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Occupational meaning, well-being and coping: A study of culturally and linguistically diverse hotel workers during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Given COVID-19’s disproportionate adverse impact on hospitality employees, we explore the proposition that COVID-19-related career challenges prompt CALD hospitality workers to rethink the meaning and purpose of work to explore ways to cope and restore occupational well-being, thus triggering occupational change. Thematic analysis of qualitative data from interviews with 25 CALD hotel workers reveal different sub-groups of CALD hotel workers differentially cognitively frame pandemic-induced employment changes to cope and restore occupational well-being: 1. as an opportunity for behavioral (occupational) change by CALD workers in refugee jobs; 2. as a temporary phenomenon, with CALD workers who were temporary migrants foreseeing positive career outcomes; and 3. as an opportunity for behavioral (occupational) advancement in hotels by CALD workers who were permanent residents with hospitality qualifications. We contribute to literature at the intersection of coping and occupational well-being research in hospitality, providing a fine-grained understanding of how CALD hotel workers coped and restored occupational well-being, by differentially reconstruing the meaning of work and undertaking occupational change, be it cognitive or behavioral.

1. Introduction

Work is widely acknowledged as a key determinant of well-being. Thus seismic shifts in the way hospitality businesses operate as a consequence of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., lockdowns, shelter-at-home orders, social distancing policies etc.) have put hospitality workers globally at risk of unemployment, underemployment, furloughing, and job insecurity (Kausch & Srivastava, 2021), with consequential adverse implications for their well-being (Srivastava & Gupta, 2021). For example, in a study of the impact of COVID-19 on the well-being of laid-off and furloughed hospitality employees, Chen and Chen, 2021 report a high level of psychological distress among hospitality workers, manifest in poor well-being which is associated with increased intentions to exit the sector. Sönmez, Apostolopoulos, Lemke, and Hsieh (2020) conclude that the stress experienced by immigrant workers in hotels and restaurants has been amplified as a consequence of job losses, shining a spotlight on the US’s socioeconomic and health inequalities. Conversely, Liu-Lastres and Wen (2021) found that ethnic minority employees with higher well-being at work are more likely to commit to their organization and less likely to leave. Hence, beyond its influence on people’s physical health, COVID-19 has impacted hospitality workers’ occupational well-being (OWB), defined as “a positive evaluation of various aspects of one’s job, including affecting, motivational, behavioral, cognitive and psychosomatic dimensions” (Van Horn, Taris, Schaufeli, and Schreurs, 2004, p. 366).

Despite increasing empirical research on employee well-being in hospitality in the COVID-19 context in general (Ayachit & Chitta, 2021; Liu-Lastres & Wen, 2021; Singh, Bhatia, & Nigam, 2021; Srivastava & Gupta, 2021; Yu, Park, & Hyun, 2021), with few exceptions (Sönmez et al., 2020) little is known about how the careers of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) hospitality workers are impacted by public health crises such as COVID-19, nor how CALD workers cope with unemployment, underemployment, furloughing, and job insecurity (Liu-Lastres & Wen, 2021). In this study, coping refers to ‘changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person’ (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 141).

As CALD hospitality workers account for a disproportionate share of workers in precarious employment (Irvine & Rose, 2020) they may expect to be especially vulnerable during the pandemic (Wrzesniewski, LoBuglio, Dutton, & Berg, 2013). According to the dominant view, and conventional logic then, CALD workers will be disproportionately
adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, on the basis that they work in insecure jobs with limited access to social protection (Kantamneni, 2020). Thus, they are the first to be furloughed in times of crisis, with concomitant adverse consequences for their OWB. However, a counter argument is unemployment and its variants (i.e., being furloughed or underemployed) can lead CALD workers to re-consider their occupational choices, explore new occupational opportunities, and change occupations and/or sectors, leading to improved job quality (Zikic & Klehe, 2006), with positive benefits for their well-being (Kniffin et al., 2021). 

Empirical evidence on how exactly unemployment, underemployment, furloughing, and job insecurity (hereafter referred to as ‘pandemic-induced employment changes’) have impacted CALD hospitality workers’ OWB is scant leading to calls for further research (Chen and Chen, 2021; Scheuring, 2020; Sonmez et al., 2020). Chen and Chen, 2021 for example, call for research beyond the immediate impacts of COVID-19, including research on the quality of reemployment of those laid-off, while Sigala (2020) highlight the need for work to understand actions and reactions to COVID-19, including emotional, behavioral and cognitive responses. This lack of research on OWB in the COVID-19 context is surprising, given that OWB is widely recognized as an important predictor of employee performance, as well as turnover and absenteeism rates (Sun, Song, & Li, 2021) – problems endemic in hospitality (Ryan, Ma, Hsiao, & Ku, 2015).

Integrating OWB, coping and career literatures, we explore the proposition that COVID-19-related career challenges prompt CALD hospitality workers to rethink the meaning and purpose of their work to explore ways to cope and restore or maintain OWB, thus triggering occupational change, be it attitudinal or behavioral. The context for the study is CALD workers in the hotel sector in Australia during the pandemic, as hotels, and the hospitality and tourism sector more broadly, are significant employers of CALD workers (Manoharan, Jones, Jiang, & Singal, 2021). CALD workers comprise individuals who were born outside of Australia and do not speak English as their first language (Rowe, Gavriel Ansara, Jaworski, Higgs, & Clare, 2020). Despite representing a substantial proportion of hospitality workforces in Australia (Manoharan, Sardeshmukh, & Gross, 2019) and elsewhere (Liui-Lastres & Wen, 2021; Sonmez et al., 2020), CALD workers remain underrepresented in hospitality research in general (Sonmez et al., 2020) and in studies on workers’ careers in hospitality in particular (Manoharan, Jones, et al., 2021). In Australia, as in many places, many hospitality firms remain unable to operate at full capacity due to social distancing restrictions and snap lockdowns, underscores the need for such research on the sector’s most vulnerable workers (Sonmez et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020).

