 1990: 32). A performance often incorporates the recognized values and attributes of a particular society (Goffman, 1990: 233), as impression management requires a team of performers who strive to maintain a situation in accordance with the prevailing rules and ethos (Huot and Rudman, 2010). For example, a person educated and trained in Sweden is likely to have been taught certain organizational norms related to non-hierarchal society, gender equality, democratic values, decision-making and freedom (see Lundström, 2010). Such cultural distinctions provide different macro-level orders that guide individuals’ micro-level actions in the workplace (e.g. related to hierarchal relations or norms expressed in language, leadership styles, orders and decisions). The micro-level actions are defined as ‘the interaction order’, providing expectations concerning how social interaction should take place (Goffman, 1967: 45). Thus, performances require coherence. Like characters in front of an audience, we suppress our impulses (via social discipline). Managing the impression one makes within the interaction order is not always an easy task; presentations can always be performed in a ‘false’ way, and such a situation causes negative emotions for individuals, ‘bringing them immediate humiliation and sometimes loss of reputation’ (Goffman, 1990: 66). Thus, the interaction order can further be compared with the type of activity that generates context-specific symbolic capital.

Accordingly, employees’ situation in the workplace may not only be connected to existing norms and values, but also to their situated feelings, which may cause emotions such as humiliation or even aversion. According to Scheer (2012), emotions are situational, relational and context-dependent. Nevertheless, when the understanding of local society and national competences are integrated transnationally, a ‘transnational social field’ (Nedelcu, 2012: 1345) is created. However, there may be ‘no real commitment to any particular other culture’ when one knows the exit (Hannerz, 2006: 200): Swedish migrants in Germany or the UK have a privileged ‘invisible status’ as legal white European migrants (Lulle et al., 2017: 2). Further, the Swedish welfare state contributes to perceived security and the ability to (partially) exit (Andreotti et al., 2015; Wallinder, 2019) if problems should arise. Therefore, a refined analysis of privilege and migration is required, exposing the symbolic power of global inequalities.

**Methodological description**

The article draws on a purposive sample of 21 semi-structured interviews with highly skilled mid-career Swedish labour migrants (i.e. no accompanying partner) between 27 and 45 years of age working in Munich (11) or London (10), and approximately equally
gender-distributed between the two countries. The interviewees were mid-career employees (aged 27–52) corresponding to the ISCO-08 Major Group 2 professionals (International Labour Office [ILO], 2012), with tertiary training and previous work experience from Sweden. They represent a prototype of the flexible and driven individual who is searching for a transnational experience to improve his/her employment opportunities (Tilly, 2005). To match these criteria, all interviewees were born, raised and had graduated in Sweden, they had spent a period living and working in either of the two foreign cities and they were not accompanying partners. The interviewees were primarily employed in private companies, several in multinational companies, predominantly in the financial and technical sector, but importantly, they were not employed as managers themselves. About one-third of the interviewees were on leave from permanent Swedish jobs. Swedish employment legislation protects employees with permanent employment contracts (see Berglund et al., 2017), which allowed the interviewees to return to Sweden whenever they wished. Two interviewees were second-generation immigrants to Sweden.

Interviews were conducted between April and October 2014 with a follow-up phase in January 2016. All interviews were recorded with the interviewees’ permission and lasted between one hour and two-and-a-half hours. Interviewees were recruited from existing informal/formal societies and networks connecting Swedes abroad in both cities. Germany and the UK are two major destinations for EU/EEA migration (Bruzelius et al., 2016), and networks connecting Swedes abroad are prominent there (Wallinder, 2018).

The analysis of the interview material is inspired by a constructivist orientation, acknowledging the importance of multiple and varied meanings in understanding how the interviewees position themselves socially and historically through social interaction (Charmaz, 2014). While conducting the interviews, continuous memoing provided a good basis for developing new aspects to focus on in future interviews. While processing the interview transcripts, initial coding, with open codes closely related to the data, was summarized using the Atlas.ti coding program. Thereafter, more focused codes emerged, generating code labels such as perceived otherness, norm-breaking and daydreaming.

