Social capital in skilled migrants' careers: Why (not) rely on it?

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Although resources accessible through social contacts (social capital) can enhance people's careers and, especially, careers of migrants, a comprehensive account explaining why career agents do or do not rely on social capital for career reasons is currently absent. This article addresses this lacuna by utilising Realist Social Theory's notion of reflexivity to explore careers of 82 skilled migrants in global (London) and secondary (Newcastle-upon-Tyne) cities. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews reveals that reliance on social capital for career reasons depends upon three factors: (1) need, (2) accessibility, and (3) costs. All three have proved to be shaped by both migrants' reflexive agency and structural conditions of the urban environments where their careers are unfolding. This article contributes by offering a fine-grained and balanced explanatory account of social capital in skilled migrants' careers, which further conceptualises careers decision-making as a relational phenomenon.

Key words: careers; social capital; skilled migrants; realist social theory; global cities; secondary cities

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Introduction

With different provisos, from various frames of reference, and using diverse terminologies, the existing studies broadly agree that careers can be enhanced by various career resources. Recently, career resources have received more scholarly attention as researchers turned to examine career boundary-crossing and factors that facilitate or hinder it (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). Importantly, another broadly agreed-upon agreement is that some of these resources can be accessed through social contacts, as social capital (Lin, 2001). Career advantages offered by social capital include access to jobs, promotions, legal advice, perceived career success, and a sense of professional identity (Granovetter, 1983; Burt, 1992; Thondhlana et al., 2016). Yet, not all people use social capital for career reasons or, at least, to the same extent.

Admittedly, social capital is conceptually vague, fluid, and loosely defined. Some authors use social capital and social networks interchangeably, some others equate social capital with resources incorporated in the networks, and the third camp suggests that social capital includes both resources and connections. Engaging with these debates is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, it adopts a conventional definition of social capital as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998: 243) to explore: [1] *why* skilled migrants rely (or not) on career resources accessible through social contacts (social capital); and [2] whether and *how* their reliance is shaped by structure and agency.

The empirical data used to answer these questions came from 82 interviews with skilled migrants in London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The focus on skilled migrants is topical and timely. For migrants, as for other underprivileged groups, such as women and ethnic minorities (Gruguletz et al., 2019; Beigi et al., 2020), social capital can be especially helpful to compensate for the lack of other recognisable resources and to overcome career barriers (Moroşanu, 2016; Mahbub, 2021). Farashah et al. (2023) demonstrate that skilled migrants' employability is constrained by multiple factors, including discrimination, which indicates the compensatory value of social capital for their careers. Yet, whereas the literature (Thondhlana et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2023) and lay knowledge alike suggest that not all skilled migrants' careers [equally] rely on social capital, the explanatory accounts of these differences are scarce, and this article addresses this void. In addition to its scholarly value, such explanation is instructive for skilled migrants' efforts to mobilise social resources, especially in the present turbulent times, as the value of social capital is believed to increase in times of austerity and uncertainty (Moroşanu, 2016). It could also improve career support offered by organisations and institutions, as the competition for skilled foreign workers is becoming increasingly stiffer, particularly in the post-Brexit UK.

To explore the agency of skilled migrants and how it influences reliance on social capital, this article draws upon Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) Realist Social Theory and its notion of reflexivity. By introducing this theory more firmly into career studies, this article contributes to the ongoing searches for the robust social theory that could advance this field of academic inquiries (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011; Mayrhofer et al., 2020). The structural factors are explored at the city-level, which contributes to the recent endeavours to appreciate cities as unique career environments (Tams et al., 2021). Overall, exploring skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons through the lenses of both structure and agency addresses the long-lasting conflict in career studies and provides a balanced and nuanced explanatory account, currently missing in the literature (Erel and Ryan, 2019).

The next sections review the existing literature to discuss social capital and the present approaches to understanding its role in careers, followed by the introduction of Realist Social Theory, as well as the concepts of global and secondary cities. Then the context of this study is outlined, and the methodological approach is expounded. Next, the key findings are presented, before discussing the contributions made by this article.

Theoretical background

Social capital in careers

Social capital has long been recognised as an important career asset – one which may not be equally useful for all careers and all purposes, and which needs to be handled with care, but nonetheless valuable and influential (e.g., Thondhlana et al., 2016; Gericke et al., 2018; Mahbub, 2021). Yet, surprisingly little effort has been made to explain *why* people do (not) use it for career purposes.

Many studies equate having [access to] social resources with mobilising them, arguing that better-connected individuals are better positioned to benefit from social capital (Portes, 1998).

Famously, Granovetter (1983: 202) identified "weak ties" as more beneficial (than "strong ties") due to their ability to act as "critical bridges" to diverse resources. This notion was further elaborated by Putnam (2000) who distinguished between bonding (connecting to people within one's social group and helpful for "getting by") and bridging (linking to the broader communities and required for "getting ahead") ties. For migrants, bridging indigenous contacts are advantageous because they can share local knowledge needed for labour market integration (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Moroşanu, 2016). Recently, studies of Polish migrants in the UK (Ryan et al., 2008) and Syrian refugees in Germany (Gericke et al., 2018) have differentiated between bridging and bonding vertically and horizontally, suggesting that vertical bridging contacts (indigenous people occupying higher positions) are particularly beneficial for re-establishing skilled careers. Yet, migrants often find themselves excluded from resource-rich indigenous networks (Moroşanu, 2016). While illuminating deplorable societal inequalities, these studies pay limited attention to individual strategizing (Kuwabara et al., 2018), and this structural approach, despite highlighting the importance of being in the right place, is less useful for understanding how one ends (or not) in that right place.

This disposition has been unsettled by the advent of the boundaryless career, which re-conceptualised social capital as knowing-whom - one of the forms of knowing required to take responsibility for one's own career (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). The boundaryless career and studies it inspired add an important individual perspective to understanding social capital in careers. Yet, such agency-centred inquiries have been criticised for downplaying the structural impact and portraying careers as unfettered by external influences (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). For example, out of six professional networking motives identified by Porter and colleagues (2023) only one - adhering to social norms - is explicitly related to external circumstances, whereas the remaining five (enjoying connecting with people; enjoying assisting others; desire to acquire status; learning and performance; maintaining employability)

are internal and focussed on people's own career preferences, objectives, and desires. When looking at internationally mobile individuals, this approach prioritises privileged, often White and male, migrants from developed countries (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Barwick, 2022) who allegedly experience neither issues with acceptance by the locals nor the need for such acceptance. They may be seen as "superior outsiders" (Wallinder, 2022) and may even form exclusive social cliques among themselves and blackball the indigenes.

Arguably, neither of these perspectives is comprehensive. Although reliance on social capital is a collective matter (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), it is not defined solely by people's network positions. Well-connected individuals can be denied access to resources if seen as unreliable (Smith, 2005). To benefit from social capital, people are required to invest in developing and maintaining connections (Granovetter, 1983; Portes, 1998), but the return on such investments differs across contexts because establishing trust and reciprocity is shaped by local norms and institutions (e.g., Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). Even skilled migrants encounter cultural and linguistic obstacles when building local connections (Wessendorf, 2019; Barwick, 2022). Besides, the use of social capital is not invariably driven by economic or, indeed, career rationality (Kuwabara et al., 2018). Yet, even career-focussed migrants may avoid reliance on social capital, or some forms of it, as migrant contacts can lead to precarious jobs and exacerbate labour market segregation (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Leschke and Weiss, 2020). For example, Thondhlana et al. (2016) discuss how a "warehouse mentality" – tendency to take any available jobs - discourages Zimbabwean migrants in the UK from competing for jobs more commensurate with their expertise and ambitions (also Kelly and Ducusin, 2024).

Therefore, to advance understanding of why people do or do not use social capital for career reasons, it is important to consider both structure and agency, as well as the interplay between them. Some trailblazers have started paving the way in this direction. Offer (2012) discriminated between exclusion and withdrawal from social networks, wherein the former is

a prohibition imposed by others and the latter refers to self-imposed restrictions. A study by Gruguletz et al. (2019) explains women's less-effective networks as an outcome of structural barriers but also personal hesitations. With a reference to migrants, Ryan and Mulholland (2014: 259) observe that access to social resources is shaped by "the complex interplay of various factors including structural context, opportunities, personal priorities and also obstacles and constraints". Yet, these studies tend to address structure and agency only implicitly and/or parenthetically, while focussing on other issues. Even more fundamental efforts (e.g., Gruguletz et al., 2019; Beigi et al., 2020) treat structure and agency as somewhat divorced and the relations between them remain nebulous. Conceivably, these shortfalls can be attributed to the notorious lack of a comprehensive social theory in career studies (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011). This article champions Margaret Archer's Realist Social Theory as a potent means for such endeavours.

Realist Social Theory

Realist Social Theory (RST) was selected as this project's theoretical framework for its ability to disentangle the relations between structure and agency (Archer, 2003) and to separate between their causal effects, without reducing one to another or conflating the two, as well as for its robust ontological foundation rooted in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975). The world is treated as a multi-layered system of interconnected entities, such as biological organisms, organisations, and societies, which have properties, such as employing people or having limbs, and causal powers to influence the world. Critical realist ontology also differentiates between three strata of the world: the *empirical* or events that can be sensed and observed; the *actual* or events that happen in the world and can be different from what is witnessed; and the *real* or powers that cause empirical and actual events (Bhaskar, 1975).

RST developed these ideas to argue that structure and agency are interconnected but ontologically and analytically distinguishable (Archer, 2003). Structure constitutes society and

has a power to orient actors' choices, goals, and actions, without pre-determining them. Individuals have their agency - a causal power to interact with and to make an impact upon the social world. When structure and agency interact, two outcomes are possible – structural reproduction (*morphostatis*) or elaboration (*morphogenesis*).

Archer (2007: 4) further argues that interactions between structure and agency are mediated through reflexivity or "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa". Reflexivity is a causal power exercised through "internal conversations" in which people define their subjective agential concerns (ambitions and priorities) against their objective structural circumstances. Thus, reflexivity helps people navigate their interests through the world but also limits the repertoire of actions compatible with the prioritised concerns in the given environment (Archer, 2007). In turn, the very existence of reflexivity and its mediating role are enabled by distinguishing between structure and agency (as reflexive objects and subjects) and their causal powers. Archer (2007, 2012) also argues that reflexive deliberations are particularly important in volatile or unfamiliar environments, which is likely to be the case for migrants.

Crucially, the way people exercise reflexivity is not uniform. Four modes of reflexivity (MoRs) have been identified (Archer, 2003, 2007). All agents practise all four but to dissimilar extents, and one mode typically dominates our internal conversations. *Communicative reflexivity* encourages concerns about inter-personal relations and requires confirmation or affirmation of internal conversations by dialogical partners or interlocutors. Such interlocutors are personal contacts perceived to be sufficiently trustworthy and knowledgeable, typically drawn from within the environment people struggle to make their way through and often disposed to preserve and enforce the structural norms and conventions. *Autonomous reflexivity* is associated with concerns about achievements and characterised by self-sufficient internal

conversations leading directly to actions. *Meta-reflexivity* results in concerns about values and encourages individuals to critically review their own reflexivity through continual self-evaluation. Finally, *fractured reflexivity* leads to confusion and social disorientation.

Whereas fractured reflexivity yields 'passive agents' unable to tackle their problems, practitioners of the other three modes are 'active agents' who develop their own *modus vivendi* – sets of practices that constitute a way of living most compatible with their concerns (Archer, 2007). Through their internal conversations, people identify and prioritise their primary concerns and decide what purposeful activities, plans, or 'projects' to deploy when pursuing these concerns within a given environment (and with a given portfolio of resources). Such projects are, in turn, reflexively monitored in the volatile structural circumstances and can be committed to, changed, revised, or even abandoned altogether. In other words, whilst structure obstructs and enables agential choices and actions, people analyse, interpret, make sense of, and respond to the social reality through reflexive deliberations that compromise between conditionings and practice. Therefore, according to Realist Social Theory, what people do (or not) and why can be explained only by considering both their contextual circumstances and reflexive agency.