In doing so, the current study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, our study extends recent work on ethnic minority workers’ perceived employee well-being (Liui-Lastres & Wen, 2021), and COVID-related employee well-being and coping (Chen & Chen, 2021; Yin & Ni, 2021) to include minority workers’ occupational well-being and coping in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By disaggregating CALD workers based on their migrant status and qualifications and explicating the coping strategies that different sub-groups of CALD workers use to manage COVID-19-induced employment changes, we provide a granular understanding of how CALD workers’ differential coping strategies restored their OWB. Understanding how CALD workers cope represents an important step in mitigating the detrimental employment effects of the pandemic (Venkatesh, 2020). This continues to be of considerable practical significance, as new COVID-19 variants evolve, with adverse implications for businesses, their workers and their careers.

Relatedly, our findings also contribute to recent research on the refugee hypothesis (Treuren, Manoharan, & Vishnu, 2021). By providing qualitative empirical evidence from actual migrants that hospitality provided ‘refugee’ jobs as they struggled to find more suitable employment, we add to hitherto empirical evidence stemming from proxies showing that migrants who leave their occupations are more likely to find employment in hospitality than other industries (Treuren et al., 2021).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews literature on CALD workers in hospitality, OWB and coping to reconstrue occupational meaning and well-being in hospitality and tourism. Section 3 overviews the research design and data analysis. Results are presented in Section 4 and discussed in Section 5. Section 6 provides theoretical and practical implications and Section 7 the limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural and linguistic diversity in hospitality

Research shows that the CALD workforce accounts for a disproportionate share of insecure work arrangements such as temporary jobs (Irvine & Rose, 2020). This is a typical phenomenon in the hospitality industry of developed economies, where the workforce is historically characterized by diverse cultural, linguistic, and national backgrounds (Wright, Knox, & Constantin, 2019). For instance, in the hotel sector of Australia, immigrant workers have become an essential workforce but are among the most vulnerable to employment instability due to the temporary nature of their jobs (Manoharan et al., 2019). Likewise, ethnic minority workers comprising Hispanic/Latinos and African Americans in the US account for more than 30 per cent of all hospitality employees (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

COVID-19 has further heightened the employment precarity of CALD hotel workers by creating an additional layer of uncertainty (Stuart, Spencer, McLachlan, & Forde, 2021). The pandemic-associated employment challenges occurred abruptly and offered few opportunities to predict and respond. Such unexpected, worsened precarity not only creates discordant experiences for now but profoundly unsettles individuals’ expectations about their future (Ayala-Hurtado, 2021). It challenges an individual’s mindset and vision toward his or her current profession (Wordsworth & Nilakant, 2021) and, when not effectively coped with, confuses one’s career identity and leads to a vicious cycle that is detrimental to an individual’s OWB (Akkersmans, Collings, da Motta Veiga, Post, & Seibert, 2021; Akkersmans, Rodrigues, Mol, Seibert, & Khapova, 2021). To thrive rather than languish in the world of changing or unpredictable employment context, individuals, particularly those facing work precarity in a chosen field, may need to reshape their own narratives or perspectives about the purpose of the work or the occupation to direct their future career development (Abkhez, McMahon, Glasheen, & Campbell, 2018). To do this, they would need to reconstrue the meaning of their occupation to identify new ways to cope that can enable occupational wellness, which benefits long-term career progression.

2.2. Occupational well-being (OWB)

Well-being is broadly defined as individuals’ subjective appraisal of their own lives regarding what extent they have reached optimal psychological functioning and experience (Sonnenstag, 2015). There are two major philosophical traditions that drive the extant research in well-being. The first resides in a hedonic perspective and regards well-being as subjective satisfaction, pleasure, enjoyment, or happiness in life (Diener, 2012; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). This approach concerns an individual’s affective experience that indicates that he or she is feeling good (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The second tradition takes a eudaimonic perspective to view a person’s well-being as development, growth, self-actualization, personal expressiveness of the self, and a sense of meaning (Ryff, 1995; Waterman, 1993), thereby involving people’s thinking and doing that leads them to live a positive, meaningful life (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Despite the fact that the differential approaches underling well-being research, the core fundamental of
well-being roots in the “subjective experience of feeling good and/or feeling authentic and meaningful in one’s life” (Sonntag, 2015, p. 263).

These perspectives have been featured in research of well-being in work and occupational contexts. The basic premise underlying OWB is that people orchestrate their professional lives in a patterned manner to satisfy their occupational needs (Doble & Santha, 2008). It is rooted in the assumption that occupational life is important for one to define and identity meaning of their lives, and occupational engagement of dignity and meaning is an essential indicator of one’s overall well-being. For example, as Thomas et al. (2017) emphasized, OWB captures “the influence of one’s engagement in a variety of occupations, in the context of the social environment and one’s sense of identity” (p. 182). Through meaningful engagement in occupational settings on a daily basis, individuals tend to build meaning and identity in occupations that help express exquisite individuality (Thomas et al., 2017).

Grounded in its basic premise, OWB has been defined in various ways. As mentioned earlier, integrating the core fundamentals of the well-being concept, Van Horn et al. (2004, p. 366) conceptualize OWB as a positive, subjective assessment of one’s own job or occupation, which consists of affective, motivational, behavioral, cognitive, and psychological aspects. This conceptualization covers both hedonic and eudaimonic components of well-being in an occupational setting. For example, affective well-being concerns individuals’ positive affect or low levels of negative affect (including lack of emotional exhaustion) in their occupational life (Le, Jiang, Fujimoto, & Nielsen, 2018; Warr, 1987). Motivational well-being captures one’s personal growth, aspiration, and purpose in career and professional development (Kronewett & Rigotti, 2020; Van Horn et al., 2004). Behavioral well-being, or social well-being, relates to one’s engagement in social environment and reflects the individuals’ quality of social functioning (e.g., quality of relationships or social interactions with others) in career contexts (Grant et al., 2007). These diverse but interrelated dimensions of well-being in occupational contexts involve affect, cognitions, and behaviors that manifest an individual as a career engager heading toward a positive direction, psychologically and socially. Other definitions or conceptualizations of OWB in the literature are largely in concert with these well-being dimensions. For instance, Hammell and Iwama (2012) defined well-being as “a state of contentment - or harmony - with one’s physical/mental health; emotional/spiritual health; personal and economic security; self-worth; sense of belonging; opportunities for self-determination; opportunities to engage in meaningful and purposeful occupations; and sense of hope” (p. 387). Also, capturing part of Van Horn et al.’s (2004) conceptualization, Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, and Baumert (2008) define OWB to reflect less emotional exhaustion and more job satisfaction. Such a narrow scope is also observed in other works such as Zacher et al. (2014) who conceptualize OWB as a combination of less fatigue and more vitality. In this article, we focus on Van Horn et al.’s definition, for it is comprehensive and has been dominant in existing OWB literature.