Analysis: Different modes of ‘othering’

The interviewed migrants increasingly experienced orientation difficulties in their new social environment because their habitus did not give them a symbolic advantage. Most migrants expected to be a rather privileged, mild version of an immigrant, an ‘immigrant light’ (man, Munich, late 20s), speaking the same language and having the same skin-colour as local employees (see also Wallinder, 2019). However, their experiences in the actual workplace tell a different story. Despite having some success in incorporating their own feeling for the game at work, all interviewees expressed a fear of incorrectly interpreting and delivering on management requirements. Fear of not doing the right thing caused a great deal of stress and anxiety, because in Sweden the interviewees were used to openly discussing assigned tasks with their manager/s in a way that was not commonplace in their new workplace. The strategies they used were often connected to a particular setting.
Strategies and attitudes concerning the workplace culture

The analyses reflect different strategies, which can (partly) be understood in relation to the type of employment contract the migrants hold. As stated, many employees were on leave from permanent Swedish contracts, allowing them to return to their home country whenever they wanted. This protection from unemployment enabled them to accept rather low employment security abroad: unlike their local colleagues, these ‘free movers’ were not afraid of sudden job loss. Therefore, the priority of maintaining loyalty to the social setting at work and behaving cautiously (see Goffman, 1990: 219) might be less important, and their impression management might be perceived as less disciplined: these free movers were less likely to show higher levels of adaptability to the specific work-life culture due to their experienced labour market security. Thus, employment conditions affected how the interviewees perceived their co-workers abroad: ‘It is easier to remain on leave from my job at home and remain registered in Sweden. [. . .] It gives you a feeling of safety, as your situation [at work] can feel rather unpredictable, you don’t always know what to expect’ (man, Munich, 30s; emphasis added). One woman in her 40s, living in London, had previously been employed in a large Swedish company in the UK, and the feeling of safety and predictability via her Swedish collegial network influenced her decision to move abroad. Thus, she could initially ‘partially exit’ her original social position in Sweden (Andreotti et al., 2015: 12), as well as enjoying her collegial network of Swedes as a transnational class privilege (Skilair, 2001). However, reflecting upon her current situation in a British company, she believed that employment conditions had worsened in the UK: every quarterly financial report could lead to letting staff go. Therefore, she was considering self-employment, believing that a greater sense of predictability comes with self-employment, as well as freedom to behave as one wishes and choose one’s customers. She felt uncertain about her future, and the fear of not behaving correctly or being made redundant caused her to feel ‘imprisoned’.

Thus, the migrants handled a disrupted framing at work either by coping with or confronting the interaction order, which is conditioned by their social security: those who could return to their employment in Sweden actively confronted the perceived expectations in the social setting abroad. However, this behaviour need not always be purposive, but can derive from socially oriented motives and cause a mismatch between the social setting, a person’s dispositions and habitus, and the outsider position. Thus, the disruption might occur subconsciously, which is why the stigmatization caused by breaking the social frames results in humiliation. In the end, the professional behaviour needs to be reframed:

Here, you need to show the best version of yourself. This was really difficult, indeed. Because you need to make yourself visible, you need to speak and laugh loudly. I also got the feeling that many are impatient. And if you don’t behave accordingly, they will tell you. That has been really difficult to handle. (Woman, Munich, early 30s)

The interviewees had initially intended to explore (quoting) ‘the cosmopolitan vibes’ in their current city, and the various imaginations of urban lifestyle: in their first year(s), the interviewees often socialized with labour migrants from Western European (and/or North American) countries (i.e. migrants with a similar ‘imagined Western superiority’ (Samaluk, 2016: 460) who also were employed in qualified positions abroad). Later on, they often
lacked the energy to participate in the numerous activities that were offered, fearing a professional disadvantage contrary to what was expected. Such habitus dislocation made their workdays feel professionally and emotionally demanding: adapting to their new cultural context was more difficult than expected and professional norms often differed from their own ideals and values regarding hierarchal relations and language codes. An engineer in his late 20s, who has lived in Munich for two years since he had resigned from his employment in Sweden, expresses deep frustration, as he often felt (quoting) ‘like an idiot or a child’ in professional contexts, due to his lack of language proficiency:

I really would like to be able to tell them off. And to be able to express, to be so fluent in German that I could say, ‘You don’t need to behave like that, you don’t need to speak to me as if I were stupid’. Because I’m not.