The choice of Realist Social Theory is not heedless of its limitations. For instance, it has been argued that, whilst meticulously attentive to agency and reflexivity, the theory is less rigorous and detailed when explaining or even appreciating social structure and a wider range of mechanisms through which it affects agency (Caetano, 2015; also Golob and Makarovic, 2019). Other scholars (e.g., Elder-Vass, 2007) have argued that there is more space for habitual actions, even in the less predictable modern conditions, than Archer (2012) suggests. Nonetheless, by avoiding the structure-agency conflation and appreciating reflexivity as a mediator between the two, Archer's theory offers a valuable lens through which to explore and explain how and why people differently respond to similar social circumstances. In this article,

Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) reflexivity is deployed to examine how different concerns stir individuals towards dissimilar dispositions to using social capital for career purposes.

Social capital in global and secondary cities

Despite the relatively limited efforts to theorise contextual and relational factors (see Caetano, 2015), Archer (2007) acknowledges that developing *modus vivendi* requires appraisal of the environment enabling or obstructing reflexive concerns. Similarly, scholars have called for more attention to spatial embeddedness of social networks and resources, as well as careers in a broader sense (Erel and Ryan, 2019).

The existing endeavours to explore how contextual forces influence careers have prioritised national, organisational, and community analytical levels. Only recently calls for appreciation of urban spaces as unique career environments have emerged (Tams et al., 2021). Yet, migration studies have a long tradition of examining social resources through the lens of urban spaces and their impact (e.g., Barwick, 2022). One useful taxonomy distinguishes between *global* and *secondary* cities. Global cities - e.g., New York, London and Hong Kong - are hubs of control over global resources (Sassen, 1991), which, historically, have been enticing great numbers of internationally mobile people. Presently, however, more migrants find home and employment in secondary cities, which are becoming acknowledged as distinct social settings with unique properties and attributes (Cardoso and Meijers, 2016).

Exploring migrants' reflexive deliberations in specific urban landscapes can offer in-depth insights into the relations between their agency and structural conditionings, whilst also usefully adding to the Realist Social Theory's somewhat limited contextual conceptualisation. In critical realist terms, global and secondary cities feature dissimilar causal powers to conduct careers, including reliance on social capital. Some of these powers can be idiosyncratic to migrants or affect them differently. Recently, Kozhevnikov (2021) identified the labour market, community, and lifestyle as three groups of city-factors that shape skilled migrants'

career capital, including knowing-whom, in global and secondary cities (also Beigi et al., 2020) Developed infrastructure and international transport links in global cities enable migrants to rely on transnational connections, which may be less feasible in secondary cities. Firmly implanted in the global economy, global cities often feature sizeable foreign-born and professional communities, and usually offer more opportunities to socialise with other migrants as well as fellow professionals, foreign and indigenous. In diverse global cities, the indigenes are more likely to have the "intercultural civility" (Wessendorf, 2019: 139) or exposure to and tolerance of people from different backgrounds. Yet, migrants' efforts to develop local ties may be hindered by costs and geographical distances in global cities (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014). This indicates that skilled migrants in global and secondary cities have different opportunities to fulfil their reflexive concerns regarding reliance on social capital.

This study takes London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne as examples of global and secondary cities, respectively, to investigate how urban landscapes, in conjunction with agential concerns, shape the role of social capital in careers. The UK's capital, London is an archetype of a global city. Despite the UK withdrawal from the EU and the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2023 London maintained its first-place position in the Global Power City Index for the twelfth consecutive year (also widening the gap between itself and New York which occupies the second place), performing particularly strongly at cultural interaction, economy, and research and development. The city's political, economic, and cultural supremacy is buttressed by its diversity, including a substantial foreign-born population, and high density of skilled jobs. Situated in the North-East of England, Newcastle has been experiencing a wounding transformation, induced by the decline of traditional manufacturing industries, from one of the world's leading industrial hubs to the city with a limited engagement in the global economy. The city is characterised by the homogenous working-class White British population (ONS, 2018) and strong, durable, and cohesive local 'Geordie' culture which, despite being regarded

as convivial and uninhibited, can be exclusive to 'outsiders' and, under certain adverse circumstances (e.g., unemployment), protectionist and insular (Hollands, 1995).

Method

To examine how agential reflexive concerns and urban landscapes shape social capital in skilled migrants' careers, this article drew upon rich qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Qualitative enquiries are useful for circumstantial insights into individual experiences (Silverman, 1993) and, from a critical realist position, semi-structured interviews have been endorsed for their ability to unravel complex structure-agency interactions (Smith and Elger, 2014).

The final sample comprised 82 skilled migrants: born outside the UK to non-British parents, educated at undergraduate university degree level or above, and/or having three or more years of experience in occupations recognised as skilled in the Standard Occupational Classification, including university lecturers, schoolteachers, managers, scientists, doctors, and engineers. When interviewed, 43 participants (aged 24-61, mean: 38) lived and worked in Newcastle and 39 (26-58, mean: 37) in London, with 18 having had career experiences in both cities. The sample was not intended to accurately reflect the demographic of migrant communities. Rather, the aim was to develop two comparable sub-samples encompassing an assortment of backgrounds and experiences. The sample included 45 male and 37 female participants (London: 22/17 and Newcastle: 23/20); 39 were from the European Economic Area (London: 18 and Newcastle: 21); and 32 respondents (London: 17 and Newcastle: 15) were classed as non-White. The interviews were conducted in English, face-to-face (67) and remotely (15), and lasted approximately one hour. All names and some other personal data had been changed or withdrawn.

The study used abductive approach (Smith and Elger, 2014) aimed at creating a logical and plausible explanation for the phenomenon in question (in this study's case, skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons) through systematic and iterative combining of theory and data. The research was also informed by Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012) which, despite its original focus on inductive approaches, has recently been recommended for enhancing 'qualitative rigour' in abductive studies (Magnani and Gioia, 2023). The research commenced with in-depth literature review presented in the previous section. An important objective of the review was identification of *a priori* themes that informed the interview guide. The interview questions were designed to examine, elaborate, or reject the *a priori* themes (Magnani and Gioia, 2023), e.g., urban migrant communities and time needed to develop social connections, but later evolved to investigate emerging patterns. For instance, when the *need* crystallised as one of the key factors in the narratives of the first few respondents, the subsequent interviews explicitly invited discussions of its manifestation and impact.

The interviews opened with introductory questions about migration and career biographies. This was followed by more specific questions about social capital, which invited explanation of why the respondents did (not) rely on it for career reasons. Multiple probing questions invited respondents to expand their answers. The questions covered the respondents' deliberations, interpretations, and actions in relation to (not) seeking, accepting, and utilising social capital, including options that were considered but dismissed and the reasons for dismissing. The participants were asked to comment on how reflexive concerns and contextual forces had shaped their reliance on social capital. Those exposed to both urban spaces were encouraged to juxtapose their experiences.

In this study, Archer's original quantitative tool, the Internal Conversation Indicator (ICONI), was not used in its 'pure' form due the highlighted issues with its reliability and consistency (see Archer, 2012; Dyke et al., 2012; Golob and Makarovic, 2019). Instead, the qualitative

questions about respondents' internal conversations, primary concerns, dialogical partnerships, and career 'projects' were incorporated in the interviews, following the examples of other, mostly education-focussed (e.g., Baker, 2018; Liu and Lin, 2024), qualitative studies and Archer's (2007) own precedent for combining the ICONI with interviews. Throughout the entire process, the respondents were recognised and treated as knowledgeable and reflexive agents (Magnani and Gioia, 2023), although with inevitable limitations to their (as well as other people's, including this article author's) understandings and interpretations (Smith and Elger, 2014). After each interview, a short summary was developed, highlighting topics needing further investigation, as well as points for researcher's own reflection (Gioia et al., 2012).

The data collection and analysis were undertaken in an iterative and dynamic fashion. Firstly, MoRs dominating the respondents' internal conversations were identified from their answers about subjective concerns and internal dialogues, as well as relations with other people, career goals, career enablers and constraints (Archer, 2008, 2012). In most cases, the identification of dominant MoRs was [surprisingly] straightforward, even when personal relations and values were concerned. For example, most respondents were fond of their family and friends, and their roles in respondents' careers were widely acknowledged. Yet, only practitioners of communicative reflexivity actively sought and relied on others' approval, confirmation, and recommendations, whereas respondents whose internal dialogues were dominated by autonomous and meta-reflexivity were conspicuously more independent in their career decision-making, with some rare exceptions of resorting to expert counselling. Similarly, the majority of interviewees mentioned their values, morals, and principles, and many considered them when engaging in career decision-making. Yet, careers of some respondents (classed as meta-reflexives) were evidently shaped by and structured around their values, more than anything else.

Eventually, 43 respondents were classed as practitioners of autonomous reflexivity (ARs), 24 had internal dialogues dominated by communicative reflexivity (CRs) and 15 participants predominantly practiced meta-reflexivity (MRs). No internal dialogues were dominated by fractured reflexivity which was anticipated, since 'passive' agency is unlikely to lead to self-initiated international mobility (Archer, 2003). Importantly, the identified dominant modes of reflexivity are not treated as personality types (Archer, 2007). Also, the research design made it possible to identify dominant modes of reflexivity only in relations to respondents' careers and the use of social capital for career reasons, and only at the time when they were interviewed (see Dyke et al., 2012), and so more generalisable claims cannot be sensibly made.

Next, the interviews were read to construct first-order (informant-based) codes, advance them into more researcher-based second-order categories and, finally, aggregate themes enabling theoretical explanation of social capital in the respondents' careers (Gioia et al., 2012). For example, one of the three aggregate themes, *costs*, was formed of five second-order categories: financial costs; acculturation; time; reputational risks; and ethical scruples. In turn, acculturation comprised eight first-order codes: language proficiency; written and verbal communication standards; cultural knowledge; football and drinking; body language; politeness; display of emotions; and tolerance and acceptance. Lastly, the impact of agency (reflexive concerns) and structure (urban context) upon the identified dimensions was scrutinised. While focussing on the most influential mechanisms, this data-to-theory advancement was particularly concerned with themes underexplored in the existing literature (Gioia et al., 2012).

The analysis compared the data with the existing literature, whilst exploring differences and similarities within and across MoRs. The explanation was sought for the codes present and absent in the analysis (see Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). The results of the analysis were

discussed with three colleagues not involved in this research but with substantial knowledge of qualitative methods and Realist Social Theory.

Findings

Three principal factors (mechanisms) shaping skilled migrants' social capital reliance materialised from the analysis: *need*, *presence,* and *costs*. Importantly, all three featured in each individual interview, although their manifestation, interpretation, significance, and effect varied across practitioners of different modes of reflexivity and across the urban contexts. These factors and how they were co-influenced by agency and structure are unravelled in the following sections.

Need

The first factor, *need*, refers to the utility of social resources compared to career aid available via other channels. Irrespective of their dominant modes of reflexivity (MoRs), social capital was described as more valuable in London. The capital featured plentiful career opportunities but also stern competition, and foreign expertise was not a substantial competitive advantage. Facing intense rivalry and having their foreign skills misprized, London respondents felt that social capital was highly beneficial for (re)establishing and advancing their careers. Contrariwise, Newcastle participants described the local skilled jobs market as "*scanty*" but underlined that, due to the homogeneity of the locally available skillsets, their foreign competencies were highly advantageous when opportunities – especially in companies seeking to internationalise - arose. This does not imply that careers in Newcastle were 'boundaries-free', but rather that migrants' skills were sufficiently valuable and rare to downgrade social capital to a helpful supplement. Omor (engineer, Bangladesh) contrasted his experience:

[In Newcastle] I could get almost any job I applied for, just because I could offer different things, you know, education and that. (…) I am more experienced now, but [in London] I am one of many and still need some, you know, favours even to get an interview.