2.3. Coping: reconstruing occupational meaning and well-being

OWB is a desirable status, based on which individuals can gauge if their internal attributes or their contextual attributes are helping their careers progress in a personally meaningful way (Röllmann, Weiss, & Zacher, 2021; Van Horn et al., 2004). Since OWB fuels individuals with affective and cognitive motivations to engage in and adapt to work and vocational changes (Schmitt, Zacher, & Frese, 2012; Sonntag, 2015), it is a key to their sustainable career success. As such, maintaining and restoring OWB is a priority that the employee and the employer need to set when responding to dynamic changes in the uncertain world of work.

In employment circumstances that are highly precarious and unpredictable (e.g., COVID-19), sustaining OWB requires one to go beyond the status quo, initiate new ways of thinking and doing, and self-regulate to seek a meaningful sense of their careers (Grote & Pfombeck, 2020; Koopmann, Liu, Liang, & Liu, 2021). In many situations, this requires a combination of reflective and forward perspectives an individual may take to manage unexpected, precarious occupational conditions (De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020; Wordsworth & Nilakant, 2021). A typical example is that, during career shocks where employment precariousness becomes salient, individuals may need to reconstrue the meaning of an occupation relevant to their personal circumstances to reconstruct an occupational identity (Vallas & Christin, 2018; Vallas & Hill, 2018) that allows them to achieve OWB and success. In this case, reconstruing occupational meaning involves both reflecting on one’s occupational experiences and envisioning a career future; reconstruing occupational meaning serves as a critical coping strategy to manage challenges that threaten a person’s long-term career well-being.

Consistent with these views, research has reported that individuals respond to employment precariousness and uncertainties by reconstruing their occupational meaning, drawing upon the experience and existing knowledge or mindsets. For instance, disadvantaged individuals are triggered to rely on narratives that are based on unique or salient cultural or value systems to imagine career futures (Frye, 2012). This imagination also builds on their reflection of various aspects of the precarious employment experience and the facilitation of this reflection in understanding and adapting to the current occupational challenges (Ayala-Hurtado, 2021; Vallas & Christin, 2018). For example, researchers found that temporary migrant workers in Australia draw upon their culture-related background, knowledge, and skills as well as their occupational experience to contemplate their work and associated factors influencing the work, and this represents an ongoing process to self-monitor well-being and to adapt to occupational, social, and cultural contexts (Bahn, 2015).

It appears clear that, while the reconstruing process starts from the past, the experience, and existing facts, it enlightens a future, change-oriented focus. For instance, scholars suggest that workers facing precarious employment try to understand their past and current job situations and use this understanding to guide future actions. This process leads them to determine whether to disengage from the current work or whether to continue with their original occupational or career goals (Ayala-Hurtado, 2021; Smith, 2018). For instance, research indicates an individual’s reconstruing personal occupational meaning based on cultural norms and identity can often shape alternative career aspirations, particularly when this reconstruing originates in an unstable occupational situation (Matlon, 2016). From the perspective of OWB, seeking alternative aspirations can be a feasible way to generate more positive affective experience and greater growth potential (Van Horn et al., 2004; Warr, 1994). As stated above, to a large extent, the literature in this area implies that unsettling career challenges could potentially prompt workers to cope by rereading the meaning and purpose of their work to explore ways to maintain OWB, and thus trigger occupational change, either attitudinal or behavioral change. Thus, coping entails an individual evaluate their circumstances and mobilize behavioral and/or cognitive responses to manage their situation (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Pratt & Tolkach, 2022). Behavioral responses involve changing the stress causing environment while cognitive response refers to changing one’s view or mindset regarding the environment.

2.4. COVID-related well-being and coping responses: hospitality and tourism employees

As noted above, there is a paucity of empirical evidence on COVID-19-related coping strategies of immigrants and other marginalised groups of hospitality and tourism workers (Sigala, 2020). Research on the impact of COVID-19 on the emotions or behaviors of employees in general in tourism enterprises in China reveals that the effect of COVID-19 event strength on fear of external threat is positive and negative on psychological safety, with fear of external threat also negatively affecting psychological safety (Yin & Ni, 2021). Further,
COVID-19 event strength indirectly affects avoidance coping behavior through the fear of external threat or psychological safety, while supervisor safety support moderates the effect of psychological safety on avoidance coping behaviors. Yin, Bi & Ni (2022) also report that COVID-19 event indirectly influences the turnover intention of hotel employees through the effect of job insecurity and operating performance perception. Chen and Chen (2021) find that unemployed and furloughed hospitality workers in the US experienced financial distress, social isolation, and panic due to COVID-19, which reduced their personal control and well-being, leading to increased depression and intention to exit the hospitality sector. Further, furloughed employees experienced fewer adverse effects relative to their laid-off counterparts (i.e., less social isolation, depression and higher personal control and well-being). However, employees who were female and younger were impacted more adversely (i.e., more panicked and depressive manifest in reduced well-being, and more socially isolated and depressive and less personal control, respectively).

3. Research design

Given the dearth of empirical evidence on how CALD hospitality workers cope with COVID-19 related employment changes and their OWB, a qualitative research design was selected to explore the research proposition. Thus, this research sits at the end of the research methodology continuum based on an interpretative perspective that seeks to provide rich insights into contemporary social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2003).