The interviewees often expressed a strategy of escaping from their present situation by daydreaming about a potential future as a returnee in Sweden. In such cases, they referred to the imagined idea of Swedishness; they expressed ideas about shared values, commonalities and how emotionally easy life would be living and working in Sweden: ‘we understand each other’ (woman, Munich, early 40s). One of the migrants, a woman in her late 30s who actually returned to Sweden after living in Munich for more than 10 years, often referred to ‘the good old saying “birds of a feather stick together”. It’s kind of easier if one has the same background, we know we are laughing at the same things, and that makes things easier.’ Thus, being able to ‘feel at home’ was emotionally rewarding.

Developing personally and professionally in a foreign labour-market context was mainly believed to be possible if one could acquire the appropriate behaviour in collegial settings (along with Ashley and Empson, 2017). To learn these rules, the migrants reported working more hours in an attempt to respond to the experienced requirements. Still, some of them never really felt they could accept the way they were expected to behave. No matter how hard they tried, they did not fit in:

Even if I now am fluent in German and I communicate in German, that is, language will always be an obstacle for me. There are regional accents and there are people who can’t accept that it takes a little bit more effort for them to talk to me. Or maybe, that they need to listen until I’ve finished talking. I can’t participate in interesting debates in the same way, or get my opinion across in the same way. This is something I consider an obstacle to my future career, to be perfectly honest. (Man, Munich, late 30s)

As shown, the migrants’ ability to ‘command the language’ is not always in accord with the present professional social field, and an ‘othering’ position as a stranger appears (Schütz, 1944: 505). Being a foreigner has disadvantages that many native-born employees do not experience: In the German context, one needs to address someone formally using titles in official settings and, in both settings, there are language uncertainties. Still, most of the Swedish migrants in Germany seemed to put considerable effort into adapting to the local language-related ‘rules’: ‘One needs to accept these things. Because the consequences of not doing it are worse than the possible discomfort one feels addressing someone by using her PhD title, in that way’ (woman, Munich, late
Still, feelings of otherness were often present even when engaging in impression management, and the fear of doing or saying the ‘wrong’ things often caused negative emotions. Such negative emotions were handled differently: for maintaining status and respect (Scheer, 2012), the migrants either confronted or ignored the social framing in a certain workplace interaction, which was manifested somewhere between *otherness as a constraint* and *otherness as a resource*, distinguishing between different strategies when confronting the interaction order.

**Otherness as a constraint**

Different expectations and norms in the migrants’ work life may be disrupted, and this often puts them in the position of being something ‘other’ vis-a-vis their colleagues: somewhere between a rewarding exception and otherness. The latter position may cause social limitation and have behavioural consequences (Goffman, 1990: 185). One man in his mid-30s, working in Germany on leave from a permanent contract in Sweden, described how he often questioned the top-down allocation of work assignments and wanted his manager to explain such decisions. In his previous Swedish collegial setting, he experienced that understanding things from (quoting) ‘a more holistic view’ was highly important and could even lead to promotion, because he was assuming responsibility for the process. However, his present manager in the more hierarchical German workplace environment would not accept his questioning, which was seen as doubting the manager’s mandate and formal authority. As a result, the interviewee felt ashamed because he had been transformed into an uncomfortable other who did not behave according to the rules of the game. Another specific situation was when questioning reasons for the project, as well as the specific tasks assigned, which caused the manager to ‘bang his hand on the table’. The interviewee, however, only wanted to understand the reasons so he could do a ‘good job for the team’ and ‘achieve a promotion’. Finally, he understood that behaving appropriately in the collegial group in Germany involved listening and accepting managers’ decisions and that group meetings were meant for disseminating and informing about managers’ decisions rather than for discussions. Though he accepted the rules of the game, he had difficulties making meaning of the tasks assigned to him. Owing to lack of feedback, he often experienced difficulties in learning appropriate behaviour, in managing the impression he made in his collegial group:

> I’ve made some major mistakes over recent years, but that was not really easy to understand. Well, it’s difficult to know actually, because you don’t get any feedback. It’s not that someone tells me, ‘yes, that was a mistake’, or ‘that was a big mistake but I understand you anyway’. This is something you won’t hear. You never know that you did something wrong before you actually did something wrong, and this is when it’s maybe already too late.