The perceived need for social capital also varied across different MoRs. With reflexive concerns aimed at achievements, respondents practising predominantly autonomous reflexivity (ARs) felt particularly enthusiastic about career advantages afforded by social capital: "*if social contacts can help [my career], then of course I need them!*" (Dato, event manager, Georgia). They described various desirable career benefits potentially accessible through social connections, such as information about vacancies, promotion opportunities, and knowledge exchange, and largely corroborated the argument of the higher need for such benefits in London's competitive and super-diverse labour market.

The other two groups concurred that social capital could provide career benefits and that they would be more useful in London. Yet, they also shared opinions idiosyncratic to their reflexive concerns, which sometimes were at cross-purposes with their own career interests. In comparison to ARs, practitioners of meta-reflexivity (MRs) displayed much lower interest in careers: "*I don't really care about the career at all"* (Lew, lecturer, Poland). Lew's detachment from his career was engendered by disappointment in higher education which, in his opinion, was based upon "*fear*" and which he did not want to (re)produce. Other MRs also discovered that their values-orientated concerns, such as sustainability, social justice, and intellectual freedom, were out of step with their careers. Notably, they saw little practical need in social capital to reconcile their concerns and careers because, as will be elaborated later, this required a fundamental transformation of society and deemed unfeasible.

This is not to imply that MRs had no career interests or experienced no need for social capital. As other respondents, they were exposed to multiple structural pressures urging career pursuits – not least, the need to fend for themselves and provide for their families. Lew handed in his

resignation but eventually withdrew it because of the need to support his disabled brother in Poland. Yet, MRs were disposed to sacrifice career interests in favour of their values-centred *modus vivendi*, especially once having secured a comfortable and stable income. Achieving financial security was more difficult in London, due to higher costs of living. Therefore, the need for social capital in London was higher not only for 'generic' career purposes, but also for specific MRs' objectives - to accelerate arrival to the financial position where MRs could pledge themselves to their cherished values.

For those respondents whose internal dialogues were dominated by communicative reflexivity (CRs), the need for social capital was axiomatic. When interviewed, 16 had trusted and knowledgeable dialogical partners who assessed and confirmed their internal dialogues, whereas the remaining eight expressed "*natural*" and "*instinctive*" desires for such relationships. The interlocutors were unanimously regarded as valuable sources of career advice and counselling, and careers of many CRs appeared to be guided by them to a very significant degree. For instance, Kasia (Poland) sought approval of "*every career step*" from her elder sisters whose paths she followed when moving to the UK to become a nurse.

More importantly, dialogical partners were also helpful for actualising specific acceptance-related concerns of CRs. Unlike pragmatic ARs, who regarded acceptance by organisations, professional bodies, or communities as a strategic career enabler, for CRs acceptance was valuable as an end in itself. The interlocutors assisted by introducing CRs to the 'right people' or by explaining locally dominant socio-cultural conventions and norms. The latter was particularly important in culturally uniform Newcastle where, as will be explained later, acceptance was typically predicated upon assimilation:

Here [in Newcastle]… sometimes it feels that they try to choose words that I don't know or they talk about things that I don't know (laughs). (…) It's like they are testing you, whether you

are, you know, assimilated enough to be their friend. (Mira, council worker, Vietnam; moved to Newcastle from London)

Consequently, Mira and other CRs experienced more need for social capital in Newcastle than in London. This may seem at odds with the earlier arguments but can be explained by the discrepancy between 'practical' career needs and CRs' reflexive commitments. Vlad (financial adviser, Russia) remarked that his "*career needed more [social capital] in London*" but he "*personally needed more of it in Newcastle*". Like other CRs, Vlad prioritised the latter as the need most compatible with his reflexive concerns and, therefore, more personally meaningful.

Presence

The second factor, *presence*, referred to the existence of the needed social capital. The consensus was that social resources in London were more plentiful and diverse. London hosted high numbers of skilled professionals, migrants and indigenes alike, with assorted experiences and assets: "*It's very self-sufficient. Honestly, I struggle to think of any support or service I possibly need and that I can't find in London*" (Dato, event manager, Georgia). Other respondents corroborated that social capital existing in London was sufficient to accommodate a variety of career purposes, thanks to well-established communities and societies, including those launched and/or run by other migrants. In contrast, social resources present in Newcastle were regarded as meagre. Most importantly, locally available social capital was described as unbefitting, since migrants' career needs could not always be met by [even genuine] support from mainly White British locals. Besides, the social distance between skilled migrants and predominantly working-class indigenes was emphasised:

And of course, as a professional migrant you don't necessarily identify yourself with working class fully. So, who are your networks? Your networks become very much reduced, because it become only your colleagues, not the city. The city doesn't offer you networks.... (Joaquin, lecturer, Colombia; moved to Newcastle from London)

The way respondents interpreted the presence of useful social resources further differed across the dominant MoRs. ARs were distinct in that they were able to identify more sources of career-related social capital and took a more proactive stance. Hannah (marketing director, Israel; moved to Newcastle from London) elaborated:

My contacts are friends, you know, just people I like… also, people I need or might need in the future, but I keep an eye on all of them, just to see what they do, where they go in life and what kind of favours we may be able to exchange if needed.

Other ARs also strategically monitored their social contacts or, in Dato's (event manager, Georgia) words, undertook "*regular audit*" to keep abreast of resources in their networks. Although agreeing that social capital in London was more abundant, Newcastle-based ARs made remarkable efforts to discover and create social capital. Akande (graduate lecturer, Nigeria) established an informal support network of predominantly other migrant colleagues. The initiatives of some other ARs included transnational networking – e.g., Fabio's (lecturer, Italy) introduction of his former US colleagues to new workmates in the UK facilitated knowledge exchange and fostered partnerships. Further, ARs were particularly likely to identify sources of social capital outside of their immediate organisations – e.g., clients, customers, and suppliers.

MRs presented two somewhat conflicting accounts, which reflected the tension between their agential values and structure. When discussing the need to secure financial stability, MRs reiterated the arguments about the wealth of social resources in London. When considering their ultimate values-related concerns, some MRs conceded that high-profile contacts in politics and business may be able to commence certain reforms, but a vehement opinion was that, eventually, social transformation would require almost unanimous communal support. Lew (lecturer, Poland) shared his thoughts about reforming the higher education: "*I think it is*

difficult to change it unless a lot of people together become conscious about how we function

as human beings, that's the thing".

So, the consensus was that the social resources needed to realise concerns of MRs were not readily present in either city, although London offered better opportunities to meet confederates:

You may be any freak you want [in London] and meet other freaks – most importantly, freaks of your own kind (laughs). (Paulina, Slovakia, receptionist; moved to London from Newcastle)

CRs also agreed that London featured more social resources useful for their careers. However, unlike ARs and MRs, they sought social capital to blend [their careers] into the host environment and, unsurprisingly, found it in both cities. Essentially, anyone knowledgeable about the structural conditions could become a trustworthy interlocutor. Yet, London-based respondents once again underscored the greater choice of interlocutors. In diverse London, both indigenes and migrants were perceived as sufficiently knowledgeable about the structural conditions. Konstantinos (barrister, Greece) formed a dialogical partnership with a Polish woman who provided ample social and cultural guidance enabling Konstantinos to feel "*like an honorary Pole*" which was sufficient for his integration. In monocultural Newcastle, preferred interlocutors were British or, at least, long-term migrant residents. Like other CRs, Stojan (engineer, Serbia) expected the desired interlocutor to explain the rules of British sports and pub etiquette, rather than to discuss strictly professional matters, as he believed that acquiring local knowledge would facilitate acceptance by the locals. Both Stojan and Konstantinos conceded that acceptance may establish their career positions more firmly but, like other CRs, regarded career-related benefits as collateral [even if worthwhile] outcomes.

Costs

The final factor, *costs*, refers to expenses associated with relying on social capital. In London, the respondents emphasised financial and time-related costs. Many stressed that networking

often happened in bars and restaurants, which can be pricey in London. Upon relocation to the capital from Newcastle, Omor (engineer, Bangladesh) had to become "*more selective*" in socialising, as he "*could not afford to attend all social gatherings [he] was invited to*". Also, travelling to meet people was described as tedious and inconvenient, and many respondents were deterred by the prospect of long journeys to meet people. In contrast, networking in Newcastle was described as affordable and convenient, thanks to lower prices and closer distances. However, the acculturation pressure, rarely mentioned in London, emerged as cardinal in Newcastle. Ahmed (bank manager, Iran) voiced an opinion shared by many: "*Culturally, Newcastle is monolithic, you know. The local culture is so strong and so inflexible, that culturally it is my way or a highway kind of thing.*" It was further suggested that to be granted access to resources-rich dominant indigenous networks, migrants were expected to develop advanced local knowledge and adopt local practices.

The way migrants construed and addressed these costs varied across the three MoRs. CRs had the most straightforward approach to managing the social capital costs. In either city, due to their 'natural' desire for dialogical partners and social acceptance, they were not deterred by the costs. Nora (teaching assistant, Saudi Arabia) poetically explained: "*Being with people is like breathing to me (…) you may be unhappy with it, but eventually you will pay any price, as that's the only way for you*".

Interestingly, career help from social contacts could be declined if seen as jeopardising wider acceptance and CRs' *modus vivendi*. Patel (insurance manager, Sri Lanka) was once offered a better-paid position but rejected the offer:

I had just started feeling comfortable with people at work, I finally started feeling like I belonged there… and [winning this acceptance] was so stressful! It took me a long time and caused anxiety, you know, I could not do that again.

Another example was shared by Mira (council worker, Vietnam) who rejected an invitation to participate in a large-scale project looking at integration of migrants into the regional economy, which would have meant working in a more diverse team, more appreciation of her 'foreignness', higher pay, and, potentially, a promotion. She "*didn't feel comfortable leaving other people*" and feared that "*it would maybe make me [her] too special*", and so preferred to stay with her – almost exclusively White British – colleagues.

Undermining the sense of belonging was the price Patel and Mira, like other CRs, were unwilling to pay, even for the sake of their careers, whereas ARs took a more strategic approach. Some of them shared examples of 'bookkeeping' where they ascertained the expenses incurred by using social capital against [potential] benefits. ARs were particularly cautious of mutual obligations and reputational risks arising from reliance on social capital and regarded them as critically important costs:

You must remember that whenever you receive help, you will have to pay back. (…) One day you receive a phone call and (…) it may not even be that person who helped you, maybe it's their kid or friend or spouse, and you will have to help them, but maybe you don't even know them, and it can be very, very risky for your reputation. (Maikel, dental solicitor, Netherlands).

In addition, ARs regarded close associations with other migrants and, especially, compatriots as potentially detrimental for their professional reputations. Like Harald (Germany), an engineer with managerial responsibilities, many deliberately avoided exchanging favours with their fellow countrymen:

There are other Germans in the company, and we do support each other, but I have been very careful not to become too cliquey with them. If I keep promoting their interests, it will be unfair and may make other people think me biased and unprofessional, so ultimately non-German people won't trust me.

MRs also displayed idiosyncratic attitudes towards the costs of social capital. Like CRs, they were inclined to avoid relying on social capital if seeing it as a threat to their reflexive concerns. However, MRs were more preoccupied with moral and ethical costs. After a violent demise of his homosexual brother, Calvin (engineer, Jamaica) became highly sensitive to homophobia and eschewed people and organisations discriminating against homosexuals, even at the expense of his career interests. One manager was very keen to promote Calvin but, having overheard some of her comments about a gay colleague, Calvin rejected her sponsorship and soon left the company. He was aware that this intransigence was unhelpful for his career but, like other MRs, was prepared to pay this price to "*stay true*" to himself.