3.1. Sample and recruitment

The research draws on semi-structured interviews with CALD hotel workers, defined as workers who were born outside of Australia and whose first language is not English; and who currently work in Australia’s hotel sector, or, as a result of COVID-19-related employment changes, have stopped working in the hotel sector. We incorporated additional sampling criteria (i.e., migrant status, gender, age, hospitality vs. non-hospitality qualifications, managerial and non-managerial workers and country of birth) to facilitate a diverse sample with a variety of experiences.

To recruit respondents, purposive sampling was used. The respondents were initially contacted through the author’s professional network, as we had difficulty accessing hotels and obtaining respondents due to COVID-19. Snowball sampling was then undertaken, with the initial respondents asked to refer colleagues working in hotels to our study. In total, 25 CALD workers agreed to participate in the study, 11 of whom were women and 14 were men. Fifteen respondents had some form of hospitality qualification, while seven respondents had qualifications in areas outside of hospitality including in business, engineering, and architecture (Table 1). Ten respondents were temporary residents and remaining respondents were permanent residents. Respondents originated from a range of countries, however a significant proportion were from India (68% or 17) reflecting that India is the second largest source of migrants to Australia (ABS, 2020), with temporary sponsored skilled migrants from India also predominantly employed in the Australian hospitality industry (Department of Home Affairs, 2020). Vietnam, Pakistan, and Nepal are also significant sources of migrants, and accordingly, are represented in the sample (Department of Home Affairs, 2020). Participants worked in a range of hotel departments including housekeeping (40% or 10), food and beverage (28% or 7), kitchen (16% or 3), front office (8% or 2), and maintenance (4% or 1).

3.2. Data collection

All interviews were conducted by phone due to COVID-19 restrictions in June 2020. The interview protocol comprised a mix of structured and semi-structured questions related to: 1. demographics, including migrant status, country of birth, age, gender and qualification; 2. CALD hotel workers’ employment status and experiences during COVID-19, including how CALD hotel workers coped with and responded to pandemic-induced employment changes, challenges and opportunities; and 3. the well-being of CALD hotel workers during COVID-19. Finally, respondents were encouraged to provide any additional comments about the topic. Appendix 1 provides a copy of the interview guide.

The average length of interviews was 34 min. Consistent with organizational studies (Coghlan & Carter, 2020), interviews were stopped when theoretical saturation was reached (n = 22). However, as an assenting step, we conducted additional interviews (n = 3), and these three-interview content supported the earlier findings from the 22 interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

3.3. Analysis

Transcribed interview data was analyzed thematically. We first familiarized ourselves with the data, by reading and rereading the transcripts. Our analysis began with a first-order interpretation of the data that captured the meaning of how interviewees spoke about their OWB experiences with pandemic-induced employment changes, and how they coped to restore OWB. At this stage, our aim was to represent CALD workers’ experiences of coping with pandemic-induced employment changes and OWB as they understood them. To make sense of the interviewees’ interpretations, we supplemented the first-order analysis with a second-order interpretation of our results in the context of literature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pratt & Tolkach, 2022) on behavioral and/or cognitive efforts to cope with occupational challenges to restore OWB. Hence, we used “abductive logic” (Langley, 1999), an iterative process between inductive data analysis and deduction, through engaging with the literature.

Iterating between first- and second-order analyses enabled us to discern patterns in the data (themes) on how interviewees coped to restore OWB which we distilled into different cognitive and behavioral coping mechanisms. Cognitive coping mechanisms involved job incumbents making psychological changes to how they view the stress causing COVID-19 related employment changes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pratt & Tolkach, 2022). These included: psychologically emphasizing COVID-19-related job transitions as opportunities, reframing the purpose of work to align it with job incumbents’ passions (Batova, 2018); and making psychological changes to the perception that COVID-19 was a threat, hence distancing oneself from the hospitality environment that is otherwise a threat (Bruning & Campion, 2018). Behavioral coping mechanisms comprised job incumbents taking action by changing the stress causing environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pratt & Tolkach, 2022), including making decisions to change occupations, or advance further by taking on new tasks, roles and responsibilities.

As we sought to account for the different cognitive and behavioral coping mechanisms, differences between interviewees according to migrant status started to emerge across the data. Hence, we re-coded interviews according to migrant status, with the transcripts of i.e., CALD workers who were permanent residents’ systematically interrogated alongside the transcripts of CALD workers who were temporary migrants: CALD workers who were permanent residents reframed COVID-19-related challenges as opportunities for behavioral changes, while CALD workers who were temporary migrants framed COVID-19-related challenges as a short-term phenomenon. In this round of

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1 We initially distinguished between CALD workers who were permanent residents and CALD workers who were who have citizenship, but as no differences were evident, we merged the two groups.
were temporary migrants restricting their ability to undertake behavioral changes (i.e., to return to work, change jobs or employers) also became apparent. Further differences emerged in the data of CALD workers who were temporary migrants with hospitality qualifications. In the final stage, we combined themes across the entire interview data and identified three aggregate themes or dimensions that reflect the different ways different sub-groups of CALD workers were making sense of their workplace situation which shaped as an opportunity for (behavioral) occupational change by CALD workers in refugee jobs, and as an opportunity for (behavioral) occupational advancement in hotels by CALD workers who were permanent residents with hospitality qualifications. In the final stage, we combined themes across the entire interview data and identified three aggregate themes or dimensions that reflect the different ways different sub-groups of CALD hotel workers cognitively framed pandemic-induced employment changes to cope and restore OWB: 1. as an opportunity for behavioral (occupational) change by CALD workers in refugee jobs; 2. as a temporary phenomenon, with CALD workers who were temporary migrants foreseeing positive hotel career outcomes; and 3. as an opportunity for behavioral (occupational) advancement in hotels by CALD workers who were permanent residents with hospitality qualifications.