Appropriate behaviour in collegial settings and in relation to managers was difficult for many of the interviewees. Another man in his late 30s said he simply listens to orders from superordinates, otherwise he might *lose face* (thus using an expression similar to Goffman’s (1990) dramaturgical understanding of performance):
Ultimately, it’s the boss who decides. No matter how much you may think that this is wrong. This is just the way it is. [. . .] The Swedish culture allows an employee to question a manager’s decision, and that I can say this decision is wrong for this or that reason. One is listened to and respected, in Sweden. But here, I got the impression that this is less the case, no attention is paid to that. (Man, London, late 30s)

The quote above exemplifies what the majority of the Swedish migrants expressed: difficulties in accepting the working climate and customs in the country of destination, which caused an inability to accept the current social setting. The emotional expression indicates the need to renegotiate their status position in order to achieve respect in the workplace. Further, it demonstrates a certain perceived and socialized workplace relation culture. In most of the interviews, ‘Swedish’ workplace behaviour had positive connotations, in that past experiences from Sweden reveal the ideal situation. However, negative aspects of such social framing were also put forward:

I think that in Sweden, it’s claimed that we Swedes are such sissies. Swedish managers are sissies. There is a culture of unanimous agreement and we are not supposed to have disagreements. Here, people are more, a manager is not afraid of disagreements, to say things that create uneasiness. To dress someone down: ‘You made a mistake there’. A Swedish manager would never approach an employee and say: ‘You made a mistake there’. Just like when I once was told, on one occasion, my British manager said: ‘This thing slipped through your fingers. This document.’ Even if it wasn’t me who compiled it. ‘This document, that is dogs’ breakfast.’ (Man, London, mid-40s)

The interviewee felt rather offended when his manager called him into his office and said he had not performed satisfactorily on a previous task. However, the social frames in a collegial setting can quickly change. The interviewee was immensely surprised by how directly the critique was delivered. While reflecting upon it, the interviewee realized that his only possibility was to (quoting) ‘rewrite it. It slipped through my fingers, so it was my fault.’ Moreover, he expressed that he could understand his manager’s situation and why she was ‘forced’ to ‘crawl for the bigwigs and bully the underlings’. Still, he struggled a great deal with handling this experience without feeling ashamed, though the lesson he learned was how to appropriately handle unpleasant situations. Next time, he would not become upset, because ‘the most important thing is how I behave, the impression I make on my manager’. Thus, what matters is one’s own effort and ability to adapt to a given circumstance, to maintain the impression, even though this type of othering limits interviewees’ mode of behaviour and action in professional situations.

It appears that the managers’ rather straightforward attitudes gave migrants an understanding of accepted workplace behaviour. Following managers’ orders gave a sense of security, though not knowing how to handle these situations was challenging. In sum, the interviewed migrants’ adaptation and acceptance of a latent feeling of shame may challenge a potential transnational feeling for the game in their professional field (cf. Nedelcu, 2012). Further, the behaviour of both the migrant and the employer can describe a framing of existing norms in the given context. Questioning or changing existing norms seems rather unusual, as only respected and powerful people may successfully change the social frames.
**Otherness as a resource**

In some collegial settings, professional behaviour, subject to cultural norms and values, could remain unchanged and some individuals even felt they were rewarded for confronting taken-for-granted behaviours. In these situations, the *feeling of pride* as ‘a Swede’ was important and gave further confidence to challenge and change norms and social expectations (reflecting the importance of status position, see Goffman, 1986). Above, being an immigrant meant managing the impression by redefining workplace social frames. For example, the interviewee appreciated the manager’s rather straightforward attitude described above, as he no longer (quoting) ‘needs to guess’ about what constitutes appropriate behaviour. These experiences made him challenge the previously appreciated Swedish consensus-workplace setting. Thus, employment in new social settings creates a different feeling for the game and (formal) recognition of being an outsider, through which the migrant employee might gain new perspectives while abroad.