In addition, MRs commonly opined that using social capital to gain career advantage was fundamentally unfair: "*there is something improper about gaining advantage just because you know the right people or because the right people know you*" (Joanne, administrator, South Africa). This does not imply that MRs never used social resources, but many made a conscious effort to minimise reliance on social capital. Such scruples particularly troubled MRs in competitive and expensive London, whereas using social capital in Newcastle was deemed more pardonable because, in Calvin's words, skilled migrants were "*not taking anyone's place*".

Discussion

This qualitative study advances understanding of *why* individuals may or may not rely on social capital for career reasons by (1) identifying three specific factors or, in critical realism terms, mechanisms – need, presence, and costs - that account for skilled migrants' reliance on social capital; and (2) explaining the operation of these mechanisms as outcomes of reflexivity-mediated interactions between structure and agency. Archer's (2003, 2007) Realist Social

Theory and the notion of reflexivity have been deployed to grasp agential concerns and how they are negotiated in urban contexts (Tams et al., 2021).

The first mechanism, *need*, relates to motivation to seek and/or accept career aid from social contacts. In line with the boundaryless career theses, this motivation has often been explored from an individual perspective. Social capital is said to be particularly useful for vulnerable groups of career agents, such as foreign-born workers (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013). Yet, not everyone desires a skilled job or career as such. The need for social capital is intrinsic for CRs, although their motivation is guided more by the social acceptance yearning than career reasons. ARs perceive the need in more explicitly career terms, whereas MRs are interested in social resources as a potential leverage for social transformation rather than as career enablers. Also, the need for social capital is shaped by external structural powers. For example, in relatively meritocratic environments, such as Singapore (Chua, 2011), jobseekers experience lower need for help from social contacts as appointments are made based on educational credentials. The present study illuminates the importance of urban factors for understanding the role of social capital in careers (see Kozhevnikov, 2021), such as stiff labour market competition in London or limited skilled opportunities in Newcastle, and suggests that, from career perspective, the need for SC is higher in global than secondary cities.

The second mechanism, *presence*, speaks to earlier studies of networks structure and composition (Granovetter, 1983; Burt, 1992). Importantly, presence refers not to the number of contacts but to accessibility of resources through those contacts (Lin, 2001). Ryan and colleagues (2008) identified high-status indigenes (vertical bridging ties) as most useful for skilled migrants' efforts to re-establish their careers. The present study finds that opportunities to develop such ties are more limited in Newcastle, with its relatively high proportion of working-class population and low-skilled jobs, than in London, but valuable resources can be present in other types of connections too (also Gericke et al., 2018). For instance, the indigenes

occupying socioeconomic positions similar to migrants (horizontal bridging contacts) can assist with developing local knowledge. Such "cultural brokers" (Moroşanu, 2016) are numerous in both cities but in multicultural London resources are also more easily accessible through bonding ties with other migrants – horizontal (e.g., professional advice) or vertical (e.g., emotional support). Unlike some earlier studies (Ryan et al., 2008; Moroşanu, 2013), these findings suggest that indigenous contacts may be superfluous in London where migrant networks are abundant and resources-rich and where adherence to British normativity is less important (see Wessendorf, 2019). The presence of social resources is also evaluated subjectively and reflexively. MRs report resources needed to pursue their values-centred concerns as absent even in the environments perceived as replete with valuable social resources by achievements-focussed ARs or acceptance-orientated CRs.

Finally, the *costs* refer to risks of relying on social resources. The mobilisation of social capital (Lin, 2001) requires substantial investments, but the return on those investments is not necessarily positive (Portes, 1998). Reliance on social capital can be fraught with broken trust, abused obligations, and reputational losses which can discourage people from requesting, accepting, or providing aid, even when their close kin are concerned (Smith, 2005; Offer, 2012). The costs are context-sensitive. In high-priced and geographically vast London, financial and time costs of connecting with people in possession of the needed resources were prominent (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Barwick, 2022). In relatively cheap and compact but non-diverse Newcastle the costs of cultural assimilation came to fore: adopting or mimicking local practices, customs, and conventions was prerequisite for accessing social capital (Ryan et al., 2008; Wessendorf, 2019). While the structural context shapes the nominal costs, the agential interpretations of the relative burden are reflexivity-driven. The unwavering desire of CR for social acceptance demands satisfaction at [almost] all costs. Importantly, CRs do not accept the costs blindly but reflexively conclude that social capital is worthy of sacrifices. MRs

are particularly sensitive to ethical costs and regard gaining advantage from social capital as fundamentally unfair. Both groups tend to eschew relying on social capital, even at the expense of career interests, when perceiving it as a threat to their reflexive priorities or *modus vivendi*. As far as careers are concerned, ARs adopt a more practical approach. Painstakingly assessing potential returns against the costs of investments in social capital, they are most cautious about obligations and possible reputational losses (Offer, 2012).

The contribution of this article extends beyond the novel typology of factors shaping reliance on social capital. More importantly, it explains *how* the identified factors are affected by structure and agency, which addresses the calls to develop more balanced and comprehensive accounts of career experiences (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011) and, specifically, social capital in careers (Gruguletz et al., 2019). The empirical results suggest that skilled migrants as career agents are neither immune from contextual influences nor helpless against them (see Farashah et al., 2023; Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). Instead, migrants reflexively navigate their ways through barriers and enablers (Thondhlana et al., 2016; Wallinder, 2022) but, even within the same context, do it differently because of their reflexive commitments (Archer, 2003, 2007). Crucially, the results explain not only why skilled migrants use social capital for career purposes, but also why they do *not* rely on it. For example, the high need and abundant presence prompt the use of social capital by London-based ARs, whilst reputational risks discourage it. In Newcastle, the reliance on social capital is curbed by lower need and scarcer presence. CRs and MRs also tend to use social capital more in London but interpret the identified mechanisms differently. In both contexts, MRs exhibit lower reliance on social capital than the other groups, whereas CRs use social capital frequently and extensively but for reasons unrelated (or non-directly related) to careers. Exploring factors that discourage reliance on social capital is important as it helps avoid the 'survival bias' (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013).

Archer's RST offered a potent theoretical tool to investigate and explain reliance on social capital as an outcome of reflexivity-moderated interactions between structure and agency. This article provides a rare empirical example of utilising RST to examine individual careers and, thus, contributes to the search for a robust social theory in career studies (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011). Archer's (2003, 2007) reflexivity acknowledges that people have different attitudes towards careers. Driven by achievements-orientated concerns, ARs have more explicit career interests and, therefore, are more likely to understand the need for social capital through potential career advantages. The need for social capital as conceived of by CRs and MRs is also informed by their unique concerns – inter-personal relations and values, respectively – which may be at odds with career interests. This illustrates the importance of taking into consideration what really matters for people when studying the use of career resources; or careers in a broader sense; or social choices, transactions, and achievements in a yet broader sense. The stance on social capital assumed by CRs and MRs may appear detrimental, irrational, or downright wrong from the perspective of *homo economicus*. Yet, the use of social capital is not always determined by its ability to maximise monetary gains or accelerate career progress, in the same vein as economic rationality is not the only type of rationality (Kuwabara et al., 2018). The respondents' decisions and actions were not random; they originated from conscious deliberations and were guided by specific interests. Some of the choices concerning social capital were more or less (dis)advantageous for careers but, crucially, the respondents were cognizant of such consequences and accepted them to pursue personally meaningful concerns and *modus vivendi*.

In this article, reflexivity was used to understand skilled migrants' agency but, more importantly, their *agency in context* (Archer, 2007), within two distinct urban spaces. The empirical results have demonstrated that global and secondary cities differently enable and hinder skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons and explained some of the

observed differences – e.g., social capital is highly important and profuse in competitive and diverse London although accessing it is pricey and time-consuming, whereas in more casual and homogenous Newcastle social resources are less significant and abundant, and accessing them demands a significant degree of acculturation (see Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Moroşanu, 2016). These findings unravel the social embeddedness of careers and social capital (Erel and Ryan, 2019) by corroborating the status of secondary cities as distinct and impactful career environments, rather than rudimentary global cities (Cardoso and Meijers, 2016), and by adding to the existing attempts to analyse careers within urban spaces (Beigi et al., 2020; Kozhevnikov, 2021; Tams et al., 2021).

This study also has practical implications. Firstly, it can inform migrants' own decision-making. For example, MRs should be aware that high costs in global cities may necessitate reliance on social capital for career reasons, even despite their moral scruples; CRs should be prepared that social acceptance in secondary cities is likely to require a significant degree of acculturation and assimilation; whereas ARs should anticipate limited career opportunities in secondary cities. At the same time, the results of this study can instruct organisations and career advisors seeking to employ, support, and/or benefit from skilled migrants. In global cities, organisations can facilitate networking by ensuring its affordability, whilst in secondary cities businesses can facilitate the exchange of cultural knowledge between migrant and local workers. Most importantly, organisations should develop, promote, and uphold fair and egalitarian employment principles, which would provide career support for all through formal channels and minimise the need for social capital.

Limitations and future research

This article has started developing a theoretically robust explanation of reliance on social capital for career reasons, but this mission cannot be accomplished by a single study and its

limitations should inform directions for future investigations. Whereas the present article has explored why skilled migrants rely (or not) on social capital for their careers, the following studies could pay more attention to positive and negative outcomes of utilising social capital and whether (and how) they differ across [urban] contexts, as well as modes of reflexivity. Such inquiries could cast more light on the "dark side" of social capital (Portes, 1998; Leschke and Weiss, 2020) and how it could be mitigated. A longitudinal approach would be useful to discover the temporal patterns of relying on social capital and the dynamic interactions between structure and agency. Archer's (2007) morphogenetic model can be particularly useful for this endeavour.

More efforts would be beneficial to address some of the Realist Social Theory's own oversights. For instance, longitudinal studies are needed to cast more light on the evolution of reflexivity throughout people's life and career course (Golob and Makarovic, 2019), which can refer to shifts between MoRs (e.g., from communicative to autonomous reflexivity) or transformation of the dominant MoR (e.g., recruiting new interlocutors by communicative reflexives or prioritising different values by meta-reflexives as contextual circumstances change). Besides, more research is needed to acknowledge the possibility of less meritorious values (e.g., it is – sadly - possible to think of someone driven by commitments to anti-Semitism or homophobia) and examine their impact. More clarity is also needed regarding whether all aspects of people's internal conversations are dominated by the same MoR or whether it is possible to switch between different modes, for example, when dealing with different concerns or in different contextual situations (see Baker, 2018; Dyke et al., 2012).

London and Newcastle typify global and secondary cities but have their own features that may be not shared by other urban contexts (see Hollands, 1995; Barwick, 2022). Exploring other global and secondary cities, as well as other urban typologies, can be worthwhile. By focussing on agential reflexivity and structural conditions in urban environments, this article has offered

a balanced and novel, but by no means exhaustive explanation of reliance on social capital. Future studies could refine it by utilising various intersectional lenses and conducting multi-level analysis to appreciate other structural and agential factors – e.g., legislation, occupations, inequality, and personality traits. It would also be useful to explore the reliance on social capital of others, differently (dis)advantaged career agents. The following studies should also pay more attention to virtual and online social capital, considering the growing prominence of digital connections in the post-COVID era. This focus can considerably shift the perception of, for example, the presence of social capital outside of global cities and explain such topical phenomena as digital nomadism or permanent relocation of professionals into relatively remote and isolated localities. Finally, future research should make more effort to disentangle the relations between need, presence, and costs.

In conclusion, this qualitative study responses to the need for better understanding of reliance on social capital for career purposes. The results present unique, theoretically robust, and empirically rich insights. The study advances the existing scholarship by identifying three specific factors that shape skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons and by explaining how these factors are simultaneously defined by structural conditionings (explored here on the urban level) and migrants' own agency (examined through the lens of reflexivity).

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Social capital in skilled migrants' careers: Why (not) rely on it?