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

| Participant No. | Age | Country of birth | Migrant status | Educational Qualification/country | Refugee job | Department | Employment status, June 2020 |
|-----------------|-----|------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| 1               | 50-54 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor of Physics Diploma –marketing Australian: Cert IV in T&A Cert IV in community service | Yes | Food and beverage service | Part-time |
| 2               | 30-34 | Brazil | Permanent Resident | Brazil: Bachelor of Administration Australia: Enrolled in Master & Hospitality Leadership | Yes | Housekeeping | Part-time, up to 20 h per week |
| 3               | 30-34 | Nepal | Permanent Resident | Australia: Bachelor of Accounting | Yes | Housekeeping | Furloughed |
| 4               | 25-29 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor of Engineering Australia: enrolled in MBA | Yes | Front office | 2 shifts per week |
| 5               | 40-44 | Pakistan | Permanent Resident | Pakistan: Bachelor of Commerce Australia: Diploma in Hospitality | Yes | Hotel Services | Laid, off, position redundant |
| 6               | 35-39 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Master Computer Science | Yes | Food and beverage service | Furloughed |
| 7               | 30-34 | Columbia | Permanent Resident | Australia: Bachelor of Architecture | Yes | Housekeeping | 1-2 shifts per week |
| 8               | 30-34 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor (unspecified) | No | Housekeeping | 1 shift per week |
| 9               | 35-39 | India | Permanent Resident | New Zealand Australia: Diploma in Hospitality | No | Kitchen | Part-time |
| 10              | 30-34 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor of hospitality Australia: Master of Hospitality | No | Front Office | Full-time |
| 11              | 40-44 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor of Hospitality Master’s degree (unspecified) | No | Housekeeping | Full-time |
| 12              | 30-34 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor of hospitality Australia: Master of Hospitality | No | Food and beverage service | Full-time |
| 13              | 25-29 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor of Hospitality – Advanced Diploma (Unspecified) | Yes | Engineering & Maintenance | Permanent part-time |
| 14              | 30-34 | India | Permanent Resident | India: Bachelor of Hospitality – Australia, Diploma in Hospitality | No | Housekeeping | Furloughed |
| 15              | 40-44 | Sri Lanka | Permanent Resident | Sri Lanka: Bachelor of Hospitality | No | Kitchen | Furloughed |
| 16              | 25-29 | India | Temporary migrant | India: Bachelor’s degree (unspecified) Australia: Diploma in Hospitality | No | Housekeeping | Furloughed |
| 17              | 35-39 | India | Temporary migrant | Degree (unspecified) | No | Housekeeping | Furloughed |
| 18              | 25-29 | India | Temporary migrant | Master’s degree (unspecified) | No | Housekeeping | Furloughed |
| 19              | 20-24 | India | Temporary migrant | India: Bachelor of Hospitality Australia: Master of Hospitality | No | Food and Beverage service | Furloughed; then worked up to 20 h per week |
| 20              | 35-39 | India | Temporary migrant | India: Bachelor of Hospitality Australia: Master of Hospitality | No | Front office | Up to 3 shifts per week |
| 21              | 25-29 | India | Temporary migrant | India: Bachelor of Hospitality Australia: Master of Hospitality | No | Food and beverage service | Furloughed |
| 22              | 20-24 | Vietnam | Temporary migrant | Vietnam: Master’s degree (unspecified) Australia: Diploma – culinary arts | No | Kitchen | Furloughed; part-time, up to 20 h per week |
| 23              | 35-39 | Bangladesh | Temporary migrant | Bangladesh: Bachelor’s degree (unspecified) | No | Kitchen | Furloughed |
| 24              | 35-39 | Brazil | Temporary migrant | Bangladesh: Graduate certificate (unspecified) | No | Housekeeping | Furloughed; later worked up to 2 shifts per week |
| 25              | 25-29 | India | Temporary migrant | India: Bachelor of Hospitality Australia: Master of Hospitality | No | Food and beverage service | Furloughed |
3.4. Ensuring credibility of data

We used two different researchers to analyze and interpret the data, facilitating a valid and trustworthy interpretation of the data. The transcripts were first coded by the first author before the second author independently went over the themes and quotations. We compared the resulting analyses in order to develop further and unify the themes. We discussed and resolved any disagreements after examining the themes as a whole. Thus, we achieved corroboration through the convergence of interpretations – researcher triangulation – which is generally accepted as a way of providing qualitative studies with a degree of validity or confidence in the findings of the research (Eisenhardt, 1989).

4. Findings

In the following sub-section, we outline how COVID-19 impacted CALD hotel workers’ employment and OWB. Thereafter, we present the alternate strategies used by CALD hotel workers to cope with pandemic-induced employment changes and restore OWB.

4.1. COVID-19 induced employment changes experienced by migrant workers and well-being

All respondents experienced involuntary job changes ranging from furloughs, reduced working time and lay-offs, to deterioration in working conditions. As shown in Table 1, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (June 2020), just under one-half of CALD hotel workers in the sample (48%, 12) were furloughed; approximately one-third (36%, 9) were working less than their normal hours with concomitant reductions in pay; and 4% (1) had lost their job. While 12% (3) remained in full-time work, these interviewees reported that their work conditions had deteriorated, manifest in increased work, and changes to the nature of their work. For example, a housekeeping manager who oversees daily operations, as well as maintains responsibility for recruiting, coaching and training housekeeping staff, was required to personally clean rooms, after standing down all her staff:

I’m the manager … I had to stand down my employees. Delivering this news and telling them that they won’t have jobs was very difficult. Then I had to clean rooms. Cleaning rooms was physical work. The first week was so hard. It’s a long time since I’d cleaned rooms … the beginning of my career … 10 years ago … So, from being a manger to literally cleaning rooms every day (Respondent #11).

Thus, beyond emotional distress, respondents experienced increased job demands and physical stress. Increasing uncertainty about job security was also a common source of stress:

I’m here for the next 6 months, but at the back of my mind I’m thinking about – what else I can do, because for hospitality to be back to it’s normal like before, it’s going to be 2023. So, that’s really scary – it’s quite worrying (Respondent #13).