The experience of living and working in a professional setting abroad was often characterized as a way to become ‘a more open-minded human being [through migration] and to have a greater degree of understanding for different points of view. [. . .] One becomes more cosmopolitan by spending time with other nationalities’ (man, Munich, late 30s), meanwhile referring to ‘other nationalities’ as ‘expatriates from Western European countries or the US’. Other examples contradict such generalized migration experiences, namely that the experience abroad automatically renders them ‘more tolerant and open-minded’ than native-born colleagues. Rather, most interviewees have a privileged position as educated Swedes, which enables them to spend time with other (privileged) nationalities and to integrate: ‘Most often, we’re quite tall, with light complexions and all of this. So, I mean, just by looking at us, you cannot say “she is like this and he is like that”’. Basically, we do blend in’ (woman, London, mid-30s). The migrant’s self-image of being a tolerant employee who appreciates organizational differences can also be used when failing to master the professional setting. In fact, the migrants’ otherness combined with their status position (e.g. a white Northern European employee) created new social liberties for them, in that they maintained a respectable position even when they broke norms and challenged the prevailing attitudes or expectations at work. Such a situation is illustrated in the following quote:

I was stubborn and wanted to use first names, especially in such a small organization like ours. The organization consisted of maybe seven [units]. And then there was a large and a smaller unit, with five or six employees each. So, that was not too many people . . . But there was a German who said: ‘But [name of interviewee], you cannot address a colleague using the first name, in such a case one cannot compete for the same position’. No, I said. But it turned out my way (laughs). So, *we Swedes*, we were successful in one respect, we carried out a ‘you’ reform here. At least among units. (Woman, Munich, early 50s)

The interviewee confronted the social establishment in her workplace; for her it was important to implement the German second-person singular pronoun ‘du’ as a universal form of address in her local workplace – the same usage she was familiar with from Sweden, where the country stopped using the plural ‘you’, or ‘ni’, to address superiors in the 1960s.
For the interviewee, it took several years to get this small-scale ‘du-reform’ acknowledged, in the end with help from other Scandinavians working in the same company.

In another example, a woman living in Munich, in her late 20s, with parents from Southern Europe who migrated to Sweden in the 1980s, expressed that ‘I will always be a foreigner, wherever I live’ (referring to her dark brown hair and non-Swedish name). Her story expressed a constant feeling of being in opposition, which actually liberated her impression management: she did not need to ‘pretend’ to fit in and to be accepted, as she was aware that she does not belong to the main establishment anyway. In fact, she felt she did not even properly belong to the networks and (quoting) ‘social free-zones’ of Swedes abroad, and therefore she did not identify herself as a superior outsider: she was (quoting, own italic) ‘just a simple immigrant’. Still, she mentioned that the digital communities connecting Swedes abroad were important for her wellbeing. For her, recognition from other Swedes was more easily accessible via digital, and thus non-face-to-face, social interaction.

For two well-educated employees with Asperger’s syndrome, previous experiences of being outsiders in Sweden caused a desire and reason to seek work abroad. This experience, in combination with the outsider status as migrants, led to a new kind of (social) freedom: in Sweden, they experienced that social skills and socialization with co-workers were important, but complicated their focus on specific tasks and working ‘without constant interruption from fellow colleagues’ (man, London, late 40s). The other interviewee expressed that:

Well, I have Asperger’s syndrome and this makes it a little difficult to find an appropriate workplace in Sweden. Many job offers, well, when you look at the job offers, they say that you should be social and an extrovert and so on. And this is something I definitely am not. Instead, I need a very relaxed workplace. So, open-plan offices do not work for me [. . .] this is more common in Sweden, in my experience. And the demand for being a very communicative person is another thing that is very complicated for me. A cliché is ‘to be able to keep several balls in the air’. And I can definitely say that this is not a straightforward talent for someone with autism. (Man, Munich, early 40s)

As shown, the two interviewees with Asperger’s syndrome felt like outsiders in Sweden. Their experiences abroad were that they could mind their own business as long as their managers were satisfied with their work. They did not need to socialize and work in teams to the same extent as in Sweden. Above all, being a migrant also allowed for a certain level of ‘odd’ behaviour in collegial settings.