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Abstract

Although resources accessible through social contacts (social capital) can enhance people's careers and, especially, careers of migrants, a comprehensive account explaining why career agents do or do not rely on social capital for career reasons is currently absent. This article addresses this lacuna by utilising Realist Social Theory's notion of reflexivity to explore careers of 82 skilled migrants in global (London) and secondary (Newcastle-upon-Tyne) cities. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews reveals that reliance on social capital for career reasons depends upon three factors: (1) need, (2) accessibility, and (3) costs. All three have proved to be shaped by both migrants' reflexive agency and structural conditions of the urban environments where their careers are unfolding. This article contributes by offering a fine-grained and balanced explanatory account of social capital in skilled migrants' careers, which further conceptualises careers decision-making as a relational phenomenon.

Key words: careers; social capital; skilled migrants; realist social theory; global cities; secondary cities

Introduction

With different provisos, from various frames of reference, and using diverse terminologies, the existing studies broadly agree that careers can be enhanced by various career resources. Recently, career resources have received more scholarly attention as researchers turned to examine career boundary-crossing and factors that facilitate or hinder it (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). Importantly, another broadly agreed-upon agreement is that some of these resources can be accessed through social contacts, as social capital (Lin, 2001). Career advantages offered by social capital include access to jobs, promotions, legal advice, perceived career success, and a sense of professional identity (Granovetter, 1983; Burt, 1992; Thondhlana et al., 2016). Yet, not all people use social capital for career reasons or, at least, to the same extent.

Admittedly, social capital is conceptually vague, fluid, and loosely defined. Some authors use social capital and social networks interchangeably, some others equate social capital with resources incorporated in the networks, and the third camp suggests that social capital includes both resources and connections. Engaging with these debates is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, it adopts a conventional definition of social capital as "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual" (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998: 243) to explore: [1] *why* skilled migrants rely (or not) on career resources accessible through social contacts (social capital); and [2] whether and *how* their reliance is shaped by structure and agency.

The empirical data used to answer these questions came from 82 interviews with skilled migrants in London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The focus on skilled migrants is topical and timely. For migrants, as for other underprivileged groups, such as women and ethnic minorities (Gruguletz et al., 2019; Beigi et al., 2020), social capital can be especially helpful to compensate for the lack of other recognisable resources and to overcome career barriers (Moroşanu, 2016; Mahbub, 2021). Farashah et al. (2023) demonstrate that skilled migrants'

employability is constrained by multiple factors, including discrimination, which indicates the compensatory value of social capital for their careers. Yet, whereas the literature (Thondhlana et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2023) and lay knowledge alike suggest that not all skilled migrants' careers [equally] rely on social capital, the explanatory accounts of these differences are scarce, and this article addresses this void. In addition to its scholarly value, such explanation is instructive for skilled migrants' efforts to mobilise social resources, especially in the present turbulent times, as the value of social capital is believed to increase in times of austerity and uncertainty (Moroşanu, 2016). It could also improve career support offered by organisations and institutions, as the competition for skilled foreign workers is becoming increasingly stiffer, particularly in the post-Brexit UK.

To explore the agency of skilled migrants and how it influences reliance on social capital, this article draws upon Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) Realist Social Theory and its notion of reflexivity. By introducing this theory more firmly into career studies, this article contributes to the ongoing searches for the robust social theory that could advance this field of academic inquiries (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011; Mayrhofer et al., 2020). The structural factors are explored at the city-level, which contributes to the recent endeavours to appreciate cities as unique career environments (Tams et al., 2021). Overall, exploring skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons through the lenses of both structure and agency addresses the long-lasting conflict in career studies and provides a balanced and nuanced explanatory account, currently missing in the literature (Erel and Ryan, 2019).

The next sections review the existing literature to discuss social capital and the present approaches to understanding its role in careers, followed by the introduction of Realist Social Theory, as well as the concepts of global and secondary cities. Then the context of this study is outlined, and the methodological approach is expounded. Next, the key findings are presented, before discussing the contributions made by this article.

Theoretical background

Social capital in careers

Social capital has long been recognised as an important career asset – one which may not be equally useful for all careers and all purposes, and which needs to be handled with care, but nonetheless valuable and influential (e.g., Thondhlana et al., 2016; Gericke et al., 2018; Mahbub, 2021). Yet, surprisingly little effort has been made to explain *why* people do (not) use it for career purposes.

Many studies equate having [access to] social resources with mobilising them, arguing that better-connected individuals are better positioned to benefit from social capital (Portes, 1998). Famously, Granovetter (1983: 202) identified "weak ties" as more beneficial (than "strong ties") due to their ability to act as "critical bridges" to diverse resources. This notion was further elaborated by Putnam (2000) who distinguished between bonding (connecting to people within one's social group and helpful for "getting by") and bridging (linking to the broader communities and required for "getting ahead") ties. For migrants, bridging indigenous contacts are advantageous because they can share local knowledge needed for labour market integration (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Moroşanu, 2016). Recently, studies of Polish migrants in the UK (Ryan et al., 2008) and Syrian refugees in Germany (Gericke et al., 2018) have differentiated between bridging and bonding vertically and horizontally, suggesting that vertical bridging contacts (indigenous people occupying higher positions) are particularly beneficial for re-establishing skilled careers. Yet, migrants often find themselves excluded from resource-rich indigenous networks (Moroşanu, 2016). While illuminating deplorable societal inequalities, these studies pay limited attention to individual strategizing (Kuwabara et al., 2018), and this structural approach, despite highlighting the importance of being in the right place, is less useful for understanding how one ends (or not) in that right place.

This disposition has been unsettled by the advent of the boundaryless career, which re-conceptualised social capital as knowing-whom - one of the forms of knowing required to take responsibility for one's own career (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). The boundaryless career and studies it inspired add an important individual perspective to understanding social capital in careers. Yet, such agency-centred inquiries have been criticised for downplaying the structural impact and portraying careers as unfettered by external influences (Rodrigues and Guest, 2010). For example, out of six professional networking motives identified by Porter and colleagues (2023) only one - adhering to social norms - is explicitly related to external circumstances, whereas the remaining five (enjoying connecting with people; enjoying assisting others; desire to acquire status; learning and performance; maintaining employability) are internal and focussed on people's own career preferences, objectives, and desires. When looking at internationally mobile individuals, this approach prioritises privileged, often White and male, migrants from developed countries (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013; Barwick, 2022) who allegedly experience neither issues with acceptance by the locals nor the need for such acceptance. They may be seen as "superior outsiders" (Wallinder, 2022) and may even form exclusive social cliques among themselves and blackball the indigenes.

Arguably, neither of these perspectives is comprehensive. Although reliance on social capital is a collective matter (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), it is not defined solely by people's network positions. Well-connected individuals can be denied access to resources if seen as unreliable (Smith, 2005). To benefit from social capital, people are required to invest in developing and maintaining connections (Granovetter, 1983; Portes, 1998), but the return on such investments differs across contexts because establishing trust and reciprocity is shaped by local norms and institutions (e.g., Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). Even skilled migrants encounter cultural and linguistic obstacles when building local connections (Wessendorf, 2019; Barwick, 2022). Besides, the use of social capital is not invariably driven by economic or, indeed, career

rationality (Kuwabara et al., 2018). Yet, even career-focussed migrants may avoid reliance on social capital, or some forms of it, as migrant contacts can lead to precarious jobs and exacerbate labour market segregation (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Leschke and Weiss, 2020). For example, Thondhlana et al. (2016) discuss how a "warehouse mentality" – tendency to take any available jobs - discourages Zimbabwean migrants in the UK from competing for jobs more commensurate with their expertise and ambitions (also Kelly and Ducusin, 2024). Therefore, to advance understanding of why people do or do not use social capital for career reasons, it is important to consider both structure and agency, as well as the interplay between them. Some trailblazers have started paving the way in this direction. Offer (2012) discriminated between exclusion and withdrawal from social networks, wherein the former is a prohibition imposed by others and the latter refers to self-imposed restrictions. A study by Gruguletz et al. (2019) explains women's less-effective networks as an outcome of structural barriers but also personal hesitations. With a reference to migrants, Ryan and Mulholland (2014: 259) observe that access to social resources is shaped by "the complex interplay of various factors including structural context, opportunities, personal priorities and also obstacles and constraints". Yet, these studies tend to address structure and agency only implicitly and/or parenthetically, while focussing on other issues. Even more fundamental efforts (e.g., Gruguletz et al., 2019; Beigi et al., 2020) treat structure and agency as somewhat divorced and the relations between them remain nebulous. Conceivably, these shortfalls can be attributed to the notorious lack of a comprehensive social theory in career studies (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011). This article champions Margaret Archer's Realist Social Theory as a potent means for such endeavours.

Realist Social Theory

Realist Social Theory (RST) was selected as this project's theoretical framework for its ability to disentangle the relations between structure and agency (Archer, 2003) and to separate

between their causal effects, without reducing one to another or conflating the two, as well as for its robust ontological foundation rooted in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975). The world is treated as a multi-layered system of interconnected entities, such as biological organisms, organisations, and societies, which have properties, such as employing people or having limbs, and causal powers to influence the world. Critical realist ontology also differentiates between three strata of the world: the *empirical* or events that can be sensed and observed; the *actual* or events that happen in the world and can be different from what is witnessed; and the *real* or powers that cause empirical and actual events (Bhaskar, 1975).

RST developed these ideas to argue that structure and agency are interconnected but ontologically and analytically distinguishable (Archer, 2003). Structure constitutes society and has a power to orient actors' choices, goals, and actions, without pre-determining them. Individuals have their agency - a causal power to interact with and to make an impact upon the social world. When structure and agency interact, two outcomes are possible – structural reproduction (*morphostatis*) or elaboration (*morphogenesis*).

Archer (2007: 4) further argues that interactions between structure and agency are mediated through reflexivity or "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa". Reflexivity is a causal power exercised through "internal conversations" in which people define their subjective agential concerns (ambitions and priorities) against their objective structural circumstances. Thus, reflexivity helps people navigate their interests through the world but also limits the repertoire of actions compatible with the prioritised concerns in the given environment (Archer, 2007). In turn, the very existence of reflexivity and its mediating role are enabled by distinguishing between structure and agency (as reflexive objects and subjects) and their causal powers. Archer (2007, 2012) also argues that reflexive deliberations are

particularly important in volatile or unfamiliar environments, which is likely to be the case for migrants.

Crucially, the way people exercise reflexivity is not uniform. Four modes of reflexivity (MoRs) have been identified (Archer, 2003, 2007). All agents practise all four but to dissimilar extents, and one mode typically dominates our internal conversations. *Communicative reflexivity* encourages concerns about inter-personal relations and requires confirmation or affirmation of internal conversations by dialogical partners or interlocutors. Such interlocutors are personal contacts perceived to be sufficiently trustworthy and knowledgeable, typically drawn from within the environment people struggle to make their way through and often disposed to preserve and enforce the structural norms and conventions. *Autonomous reflexivity* is associated with concerns about achievements and characterised by self-sufficient internal conversations leading directly to actions. *Meta-reflexivity* results in concerns about values and encourages individuals to critically review their own reflexivity through continual self-evaluation. Finally, *fractured reflexivity* leads to confusion and social disorientation.

Whereas fractured reflexivity yields 'passive agents' unable to tackle their problems, practitioners of the other three modes are 'active agents' who develop their own *modus vivendi* – sets of practices that constitute a way of living most compatible with their concerns (Archer, 2007). Through their internal conversations, people identify and prioritise their primary concerns and decide what purposeful activities, plans, or 'projects' to deploy when pursuing these concerns within a given environment (and with a given portfolio of resources). Such projects are, in turn, reflexively monitored in the volatile structural circumstances and can be committed to, changed, revised, or even abandoned altogether. In other words, whilst structure obstructs and enables agential choices and actions, people analyse, interpret, make sense of, and respond to the social reality through reflexive deliberations that compromise between conditionings and practice. Therefore, according to Realist Social Theory, what people do (or

not) and why can be explained only by considering both their contextual circumstances and reflexive agency.