Hence, respondents were unanimous that the pandemic had negatively influenced their OWB (Van Horn et al., 2004), particularly affective well-being, manifested in migrants feeling scared, anxious and upset, or negative affect (Le et al., 2018; Warr, 1987).

Consistent with conventional logic (Kantamneni, 2020) CALD hotel workers who were temporary migrants working in hotels were the hardest hit by the pandemic, manifested in their being the first to be furloughed without access to income or wage subsidies. In addition to financial distress, the latent functions of employment were lost (i.e., work occupies time, provides regular activity, social interaction, and a sense of status and identity (Jahoda, 1982), with adverse consequences for temporary migrants’ OWB (Van Horn et al., 2004), particularly affective (Le et al., 2018; Warr, 1987) and social well-being (Grant et al., 2007):

When we were stood down, I feel like I lost my job. Economically, I need to decrease my spend. Because we rent apartment, we ask to decrease our rent. Socially, before I start the job, I could talk with many girls, many housekeepers. So, emotionally of course it was terrible because I didn’t have a job, it’s affected my self-esteem, my confidence - I could see people going to job or home doing home office and I didn’t have a job (Respondent #17).

4.2. Coping strategies: restoring occupational well-being

Analyses revealed three distinct coping strategies of different subgroups of CALD hotel workers to pandemic induced-employment changes which facilitated OWB: 1. CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs cognitively framed pandemic induced-employment challenges as opportunities to reconstrue their occupational aspirations, the meaning of work and change occupations (i.e., cognitive and behavioral coping via occupational change); 2. CALD hotel workers who were temporary migrants cognitively framed and interpreted their furloughing and under-employment as short-term, and thus were able to construe their hotel career in positive terms (i.e., cognitive coping but no behavioral change); and 3. CALD hotel workers who were permanent migrants with hospitality qualifications cognitively framed pandemic induced-employment challenges as opportunities for occupational advancement, by taking on new, additional responsibilities (i.e., cognitive and behavioral coping via occupational advancement). We explicate these coping strategies below.

4.2.1. Cognitive framing of pandemic-induced employment changes as opportunity for behavioral (occupational) change: CALD workers in refugee jobs

One sub-set of CALD hotel workers in so-called refugee jobs, comprising work which were below migrants’ qualifications and experience (Treuren et al., 2021), perceived the otherwise threatening circumstances of unemployment, underemployment, and deteriorating work conditions as opportunities to reorient their career aspirations and change occupations. Thus, CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs positively reframed pandemic-induced employment challenges enforced upon them as “opportunities” (cognitive coping), and made the decision to change occupations (i.e., behavioral coping) enabling them to restore OWB and career success.

Analyses revealed that CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs had initially struggled to find employment that matched their pre-migration skills and experience, with economic necessity driving them to accept positions that were below their qualifications and experience – the

2 As a consequence of their temporary migrant status, temporary migrants were ineligible for JobKeeper wage subsidies. The JobKeeper Payment scheme was an Australian government temporary wage subsidy for organizations significantly affected by COVID-19, which ended on 28 March 2021. Eligible employers, sole traders and other entities could apply to receive $1500 per eligible employee per fortnight. As a result, hotels were incentivized to retain wage-subsidy eligible Australian permanent residents, and disincentivized to employ temporary migrant workers, whose positions weren’t subsidized.

3 Participant crying.
phenomena known as occupational downgrading (Hagan et al., 2011), skill discounting, or as noted above, refugee employment (Treuren et al., 2021). Respondent #6, with a Masters of Computer Science employed in a Food and Beverage department, is illustrative of the CALD worker in refugee employment in hospitality: “When I came here, it was very difficult for me to find a job in the field that I was working. So, I just took the job that I can get.” Likewise, Respondent #7, with a Bachelor of Architecture working as a supervisor in housekeeping, stated “I tried to find jobs. That was hard, because I didn’t have much English, I did whatever I could do. I just needed a job.” This reflects work in Food and Beverage and in Accommodation and other departments in hotels, and hospitality more generally, comprise occupations that do not necessarily require formal qualifications, skills or experience.

Pandemic-induced unemployment and underemployment was a catalyst for this sub-group of CALD hotel workers to interrogate existing career choices and their utility, ultimately leading them to reconstrue their occupational aspirations and the meaning of work, manifest in the decision to change occupations. This resulted in work that was more meaningful and satisfying for interviewees. For example, all CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs stated that they aspired to secure paid work, with the following quote representative of this theme: “I want money. I do not want to be jobless with that horrible stress” (Respondent #5). The interviewee, a hotel services manager, who was laid off at the start of the pandemic, described the experience of job loss as follows:

The worst nightmare. A very difficult time. I was newly married. I married four days when I lost my job. I did not have any money in my account, because all the money had gone on the ceremony. Newlywed, and saying that I do not have a job. It was very hard for me mentally, I was shaking (Respondent #5).

The health sector and aged care were construed as sectors offering secure occupational futures, with job availability a significant influence on occupational choices as illustrated in the following quote: “I would rather a low position in another industry if I gain security. I can start my career again in a different field ... health” (Respondent #3). Interviewees reconstrued the salience of secure work based upon family and financial commitments: “I have got my family, my parents, my daughter. There’s a house mortgage, a car loan, other bills, financial commitments here as well as back in the home country” (Respondent #3). Beyond a secure source of income, CALD hotel workers aspired to work that offers “career progress” as illustrated by Respondent #4: “I want to grow my career. I want progression.”

Thus, CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs reconstrued their aspirations and changed jobs, as exemplified by Respondent #5, who interpreted his food services attendant occupation in hospitals in a more meaningful way, by framing its purpose to align with his personal passion for hospitality:

Luckily, I realized I can utilize my customer service skills related to hotel guests in hospitals, as a food service attendant. This is a good job. And it is very much related to my profession. My profession will be hospitality, but in hospitals. I got a position to work as a casual staff delivering meals to patients. After just 2 weeks, I got a part-time permanent position. I’m expecting a full-time position in 6 months, and then a supervisor ... maybe a manager.