To conclude, the interviewees’ life abroad sometimes generated (rather unexpected) resources, liberating their behaviour and allowing them to challenge norms and social expectations from their past experience in Sweden. The social framing that shapes otherness at work was in most cases a rather privileged otherness, formed by deeply rooted and embodied collective histories. In fact, perceived otherness might matter differently when grounded in sameness (e.g. having a light complexion, see Ahmed, 2007); a self-image that turns them (by default) into insiders but at the same time into (superior) outsiders. Thus, being open-minded to ‘other’ cultures might be connected to the migrants’ position as (white) middle-class Western Europeans, as they are less likely to confront
potential racism (or discrimination) compared to other, more vulnerable migrant groups. Furthermore, the identities reflected in interviews were often connected to feelings of superiority, as the interviewees were aware of their transnational privileges through the ability to leave and return to their home country: Sweden. As professional disruptions did occur rather unexpectedly, strategies to handle such situations were interlinked with their self-image, which enabled them to challenge norms.

**Conclusion**

Increased incentives for European transnational labour mobility among the well-educated have taken shape over the past decades. In the present article, highly skilled Swedish labour migrants, employed in the UK or Germany, were assumed to possess an educational and middle-class habitus similar to that of their colleagues in their countries of destination (Ashley and Empson, 2017). As shown in the study, however, this was not always the case. Through its focus on implicit assumptions connected to norm-breaking behaviour in the workplace and the migrants’ strategies used to deal with (potential) ‘otherness’ in the workplace, the article renders visible invisible cultural norms and values that are otherwise taken for granted within the European rhetoric claiming equality of transnational labour migration. Highly skilled trans-mobile European employees possess a certain privilege compared to other groups who might experience more locally bound employment opportunities. Besides the highly skilled migrants’ formal qualifications, having a light complexion may provide an important entry into feeling included in the ‘community of mobile individuals’, a recognition affected by hierarchies of belonging (Erel, 2010). Such preconditions and self-perceptions on the part of the interviewees in the present study made them superior outsiders, a position that enabled them to challenge (and sometimes even change) norms. However, not all white Europeans have such positions of (imagined) superiority, reflecting the discussed difference between East–West European labour migration (Samaluk, 2016): interviewees who were second-generation immigrants to Sweden had a constant feeling of being in opposition, they were aware of not belonging to the main establishment (describing themselves as a ‘simple migrant’ in opposition to the more superior white-coloured Swede), wherefore their norm-breaking was expected and therefore easier to handle. In fact, migrants’ social background may affect their potential to obtain (local) recognition of capital while searching for employment; for example, via access to relevant networks and embodied habitus (in line with Bourdieu, 1990).

Thus, it is important to recognize that individuals’ performances are legitimized in different ways, depending on social status and context (see Tatlu and Özbilgin, 2012). However, despite sectoral differences in employment conditions or work cultural differences between the UK and Germany, the Swedish migrants experienced their position and otherness in a rather similar way: their feeling of being ‘at home’ is negated when they are positioned outside their comfort zone, outside the Swedish labour market with its own ideals, values and social mechanisms related to, for example, hierarchal relations and language codes. Thus, they transgress the taken-for-granted norms within their professional and context-specific social field (Huot and Rudman, 2010). Furthermore, when migrants’ otherness is perceived as a resource (rather than a constraint), it provides a
possibility to change the social frames in their workplace setting. Such a distinction describes how the micro-level interactions may affect the macro-level order; that is, how performances come to be legitimized in a particular social establishment. Thus, feeling ‘at home’ is most likely socially oriented; it is constructed in interactions with others and affected by historical narratives of belonging (because Western Europeans are more likely to perceive their otherness as a resource).

Despite the rather micro-oriented order emphasized in a social interaction (Goffman, 1986), it is important to conceptualize the workplace settings in relation to a macro-structured order (see also Huot and Rudman, 2010). The results generated herein highlight the importance of culturally oriented values in framing both accepted formal and informal professional behaviour. These cultural frames are embodied via habitus, providing implicit norms that facilitate social interaction. Thus, the norms change depending on social context (Scheer, 2012). For someone to feel socially liberated when transgressing norms, a feeling of pride and respect might be important. Moreover, such feelings would seem to be connected to structural conditions and a perceived ability to exit (see Hannerz, 2006) the current workplace without loss of social security – in this case by remaining on leave from a permanent employment contract in Sweden or relying on a collegial network of Swedes within the origin as well as the destination context. The perceived ability to exit allows the migrants to take a more distanced strategy in situations of norm-breaking, enabling them to retain their status and feel respected even in situations of low adaptability to the specific work-life culture. However, a feeling of not belonging to the category of Swedish migrants abroad, not being able to enjoy the white privilege it is associated with, can also become liberating; then you do not need to pretend to fit in as you may feel like an outsider anyway. Yet, when a feeling of shame appeared in a social setting, norm-breaking was perceived in a constraining manner: rather surprisingly, a person who may expect to move rather freely across social and cultural borders (due to his/her privileged Western origins) may suddenly feel unable to maintain that impression. In such situations, the migrants may blame the norm – not themselves – for behaving improperly, thus elevating them to the position of (a self-imagined) superior other.