The choice of Realist Social Theory is not heedless of its limitations. For instance, it has been argued that, whilst meticulously attentive to agency and reflexivity, the theory is less rigorous and detailed when explaining or even appreciating social structure and a wider range of mechanisms through which it affects agency (Caetano, 2015; also Golob and Makarovic, 2019). Other scholars (e.g., Elder-Vass, 2007) have argued that there is more space for habitual actions, even in the less predictable modern conditions, than Archer (2012) suggests. Nonetheless, by avoiding the structure-agency conflation and appreciating reflexivity as a mediator between the two, Archer's theory offers a valuable lens through which to explore and explain how and why people differently respond to similar social circumstances. In this article, Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) reflexivity is deployed to examine how different concerns stir individuals towards dissimilar dispositions to using social capital for career purposes.

Social capital in global and secondary cities

Despite the relatively limited efforts to theorise contextual and relational factors (see Caetano, 2015), Archer (2007) acknowledges that developing *modus vivendi* requires appraisal of the environment enabling or obstructing reflexive concerns. Similarly, scholars have called for more attention to spatial embeddedness of social networks and resources, as well as careers in a broader sense (Erel and Ryan, 2019).

The existing endeavours to explore how contextual forces influence careers have prioritised national, organisational, and community analytical levels. Only recently calls for appreciation of urban spaces as unique career environments have emerged (Tams et al., 2021). Yet, migration studies have a long tradition of examining social resources through the lens of urban spaces and their impact (e.g., Barwick, 2022). One useful taxonomy distinguishes between *global* and *secondary* cities. Global cities - e.g., New York, London and Hong Kong - are hubs

of control over global resources (Sassen, 1991), which, historically, have been enticing great numbers of internationally mobile people. Presently, however, more migrants find home and employment in secondary cities, which are becoming acknowledged as distinct social settings with unique properties and attributes (Cardoso and Meijers, 2016).

Exploring migrants' reflexive deliberations in specific urban landscapes can offer in-depth insights into the relations between their agency and structural conditionings, whilst also usefully adding to the Realist Social Theory's somewhat limited contextual conceptualisation. In critical realist terms, global and secondary cities feature dissimilar causal powers to conduct careers, including reliance on social capital. Some of these powers can be idiosyncratic to migrants or affect them differently. Recently, Kozhevnikov (2021) identified the labour market, community, and lifestyle as three groups of city-factors that shape skilled migrants' career capital, including knowing-whom, in global and secondary cities (also Beigi et al., 2020) Developed infrastructure and international transport links in global cities enable migrants to rely on transnational connections, which may be less feasible in secondary cities. Firmly implanted in the global economy, global cities often feature sizeable foreign-born and professional communities, and usually offer more opportunities to socialise with other migrants as well as fellow professionals, foreign and indigenous. In diverse global cities, the indigenes are more likely to have the "intercultural civility" (Wessendorf, 2019: 139) or exposure to and tolerance of people from different backgrounds. Yet, migrants' efforts to develop local ties may be hindered by costs and geographical distances in global cities (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014). This indicates that skilled migrants in global and secondary cities have different opportunities to fulfil their reflexive concerns regarding reliance on social capital.

This study takes London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne as examples of global and secondary cities, respectively, to investigate how urban landscapes, in conjunction with agential concerns, shape the role of social capital in careers. The UK's capital, London is an archetype of a global city.

Despite the UK withdrawal from the EU and the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2023 London maintained its first-place position in the Global Power City Index for the twelfth consecutive year (also widening the gap between itself and New York which occupies the second place), performing particularly strongly at cultural interaction, economy, and research and development. The city's political, economic, and cultural supremacy is buttressed by its diversity, including a substantial foreign-born population, and high density of skilled jobs. Situated in the North-East of England, Newcastle has been experiencing a wounding transformation, induced by the decline of traditional manufacturing industries, from one of the world's leading industrial hubs to the city with a limited engagement in the global economy. The city is characterised by the homogenous working-class White British population (ONS, 2018) and strong, durable, and cohesive local 'Geordie' culture which, despite being regarded as convivial and uninhibited, can be exclusive to 'outsiders' and, under certain adverse circumstances (e.g., unemployment), protectionist and insular (Hollands, 1995).

Method

To examine how agential reflexive concerns and urban landscapes shape social capital in skilled migrants' careers, this article drew upon rich qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Qualitative enquiries are useful for circumstantial insights into individual experiences (Silverman, 1993) and, from a critical realist position, semi-structured interviews have been endorsed for their ability to unravel complex structure-agency interactions (Smith and Elger, 2014).

The final sample comprised 82 skilled migrants: born outside the UK to non-British parents, educated at undergraduate university degree level or above, and/or having three or more years of experience in occupations recognised as skilled in the Standard Occupational Classification, including university lecturers, schoolteachers, managers, scientists, doctors, and engineers.

When interviewed, 43 participants (aged 24-61, mean: 38) lived and worked in Newcastle and 39 (26-58, mean: 37) in London, with 18 having had career experiences in both cities. The sample was not intended to accurately reflect the demographic of migrant communities. Rather, the aim was to develop two comparable sub-samples encompassing an assortment of backgrounds and experiences. The sample included 45 male and 37 female participants (London: 22/17 and Newcastle: 23/20); 39 were from the European Economic Area (London: 18 and Newcastle: 21); and 32 respondents (London: 17 and Newcastle: 15) were classed as non-White. The interviews were conducted in English, face-to-face (67) and remotely (15), and lasted approximately one hour. All names and some other personal data had been changed or withdrawn.

The study used abductive approach (Smith and Elger, 2014) aimed at creating a logical and plausible explanation for the phenomenon in question (in this study's case, skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons) through systematic and iterative combining of theory and data. The research was also informed by Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2012) which, despite its original focus on inductive approaches, has recently been recommended for enhancing 'qualitative rigour' in abductive studies (Magnani and Gioia, 2023). The research commenced with in-depth literature review presented in the previous section. An important objective of the review was identification of *a priori* themes that informed the interview guide. The interview questions were designed to examine, elaborate, or reject the *a priori* themes (Magnani and Gioia, 2023), e.g., urban migrant communities and time needed to develop social connections, but later evolved to investigate emerging patterns. For instance, when the *need* crystallised as one of the key factors in the narratives of the first few respondents, the subsequent interviews explicitly invited discussions of its manifestation and impact.

The interviews opened with introductory questions about migration and career biographies. This was followed by more specific questions about social capital, which invited explanation

of why the respondents did (not) rely on it for career reasons. Multiple probing questions invited respondents to expand their answers. The questions covered the respondents' deliberations, interpretations, and actions in relation to (not) seeking, accepting, and utilising social capital, including options that were considered but dismissed and the reasons for dismissing. The participants were asked to comment on how reflexive concerns and contextual forces had shaped their reliance on social capital. Those exposed to both urban spaces were encouraged to juxtapose their experiences.

In this study, Archer's original quantitative tool, the Internal Conversation Indicator (ICONI), was not used in its 'pure' form due the highlighted issues with its reliability and consistency (see Archer, 2012; Dyke et al., 2012; Golob and Makarovic, 2019). Instead, the qualitative questions about respondents' internal conversations, primary concerns, dialogical partnerships, and career 'projects' were incorporated in the interviews, following the examples of other, mostly education-focussed (e.g., Baker, 2018; Liu and Lin, 2024), qualitative studies and Archer's (2007) own precedent for combining the ICONI with interviews. Throughout the entire process, the respondents were recognised and treated as knowledgeable and reflexive agents (Magnani and Gioia, 2023), although with inevitable limitations to their (as well as other people's, including this article author's) understandings and interpretations (Smith and Elger, 2014). After each interview, a short summary was developed, highlighting topics needing further investigation, as well as points for researcher's own reflection (Gioia et al., 2012).

The data collection and analysis were undertaken in an iterative and dynamic fashion. Firstly, MoRs dominating the respondents' internal conversations were identified from their answers about subjective concerns and internal dialogues, as well as relations with other people, career goals, career enablers and constraints (Archer, 2008, 2012). In most cases, the identification of dominant MoRs was [surprisingly] straightforward, even when personal relations and values were concerned. For example, most respondents were fond of their family and friends, and

their roles in respondents' careers were widely acknowledged. Yet, only practitioners of communicative reflexivity actively sought and relied on others' approval, confirmation, and recommendations, whereas respondents whose internal dialogues were dominated by autonomous and meta-reflexivity were conspicuously more independent in their career decision-making, with some rare exceptions of resorting to expert counselling. Similarly, the majority of interviewees mentioned their values, morals, and principles, and many considered them when engaging in career decision-making. Yet, careers of some respondents (classed as meta-reflexives) were evidently shaped by and structured around their values, more than anything else.

Eventually, 43 respondents were classed as practitioners of autonomous reflexivity (ARs), 24 had internal dialogues dominated by communicative reflexivity (CRs) and 15 participants predominantly practiced meta-reflexivity (MRs). No internal dialogues were dominated by fractured reflexivity which was anticipated, since 'passive' agency is unlikely to lead to self-initiated international mobility (Archer, 2003). Importantly, the identified dominant modes of reflexivity are not treated as personality types (Archer, 2007). Also, the research design made it possible to identify dominant modes of reflexivity only in relations to respondents' careers and the use of social capital for career reasons, and only at the time when they were interviewed (see Dyke et al., 2012), and so more generalisable claims cannot be sensibly made.

Next, the interviews were read to construct first-order (informant-based) codes, advance them into more researcher-based second-order categories and, finally, aggregate themes enabling theoretical explanation of social capital in the respondents' careers (Gioia et al., 2012). For example, one of the three aggregate themes, *costs*, was formed of five second-order categories: financial costs; acculturation; time; reputational risks; and ethical scruples. In turn, acculturation comprised eight first-order codes: language proficiency; written and verbal communication standards; cultural knowledge; football and drinking; body language;

politeness; display of emotions; and tolerance and acceptance. Lastly, the impact of agency (reflexive concerns) and structure (urban context) upon the identified dimensions was scrutinised. While focussing on the most influential mechanisms, this data-to-theory advancement was particularly concerned with themes underexplored in the existing literature (Gioia et al., 2012).

The analysis compared the data with the existing literature, whilst exploring differences and similarities within and across MoRs. The explanation was sought for the codes present and absent in the analysis (see Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). The results of the analysis were discussed with three colleagues not involved in this research but with substantial knowledge of qualitative methods and Realist Social Theory.

Findings

Three principal factors (mechanisms) shaping skilled migrants' social capital reliance materialised from the analysis: *need*, *presence,* and *costs*. Importantly, all three featured in each individual interview, although their manifestation, interpretation, significance, and effect varied across practitioners of different modes of reflexivity and across the urban contexts. These factors and how they were co-influenced by agency and structure are unravelled in the following sections.

Need

The first factor, *need*, refers to the utility of social resources compared to career aid available via other channels. Irrespective of their dominant modes of reflexivity (MoRs), social capital was described as more valuable in London. The capital featured plentiful career opportunities but also stern competition, and foreign expertise was not a substantial competitive advantage. Facing intense rivalry and having their foreign skills misprized, London respondents felt that social capital was highly beneficial for (re)establishing and advancing their careers.

Contrariwise, Newcastle participants described the local skilled jobs market as "*scanty*" but underlined that, due to the homogeneity of the locally available skillsets, their foreign competencies were highly advantageous when opportunities – especially in companies seeking to internationalise - arose. This does not imply that careers in Newcastle were 'boundaries-free', but rather that migrants' skills were sufficiently valuable and rare to downgrade social capital to a helpful supplement. Omor (engineer, Bangladesh) contrasted his experience:

[In Newcastle] I could get almost any job I applied for, just because I could offer different things, you know, education and that. (...) I am more experienced now, but [in London] I am one of many and still need some, you know, favours even to get an interview.