Through reconstruing their occupational aspirations, and changing occupations, CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs were able to restore OWB, manifested in positive affect (e.g., joy, excitement) and hence affective well-being (Le et al., 2018; Warr, 1987), as well as motivational well-being (e.g., career growth) (Van Horn et al., 2004), as Respondent #2 illustrates: “I believe people should do what they enjoy. I feel excited about my career prospects. I’ve got a chance to grow as a supervisor and then as a manager.”

4.2.2. Cognitive framing of pandemic-induced employment changes as a temporary phenomenon, foreseeing positive hotel career outcomes: CALD workers who were temporary migrants

Analyses indicated that CALD hotel workers who were temporary migrants adapted to COVID-19-induced employment changes through cognitive coping. This involved respondents cognitively framing and interpreting their furloughing and underemployment in more positive terms, by rationalizing it as “temporary”—a short-term separation — with the hospitality sector to return to “normal” in the near-term, hence foreseeing positive career outcomes. The following quote from a temporary migrant who worked as a casual chef is illustrative of this theme:

“Our kitchen team shares with each other what’s going on, when are we going to open. COVID-19 will affect our business for the next six months. Then it will be normal. The borders will open, people will travel and stay in the hotel, the hotel will be busy, then they give a job to us” (Respondent #23).

Likewise, Respondent #16 stated “we are going to get busy again. My friendship circle is expecting everything to be normal soon.” As these quotes reveal, temporary migrants exhibited strong group affiliation and cohesion, which was a source of strength (Patton, 1990), that shaped and reinforced temporary migrants’ perceptions that pandemic-induced employment changes were temporary, and that the industry would get back to “normal” in the near-term. As a result, these hotel workers manifested OWB, particularly behavioral or social well-being (Grant et al., 2007), as evidenced by their strong group affiliation, and positive affect and affective well-being (Le et al., 2018; Warr, 1987). This is exemplified by Respondent #23 who stated, “I’m optimistic about my future [career], positive. 100% I am positive about myself working in this industry.”

By reframing the way that they perceived pandemic-enforced job changes, CALD hotel workers who were temporary migrants restored OWB, without behavioral change. This is important because temporary migrants were unable to return to work, change employers or occupations at their own volition (i.e., behavioral coping) to restore OWB. This was a consequence of their temporary migrant status and institutional-level wage subsidies which collectively diminished their personal control, as hotels were incentivized to retain wage-subsidy eligible Australian permanent residents, and disincentivized to employ temporary migrant workers, whose positions weren’t subsidized.

4.2.3. Cognitive framing of pandemic-induced employment changes as opportunity for (behavioral) occupational advancement: CALD workers who were permanent residents with hospitality qualifications

A third strategy evident among CALD hotel workers who were permanent residents with hospitality qualifications was cognitive and behavioral coping via occupational advancement. Cognitive coping involved workers envisaging pandemic-induced employment challenges as opportunities. Behavioral coping consisted of workers utilizing COVID-19-related changes as an opportunity to take on new, additional tasks, roles and responsibilities — occupational advancement — restoring OWB. Respondent #10, a supervisor in Front Office, illustrates this theme:

If you are smart, you can make full use of this situation we’re in and move ahead, by focusing on taking on any [tasks and roles] that comes your way and learning and embracing the change. It’s important for yourself and for your team. You help them embrace this change and challenge and then move ahead … to the next role.

Similarly, Respondent #12, head of a Food and Beverage...
5. Discussion

Respondent #12 was ready for the next role career development, as did Respondent #10, who also spoke of “be [ing] ready for the next role”. Positive affect and affective well-being (Le et al., 2018; Warr, 1987), were also evident with Respondent #10 saying he was “excited, inspired and optimistic about his future [career]” while Respondent #12 was “positive and optimistic” too.

The findings revealed that, in response to COVID-related career challenges, CALD hotel workers reshaped their narratives about the purpose of their work or occupation via cognitive and/or behavioral change (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Pratt & Tolkach, 2022), which not only directed future career development, but also restored OWB (Van Horn et al., 2004). Our results revealed different sub-groups of CALD hotel workers differentially cognitively framed pandemic-induced employment changes to cope and restore occupational well-being: 1. as an opportunity for behavioral (occupational) change by CALD workers in refugee jobs; 2. as a temporary phenomenon, with CALD workers who were temporary migrants foreseeing positive career outcomes; and 3. as an opportunity for behavioral (occupational) advancement in hotels by permanent residents with hospitality qualifications.

Thus, the study provides empirical evidence on CALD hotel workers’ coping strategies, and their OWB, which, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, is among the first empirical studies to do so in the hospitality and tourism literature. In line with prior research (Yin & Ni, 2021) that reports COVID-19 is associated with employees’ negative emotions and negatively influences their psychological safety, our study reveals that the pandemic-related difficulties facing employees are also diverse, and include financial, social, and psychological challenges, which also reduces employees’ well-being and may induce career change intention (Chen & Chen, 2021; Yin, Bi & Ni, 2022).

In terms of coping strategies, the findings are consistent with recent research which found that migrant workers often employ self-regulation strategies to positively adapt to challenges during the pandemic so that they can maintain mental health in a professional setting (e.g., Baum et al., 2021). These coping strategies are useful, particularly when CALD workers are distant from communities where they seek social support (e.g., the pandemic makes these communities more difficult to access) (Alcaraz, Lorenzetti, Thomas, & Dhungel, 2022). With effective cognitive regulation strategies (e.g., cognitively framing pandemic-induced challenges in a positive way), CALD workers may experience less stress (Le et al., 2018; Van Horn et al., 2004). This also explains why all CALD hotel workers in our study manifested OWB to some extent, particularly positive affect. However, like Chen and Chen (2021) who identified differences in well-being between furloughed and laid-off, and female and younger employees, we also find differences in the OWB dimensions of CALD workers: CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs who changed occupations and CALD hotel workers who were permanent residents with hospitality qualifications also evidence motivational well-being (Van Horn et al., 2004) while behavioral or social well-being was emphasized among CALD hotel workers who were temporary migrants (Grant et al., 2007).