The present article puts forward problems associated with achieving an inclusive professional social field, where the understandings of local society and competences are integrated transnationally. In fact, the construction of an inclusive European transnational labour market would seem to be a more complex project to achieve than by solely promoting standardization of qualifications (cf. Eurydice, 2012). Inevitably, transnational mobility causes disruptions due to a change of social context – both privately and professionally. Considering that plenty of research on EU/EEA mobility focuses on migration from central and eastern Europe, some of it also utilizing a Bourdieuan lens to explore migration, whiteness and ethnic privilege at work (Anderson et al., 2006; Currie, 2007; Samaluk, 2016; Vershinina et al., 2011), this article fills a gap in the research looking at intra-EU migration of highly skilled individuals from Western European countries. While intra-European migrants from Central and Eastern Europe may choose self-deskilling due to a perceived self-inferiority (Samaluk, 2016), migrants from Western countries like Sweden instead express an imagined self-superiority. Owing to such privileged self-image reflected in their embodied habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), Swedish migrants can expect a personal recognition and acceptance while they are not expected to integrate
in the local workplace. Instead, their self-superiority allows migrants to escape the disciplinary aspects of impression management by becoming disloyal to the social settings at work, which enables them to challenge norms and confront hierarchal relations at the workplace. However, the experienced otherness stands in sharp contrast to their expectations, making the mobility become more difficult than expected.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the editors and the three anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I am indebted to Associate Professor Gabriella Elgenius and Professor Kerstin Jacobsson, University of Gothenburg, who both shared their valuable time and insightful comments in order to make this publication possible. Last, but not least, many thanks to all interviewees.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Highly skilled migrants are defined according to ISCO-08 Major Group 2; that is, completed a minimum first or second stage of tertiary education (see ILO, 2012).
2. See Wallinder (2018) for a more thorough description of the sample.
3. Despite differences between the two destination countries regarding national context, the analysis showed no systematic differences between the two samples. Instead, experiences and strategies employed by the migrants were similar; all grew up and were trained in the Swedish school system, which shaped their expectations and cultural preferences abroad.
4. In both regions, e-mail lists and Facebook groups of the local Swedish churches (Svenska kyrkan), Svenskar i världen (SVIV) and the Swedish Women’s Educational Association (SWEA) constituted platforms for recruiting interviewees.
5. Both interviewees were diagnosed as adults.

References

Ahmed S (2007) A phenomenology of whiteness. Feminist Theory 8(2): 149–168.
Anderson B, Ruhs M, Rogaly B, et al. (2006) Fair Enough? Central and Eastern European Migrants in Low-Wage Employment in the UK. York: The Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
Andreotti A, Le Galés P and Moreno-Fuentes F-J (2015) Globalised Minds, Roots in the City: Urban Upper Middle Classes in Europe. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
Ashley L and Empson L (2017) Understanding social exclusion in elite professional service firms: field level dynamics and the ‘professional project’. Work, Employment and Society 31(2): 211–229.
Berglund T, Håkansson K, Isidorsson T, et al. (2017) Temporary employment and the future labor market status. Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies 7(2): 27–48.
Bourdieu P (1990) The Logic of Practice. Cambridge: Polity.
Bruzelius C, Chase E and Seeleib-Kaiser M (2016) Social rights of EU migrant citizens: Britain and Germany compared. Social Policy and Society 15: 403–416.
Burrell K (2016) Polish Migration to the UK in the ‘New’ European Union: After 2004. London: Routledge.
Charmaz K (2014) Constructing Grounded Theory. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
Currie S (2007) De-skilled and devalued: the labour market experience of Polish migrants in the UK following enlargement. *International Journal of Comparative Labour Law and Industrial Relations* 23(1): 83–116.