The perceived need for social capital also varied across different MoRs. With reflexive concerns aimed at achievements, respondents practising predominantly autonomous reflexivity (ARs) felt particularly enthusiastic about career advantages afforded by social capital: "*if social contacts can help [my career], then of course I need them!*" (Dato, event manager, Georgia). They described various desirable career benefits potentially accessible through social connections, such as information about vacancies, promotion opportunities, and knowledge exchange, and largely corroborated the argument of the higher need for such benefits in London's competitive and super-diverse labour market.

The other two groups concurred that social capital could provide career benefits and that they would be more useful in London. Yet, they also shared opinions idiosyncratic to their reflexive concerns, which sometimes were at cross-purposes with their own career interests. In comparison to ARs, practitioners of meta-reflexivity (MRs) displayed much lower interest in careers: "*I don't really care about the career at all"* (Lew, lecturer, Poland). Lew's detachment from his career was engendered by disappointment in higher education which, in his opinion, was based upon "*fear*" and which he did not want to (re)produce. Other MRs also discovered that their values-orientated concerns, such as sustainability, social justice, and intellectual

freedom, were out of step with their careers. Notably, they saw little practical need in social capital to reconcile their concerns and careers because, as will be elaborated later, this required a fundamental transformation of society and deemed unfeasible.

This is not to imply that MRs had no career interests or experienced no need for social capital. As other respondents, they were exposed to multiple structural pressures urging career pursuits – not least, the need to fend for themselves and provide for their families. Lew handed in his resignation but eventually withdrew it because of the need to support his disabled brother in Poland. Yet, MRs were disposed to sacrifice career interests in favour of their values-centred *modus vivendi*, especially once having secured a comfortable and stable income. Achieving financial security was more difficult in London, due to higher costs of living. Therefore, the need for social capital in London was higher not only for 'generic' career purposes, but also for specific MRs' objectives - to accelerate arrival to the financial position where MRs could pledge themselves to their cherished values.

For those respondents whose internal dialogues were dominated by communicative reflexivity (CRs), the need for social capital was axiomatic. When interviewed, 16 had trusted and knowledgeable dialogical partners who assessed and confirmed their internal dialogues, whereas the remaining eight expressed "*natural*" and "*instinctive*" desires for such relationships. The interlocutors were unanimously regarded as valuable sources of career advice and counselling, and careers of many CRs appeared to be guided by them to a very significant degree. For instance, Kasia (Poland) sought approval of "*every career step*" from her elder sisters whose paths she followed when moving to the UK to become a nurse.

More importantly, dialogical partners were also helpful for actualising specific acceptance-related concerns of CRs. Unlike pragmatic ARs, who regarded acceptance by organisations, professional bodies, or communities as a strategic career enabler, for CRs acceptance was valuable as an end in itself. The interlocutors assisted by introducing CRs to the 'right people'

or by explaining locally dominant socio-cultural conventions and norms. The latter was particularly important in culturally uniform Newcastle where, as will be explained later, acceptance was typically predicated upon assimilation:

Here [in Newcastle]… sometimes it feels that they try to choose words that I don't know or they talk about things that I don't know (laughs). (…) It's like they are testing you, whether you are, you know, assimilated enough to be their friend. (Mira, council worker, Vietnam; moved to Newcastle from London)

Consequently, Mira and other CRs experienced more need for social capital in Newcastle than in London. This may seem at odds with the earlier arguments but can be explained by the discrepancy between 'practical' career needs and CRs' reflexive commitments. Vlad (financial adviser, Russia) remarked that his "*career needed more [social capital] in London*" but he "*personally needed more of it in Newcastle*". Like other CRs, Vlad prioritised the latter as the need most compatible with his reflexive concerns and, therefore, more personally meaningful.

Presence

The second factor, *presence*, referred to the existence of the needed social capital. The consensus was that social resources in London were more plentiful and diverse. London hosted high numbers of skilled professionals, migrants and indigenes alike, with assorted experiences and assets: "*It's very self-sufficient. Honestly, I struggle to think of any support or service I possibly need and that I can't find in London*" (Dato, event manager, Georgia). Other respondents corroborated that social capital existing in London was sufficient to accommodate a variety of career purposes, thanks to well-established communities and societies, including those launched and/or run by other migrants. In contrast, social resources present in Newcastle were regarded as meagre. Most importantly, locally available social capital was described as unbefitting, since migrants' career needs could not always be met by [even genuine] support

from mainly White British locals. Besides, the social distance between skilled migrants and predominantly working-class indigenes was emphasised:

And of course, as a professional migrant you don't necessarily identify yourself with working class fully. So, who are your networks? Your networks become very much reduced, because it become only your colleagues, not the city. The city doesn't offer you networks.... (Joaquin, lecturer, Colombia; moved to Newcastle from London)

The way respondents interpreted the presence of useful social resources further differed across the dominant MoRs. ARs were distinct in that they were able to identify more sources of career-related social capital and took a more proactive stance. Hannah (marketing director, Israel; moved to Newcastle from London) elaborated:

My contacts are friends, you know, just people I like… also, people I need or might need in the future, but I keep an eye on all of them, just to see what they do, where they go in life and what kind of favours we may be able to exchange if needed.

Other ARs also strategically monitored their social contacts or, in Dato's (event manager, Georgia) words, undertook "*regular audit*" to keep abreast of resources in their networks. Although agreeing that social capital in London was more abundant, Newcastle-based ARs made remarkable efforts to discover and create social capital. Akande (graduate lecturer, Nigeria) established an informal support network of predominantly other migrant colleagues. The initiatives of some other ARs included transnational networking – e.g., Fabio's (lecturer, Italy) introduction of his former US colleagues to new workmates in the UK facilitated knowledge exchange and fostered partnerships. Further, ARs were particularly likely to identify sources of social capital outside of their immediate organisations – e.g., clients, customers, and suppliers.

MRs presented two somewhat conflicting accounts, which reflected the tension between their agential values and structure. When discussing the need to secure financial stability, MRs

reiterated the arguments about the wealth of social resources in London. When considering their ultimate values-related concerns, some MRs conceded that high-profile contacts in politics and business may be able to commence certain reforms, but a vehement opinion was that, eventually, social transformation would require almost unanimous communal support. Lew (lecturer, Poland) shared his thoughts about reforming the higher education: "*I think it is difficult to change it unless a lot of people together become conscious about how we function as human beings, that's the thing*".

So, the consensus was that the social resources needed to realise concerns of MRs were not readily present in either city, although London offered better opportunities to meet confederates:

You may be any freak you want [in London] and meet other freaks – most importantly, freaks of your own kind (laughs). (Paulina, Slovakia, receptionist; moved to London from Newcastle)

CRs also agreed that London featured more social resources useful for their careers. However, unlike ARs and MRs, they sought social capital to blend [their careers] into the host environment and, unsurprisingly, found it in both cities. Essentially, anyone knowledgeable about the structural conditions could become a trustworthy interlocutor. Yet, London-based respondents once again underscored the greater choice of interlocutors. In diverse London, both indigenes and migrants were perceived as sufficiently knowledgeable about the structural conditions. Konstantinos (barrister, Greece) formed a dialogical partnership with a Polish woman who provided ample social and cultural guidance enabling Konstantinos to feel "*like an honorary Pole*" which was sufficient for his integration. In monocultural Newcastle, preferred interlocutors were British or, at least, long-term migrant residents. Like other CRs, Stojan (engineer, Serbia) expected the desired interlocutor to explain the rules of British sports and pub etiquette, rather than to discuss strictly professional matters, as he believed that acquiring local knowledge would facilitate acceptance by the locals. Both Stojan and

Konstantinos conceded that acceptance may establish their career positions more firmly but, like other CRs, regarded career-related benefits as collateral [even if worthwhile] outcomes.

Costs

The final factor, *costs*, refers to expenses associated with relying on social capital. In London, the respondents emphasised financial and time-related costs. Many stressed that networking often happened in bars and restaurants, which can be pricey in London. Upon relocation to the capital from Newcastle, Omor (engineer, Bangladesh) had to become "*more selective*" in socialising, as he "*could not afford to attend all social gatherings [he] was invited to*". Also, travelling to meet people was described as tedious and inconvenient, and many respondents were deterred by the prospect of long journeys to meet people. In contrast, networking in Newcastle was described as affordable and convenient, thanks to lower prices and closer distances. However, the acculturation pressure, rarely mentioned in London, emerged as cardinal in Newcastle. Ahmed (bank manager, Iran) voiced an opinion shared by many: "*Culturally, Newcastle is monolithic, you know. The local culture is so strong and so inflexible, that culturally it is my way or a highway kind of thing.*" It was further suggested that to be granted access to resources-rich dominant indigenous networks, migrants were expected to develop advanced local knowledge and adopt local practices.

The way migrants construed and addressed these costs varied across the three MoRs. CRs had the most straightforward approach to managing the social capital costs. In either city, due to their 'natural' desire for dialogical partners and social acceptance, they were not deterred by the costs. Nora (teaching assistant, Saudi Arabia) poetically explained: "*Being with people is like breathing to me (…) you may be unhappy with it, but eventually you will pay any price, as that's the only way for you*".

Interestingly, career help from social contacts could be declined if seen as jeopardising wider acceptance and CRs' *modus vivendi*. Patel (insurance manager, Sri Lanka) was once offered a better-paid position but rejected the offer:

I had just started feeling comfortable with people at work, I finally started feeling like I belonged there… and [winning this acceptance] was so stressful! It took me a long time and caused anxiety, you know, I could not do that again.

Another example was shared by Mira (council worker, Vietnam) who rejected an invitation to participate in a large-scale project looking at integration of migrants into the regional economy, which would have meant working in a more diverse team, more appreciation of her 'foreignness', higher pay, and, potentially, a promotion. She "*didn't feel comfortable leaving other people*" and feared that "*it would maybe make me [her] too special*", and so preferred to stay with her – almost exclusively White British – colleagues.

Undermining the sense of belonging was the price Patel and Mira, like other CRs, were unwilling to pay, even for the sake of their careers, whereas ARs took a more strategic approach. Some of them shared examples of 'bookkeeping' where they ascertained the expenses incurred by using social capital against [potential] benefits. ARs were particularly cautious of mutual obligations and reputational risks arising from reliance on social capital and regarded them as critically important costs:

You must remember that whenever you receive help, you will have to pay back. (…) One day you receive a phone call and (…) it may not even be that person who helped you, maybe it's their kid or friend or spouse, and you will have to help them, but maybe you don't even know them, and it can be very, very risky for your reputation. (Maikel, dental solicitor, Netherlands).

In addition, ARs regarded close associations with other migrants and, especially, compatriots as potentially detrimental for their professional reputations. Like Harald (Germany), an

engineer with managerial responsibilities, many deliberately avoided exchanging favours with their fellow countrymen:

There are other Germans in the company, and we do support each other, but I have been very careful not to become too cliquey with them. If I keep promoting their interests, it will be unfair and may make other people think me biased and unprofessional, so ultimately non-German people won't trust me.

MRs also displayed idiosyncratic attitudes towards the costs of social capital. Like CRs, they were inclined to avoid relying on social capital if seeing it as a threat to their reflexive concerns. However, MRs were more preoccupied with moral and ethical costs. After a violent demise of his homosexual brother, Calvin (engineer, Jamaica) became highly sensitive to homophobia and eschewed people and organisations discriminating against homosexuals, even at the expense of his career interests. One manager was very keen to promote Calvin but, having overheard some of her comments about a gay colleague, Calvin rejected her sponsorship and soon left the company. He was aware that this intransigence was unhelpful for his career but, like other MRs, was prepared to pay this price to "*stay true*" to himself.