Chen and Chen (2021) also find that high personal control serves as a buffer against adverse well-being outcomes. Our finding that CALD hotel workers in refugee jobs and permanent residents with hospitality qualifications engaged in cognitive and behavioral changes to restore OWB, while CALD hotel workers who were temporary migrants engaged in cognitive change only, reveals how personal control or agency, and lack thereof, respectively shaped the three groups of migrants’ coping responses to restore OWB.

6. Theoretical and practical implications

The findings contribute to theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, our research extends prior work on ethnic minority workers’ perceived employee well-being (Liu-Lastres & Wen, 2021), to include the COVID-19 context. In doing so, the study responds to calls for research to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on different types of employees, particularly the well-being of marginalised (Sigala, 2020). By disaggregating CALD workers based on their migrant status and qualifications and explicating the coping strategies that different migrant sub-groups use to manage COVID-19-induced employment changes, our qualitative study provides a fine-grained understanding of how differential coping strategies restored CALD workers’ OWB. By delineating a range of coping mechanisms, we also extend extant literature on COVID-19’s impact on workers’ emotions and psychological state and their avoidance coping behaviors (Yin & Ni, 2021) to include a more holistic approach to coping. Understanding how workers, and CALD workers in particular, cope is important to mitigate the detrimental employment effects of the pandemic (Venkatesh, 2020) which remains important, as new COVID-19 variants evolve, with concomitant adverse consequences for enterprises, their employees and their careers. From a methodological perspective, the different coping strategies of different types of CALD workers and dimensions of OWB each group manifest in the present study and recent work (Chen & Chen, 2021) underscore the need for researchers to disaggregate employee samples in order to fully understand employee well-being, and coping strategies.

Finally, our findings also contribute to recent research on the refugee hypothesis (Treuren et al., 2021). While Treuren et al. (2021) show that migrants who leave their occupations are more likely to find employment in hospitality than other industries providing tentative support for the refugee hypothesis, they do not provide empirical evidence from actual migrants that hospitality provided ‘refugee’ jobs for those struggling to find more suitable employment. By providing qualitative empirical evidence from actual migrants that hospitality provided ‘refugee’ jobs as they struggled to find more suitable employment, we add to hitherto proxy-based empirical evidence (Treuren et al., 2021).

Our study offers practical implications for employers and hospitality managers. First, our findings show that CALD workers’ interpretations of their pandemic-induced employment experiences and their subsequent coping strategies are influenced by their migrant status. Thus, HR managers should develop differentiated policies and practices to provide support tailored to specific sub-groups of workers – for example, psychosocial support could be targeted at temporary migrants.

Second, and more generally, psychosocial support and employee assistance programs can be used to help address the emotional distress experienced by CALD hotel workers as a consequence of pandemic-induced employment changes. Employers could also provide financial support, which may help to ease employees’ financial burdens associated with furloughing. In Australia, as elsewhere, many hospitality employers were able to apply for the government support packages which aided their employees. Finally, employers can provide remote opportunities for furloughed employees to develop new knowledge, skills and abilities, benefitting both the development of individual employees as well as their employers. Collectively, research indicates that such initiatives lead to better health and improved emotions (Sonnenstag
7. Limitations and future research directions

This research employed a qualitative methodology to explore the coping and OWB of CALD hotel workers in-depth during COVID-19. The sample is relatively small, which provides opportunities for future research using quantitative methods. Future quantitative research should further examine the relationship between how rethinking the meaning of work restores OWB via cognitive and/or behavioral coping among CALD hotel workers, including the various moderators and mediators in this relationship. In the present study, data were collected at a single time point, thus researchers could also consider a longitudinal research design. In addition, studies can draw on diverse samples outside of hotels, or replicate this study in hotels in different countries including in Canada, UK, and the US where hospitality is also highly dependent on migrants.

Appendix 1. Interview Protocol

Section 1

Introduction

• Introduction to research study
• Consent to interview and audio-record interview; assure participant of anonymity

Participant’s details

• Demographics: gender, age, educational qualification/s, country of birth, length of time living in Australia, migration status
• Position, level and department
• Tenure and experience in current hotel, in previous hotel/s; other work experience in Australia or elsewhere

Section 2

Impact of COVID-19 on your employment

• No change (employed same as before COVID-19), furloughed, lost job
• Estimate reduction, if any, in number of hours worked; length of time reduction in place
• Estimate (percentage) reduction, if any, in rates of level of pay; length of time reduction in place

Employee well-being, time 1 (i.e., at the time of the initial COVID-19 related work transition i.e., furloughing, reduction in work hours or pay, loss of job etc).

• Thinking back to the initial COVID-related employment change, how did you feel about the work-related change, challenges & opportunities that have been brought about by COVID-19? What was the impact on you?

Prompts:
Impact may be financial, physical, psychological/emotional, mentally, social, familiar, professional effects, etc.
Evaluate as good/positive or negative.
Participant to illustrate with specific example/s.
Coping
During COVID-19.

• How have you coped with COVID-19 related work transitions (e.g., furloughing, reduction in work hours or pay, loss of job etc)?

Prompts:
Thought about changing employment, tried to change employment, or changed employment e.g., sought more hours, tried to change, or changed employers or jobs, including reason for change (or no change).
Resources you used to help you cope with COVID-19 related work transition, challenges, opportunities.

– role of self e.g., personal attributes, knowledge, skills etc.
– role of others e.g., employer, peers, manager, family, friends, etc.

Participant to illustrate with specific example/s.

Employee well-being, time 2 (i.e., following coping/attempt at coping).

• How do you feel now, having coped, or attempted to cope with, COVID-19 related work transition (e.g., furloughing, reduction in work hours or pay, loss of job etc)

Prompts:
Evaluate as good/positive or negative
E.g., financial, physical, psychological/emotional, mentally, social, familiar, professional effects, etc.
Participant to illustrate with specific example/s.
Closing
Do you have any other comments?

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