Erel U (2010) Migrating cultural capital: Bourdieu in migration studies. *Sociology* 44(4): 642–660.

Eurydice (2012) *The European Higher Education Area in 2012: Bologna Process Implementation Report.* 25 April. Brussels: Eurydice.

Faist T, Fauser M and Reisenauer E (2013) *Transnational Migration.* Cambridge: Polity.

Girard E-R and Bauder H (2007) Assimilation and exclusion of foreign trained engineers in Canada: inside a professional regulatory organization. *Antipode* 39(1): 35–53.

Goffman E (1986) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience.* Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

Goffman E (1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* London: Penguin.

Goffman E (1967) *Interaction ritual: essays in face-to-face behavior.* Chicago: Aldine.

Grabowska I (2017) Social skills, workplaces and social remittances: a case of post-accession migrants. *Work, Employment and Society* 32(5): 868–886.

Hannerz U (2006) Two faces of cosmopolitanism: culture and politics. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 107(3): 199–213.

Huot S and Rudman D-L (2010) The performances and places of identity: conceptualizing intersections of occupation, identity and place in the process of migration. *Journal of Occupational Science* 17(2): 68–77.

International Labour Office (ILO) (2012) *International Standard Classification of Occupations. Structure, Group Definitions and Correspondence Tables. ISCO-08,* vol. 1. Geneva: ILO.

Lehman W and Taylor A (2016) On the role of habitus and field in apprenticeship. *Work, Employment and Society* 29(4): 607–623.

Lindberg O (2009) Nyttig, utvald eller bildad? Tre sätt att se på den högre utbildningens funktion. In: Sparhoff G and Fejes A (eds) *Anställningsbarhet: perspektiv från utbildning och arbetsliv.* Lund: Studentlitteratur, 39–54.

Lulle A, Morosanu L and King R (2017) And then came Brexit: experiences and future plans of youth EU migrants in the London region. *Population, Space and Place* 24: e2122.

Lundström C (2010) Women with class: Swedish migrant women’s class positions in the USA. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31(1): 49–63.

Marshall J and Foster N (2002) ‘Between belonging’: habitus and the migration experience. *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe Canadien* 46: 63–83.

Nedelcu M (2012) Migrants’ new transnational habitus: rethinking migration through a cosmopolitan lens in the digital age. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38: 1339–1356.

Nohl AM, Schittenheim K, Schmidike O, et al. (2014) *Work in Transition: Cultural Capital and Highly Skilled Migrants’ Passages into the Labour Market.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Samaluk B (2016) Migrant workers’ engagement with labour market intermediaries in Europe: symbolic power guiding transnational exchange. *Work, Employment and Society* 30(3): 455–471.

Scheer M (2012) Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion. *History and Theory* 51: 193–220.

Schütz A (1944) The stranger: an essay in social psychology. *American Journal of Sociology* 49(6): 499–507.

Skłair L (2001) *The Transnational Capitalist Class.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Spence C, Carter C, Belal A, et al. (2016) Tracking habitus across a transnational professional field. *Work, Employment and Society* 30(1): 3–20.
Tatlu A and Özbilgin M (2012) Surprising intersectionalities of inequality and privilege: the case of the arts and cultural sector. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* 31(3): 249–265.

Tilly C (2005) *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties*. London: Paradigm Publisher.

Vershinina N, Barrett R and Meyer M (2011) Forms of capital, intra-ethnic variation and Polish entrepreneurs in Leicester. *Work, Employment and Society* 25(1): 101–117.

Wallinder Y (2018) *Imagined independence. Institutional conditions and individual opportunities in European labour markets*. PhD Thesis, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Wallinder Y (2019) Imagined independence among highly skilled Swedish labour migrants. *Sociologisk Forskning* 56(1): 27–51.

Weiss A (2005) The transnationalization of social inequality: conceptualizing social positions on a world scale. *Current Sociology* 53(4): 707–728.

Ylva Wallinder has a PhD in Sociology from the Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg entitled *Imagined independence. Institutional conditions and Individual opportunities in European labour markets*. The focus of her compilation thesis is on conditions for labour market opportunities and labour market mobility within the European Union. She is currently employed as a postdoc at the Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg.

**Date submitted** August 2018

**Date accepted** May 2021