In addition, MRs commonly opined that using social capital to gain career advantage was fundamentally unfair: "*there is something improper about gaining advantage just because you know the right people or because the right people know you*" (Joanne, administrator, South Africa). This does not imply that MRs never used social resources, but many made a conscious effort to minimise reliance on social capital. Such scruples particularly troubled MRs in competitive and expensive London, whereas using social capital in Newcastle was deemed more pardonable because, in Calvin's words, skilled migrants were "*not taking anyone's place*".

Discussion

This qualitative study advances understanding of *why* individuals may or may not rely on social capital for career reasons by (1) identifying three specific factors or, in critical realism terms, mechanisms – need, presence, and costs - that account for skilled migrants' reliance on social capital; and (2) explaining the operation of these mechanisms as outcomes of reflexivity-mediated interactions between structure and agency. Archer's (2003, 2007) Realist Social Theory and the notion of reflexivity have been deployed to grasp agential concerns and how they are negotiated in urban contexts (Tams et al., 2021).

The first mechanism, *need*, relates to motivation to seek and/or accept career aid from social contacts. In line with the boundaryless career theses, this motivation has often been explored from an individual perspective. Social capital is said to be particularly useful for vulnerable groups of career agents, such as foreign-born workers (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013). Yet, not everyone desires a skilled job or career as such. The need for social capital is intrinsic for CRs, although their motivation is guided more by the social acceptance yearning than career reasons. ARs perceive the need in more explicitly career terms, whereas MRs are interested in social resources as a potential leverage for social transformation rather than as career enablers. Also, the need for social capital is shaped by external structural powers. For example, in relatively meritocratic environments, such as Singapore (Chua, 2011), jobseekers experience lower need for help from social contacts as appointments are made based on educational credentials. The present study illuminates the importance of urban factors for understanding the role of social capital in careers (see Kozhevnikov, 2021), such as stiff labour market competition in London or limited skilled opportunities in Newcastle, and suggests that, from career perspective, the need for SC is higher in global than secondary cities.

The second mechanism, *presence*, speaks to earlier studies of networks structure and composition (Granovetter, 1983; Burt, 1992). Importantly, presence refers not to the number of contacts but to accessibility of resources through those contacts (Lin, 2001). Ryan and

colleagues (2008) identified high-status indigenes (vertical bridging ties) as most useful for skilled migrants' efforts to re-establish their careers. The present study finds that opportunities to develop such ties are more limited in Newcastle, with its relatively high proportion of working-class population and low-skilled jobs, than in London, but valuable resources can be present in other types of connections too (also Gericke et al., 2018). For instance, the indigenes occupying socioeconomic positions similar to migrants (horizontal bridging contacts) can assist with developing local knowledge. Such "cultural brokers" (Moroşanu, 2016) are numerous in both cities but in multicultural London resources are also more easily accessible through bonding ties with other migrants – horizontal (e.g., professional advice) or vertical (e.g., emotional support). Unlike some earlier studies (Ryan et al., 2008; Moroşanu, 2013), these findings suggest that indigenous contacts may be superfluous in London where migrant networks are abundant and resources-rich and where adherence to British normativity is less important (see Wessendorf, 2019). The presence of social resources is also evaluated subjectively and reflexively. MRs report resources needed to pursue their values-centred concerns as absent even in the environments perceived as replete with valuable social resources by achievements-focussed ARs or acceptance-orientated CRs.

Finally, the *costs* refer to risks of relying on social resources. The mobilisation of social capital (Lin, 2001) requires substantial investments, but the return on those investments is not necessarily positive (Portes, 1998). Reliance on social capital can be fraught with broken trust, abused obligations, and reputational losses which can discourage people from requesting, accepting, or providing aid, even when their close kin are concerned (Smith, 2005; Offer, 2012). The costs are context-sensitive. In high-priced and geographically vast London, financial and time costs of connecting with people in possession of the needed resources were prominent (Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Barwick, 2022). In relatively cheap and compact but non-diverse Newcastle the costs of cultural assimilation came to fore: adopting or mimicking

local practices, customs, and conventions was prerequisite for accessing social capital (Ryan et al., 2008; Wessendorf, 2019). While the structural context shapes the nominal costs, the agential interpretations of the relative burden are reflexivity-driven. The unwavering desire of CR for social acceptance demands satisfaction at [almost] all costs. Importantly, CRs do not accept the costs blindly but reflexively conclude that social capital is worthy of sacrifices. MRs are particularly sensitive to ethical costs and regard gaining advantage from social capital as fundamentally unfair. Both groups tend to eschew relying on social capital, even at the expense of career interests, when perceiving it as a threat to their reflexive priorities or *modus vivendi*. As far as careers are concerned, ARs adopt a more practical approach. Painstakingly assessing potential returns against the costs of investments in social capital, they are most cautious about obligations and possible reputational losses (Offer, 2012).

The contribution of this article extends beyond the novel typology of factors shaping reliance on social capital. More importantly, it explains *how* the identified factors are affected by structure and agency, which addresses the calls to develop more balanced and comprehensive accounts of career experiences (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011) and, specifically, social capital in careers (Gruguletz et al., 2019). The empirical results suggest that skilled migrants as career agents are neither immune from contextual influences nor helpless against them (see Farashah et al., 2023; Shirmohammadi et al., 2023). Instead, migrants reflexively navigate their ways through barriers and enablers (Thondhlana et al., 2016; Wallinder, 2022) but, even within the same context, do it differently because of their reflexive commitments (Archer, 2003, 2007). Crucially, the results explain not only why skilled migrants use social capital for career purposes, but also why they do *not* rely on it. For example, the high need and abundant presence prompt the use of social capital by London-based ARs, whilst reputational risks discourage it. In Newcastle, the reliance on social capital is curbed by lower need and scarcer presence. CRs and MRs also tend to use social capital more in London but interpret the identified mechanisms

differently. In both contexts, MRs exhibit lower reliance on social capital than the other groups, whereas CRs use social capital frequently and extensively but for reasons unrelated (or non-directly related) to careers. Exploring factors that discourage reliance on social capital is important as it helps avoid the 'survival bias' (Al Ariss and Crowley-Henry, 2013).

Archer's RST offered a potent theoretical tool to investigate and explain reliance on social capital as an outcome of reflexivity-moderated interactions between structure and agency. This article provides a rare empirical example of utilising RST to examine individual careers and, thus, contributes to the search for a robust social theory in career studies (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011). Archer's (2003, 2007) reflexivity acknowledges that people have different attitudes towards careers. Driven by achievements-orientated concerns, ARs have more explicit career interests and, therefore, are more likely to understand the need for social capital through potential career advantages. The need for social capital as conceived of by CRs and MRs is also informed by their unique concerns – inter-personal relations and values, respectively – which may be at odds with career interests. This illustrates the importance of taking into consideration what really matters for people when studying the use of career resources; or careers in a broader sense; or social choices, transactions, and achievements in a yet broader sense. The stance on social capital assumed by CRs and MRs may appear detrimental, irrational, or downright wrong from the perspective of *homo economicus*. Yet, the use of social capital is not always determined by its ability to maximise monetary gains or accelerate career progress, in the same vein as economic rationality is not the only type of rationality (Kuwabara et al., 2018). The respondents' decisions and actions were not random; they originated from conscious deliberations and were guided by specific interests. Some of the choices concerning social capital were more or less (dis)advantageous for careers but, crucially, the respondents were cognizant of such consequences and accepted them to pursue personally meaningful concerns and *modus vivendi*.

In this article, reflexivity was used to understand skilled migrants' agency but, more importantly, their *agency in context* (Archer, 2007), within two distinct urban spaces. The empirical results have demonstrated that global and secondary cities differently enable and hinder skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons and explained some of the observed differences – e.g., social capital is highly important and profuse in competitive and diverse London although accessing it is pricey and time-consuming, whereas in more casual and homogenous Newcastle social resources are less significant and abundant, and accessing them demands a significant degree of acculturation (see Ryan and Mullholland, 2014; Moroşanu, 2016). These findings unravel the social embeddedness of careers and social capital (Erel and Ryan, 2019) by corroborating the status of secondary cities as distinct and impactful career environments, rather than rudimentary global cities (Cardoso and Meijers, 2016), and by adding to the existing attempts to analyse careers within urban spaces (Beigi et al., 2020; Kozhevnikov, 2021; Tams et al., 2021).

This study also has practical implications. Firstly, it can inform migrants' own decision-making. For example, MRs should be aware that high costs in global cities may necessitate reliance on social capital for career reasons, even despite their moral scruples; CRs should be prepared that social acceptance in secondary cities is likely to require a significant degree of acculturation and assimilation; whereas ARs should anticipate limited career opportunities in secondary cities. At the same time, the results of this study can instruct organisations and career advisors seeking to employ, support, and/or benefit from skilled migrants. In global cities, organisations can facilitate networking by ensuring its affordability, whilst in secondary cities businesses can facilitate the exchange of cultural knowledge between migrant and local workers. Most importantly, organisations should develop, promote, and uphold fair and egalitarian employment principles, which would provide career support for all through formal channels and minimise the need for social capital.

Limitations and future research

This article has started developing a theoretically robust explanation of reliance on social capital for career reasons, but this mission cannot be accomplished by a single study and its limitations should inform directions for future investigations. Whereas the present article has explored why skilled migrants rely (or not) on social capital for their careers, the following studies could pay more attention to positive and negative outcomes of utilising social capital and whether (and how) they differ across [urban] contexts, as well as modes of reflexivity. Such inquiries could cast more light on the "dark side" of social capital (Portes, 1998; Leschke and Weiss, 2020) and how it could be mitigated. A longitudinal approach would be useful to discover the temporal patterns of relying on social capital and the dynamic interactions between structure and agency. Archer's (2007) morphogenetic model can be particularly useful for this endeavour.

More efforts would be beneficial to address some of the Realist Social Theory's own oversights. For instance, longitudinal studies are needed to cast more light on the evolution of reflexivity throughout people's life and career course (Golob and Makarovic, 2019), which can refer to shifts between MoRs (e.g., from communicative to autonomous reflexivity) or transformation of the dominant MoR (e.g., recruiting new interlocutors by communicative reflexives or prioritising different values by meta-reflexives as contextual circumstances change). Besides, more research is needed to acknowledge the possibility of less meritorious values (e.g., it is – sadly - possible to think of someone driven by commitments to anti-Semitism or homophobia) and examine their impact. More clarity is also needed regarding whether all aspects of people's internal conversations are dominated by the same MoR or whether it is possible to switch between different modes, for example, when dealing with different concerns or in different contextual situations (see Baker, 2018; Dyke et al., 2012).

London and Newcastle typify global and secondary cities but have their own features that may be not shared by other urban contexts (see Hollands, 1995; Barwick, 2022). Exploring other global and secondary cities, as well as other urban typologies, can be worthwhile. By focussing on agential reflexivity and structural conditions in urban environments, this article has offered a balanced and novel, but by no means exhaustive explanation of reliance on social capital. Future studies could refine it by utilising various intersectional lenses and conducting multi-level analysis to appreciate other structural and agential factors – e.g., legislation, occupations, inequality, and personality traits. It would also be useful to explore the reliance on social capital of others, differently (dis)advantaged career agents. The following studies should also pay more attention to virtual and online social capital, considering the growing prominence of digital connections in the post-COVID era. This focus can considerably shift the perception of, for example, the presence of social capital outside of global cities and explain such topical phenomena as digital nomadism or permanent relocation of professionals into relatively remote and isolated localities. Finally, future research should make more effort to disentangle the relations between need, presence, and costs.

In conclusion, this qualitative study responses to the need for better understanding of reliance on social capital for career purposes. The results present unique, theoretically robust, and empirically rich insights. The study advances the existing scholarship by identifying three specific factors that shape skilled migrants' reliance on social capital for career reasons and by explaining how these factors are simultaneously defined by structural conditionings (explored here on the urban level) and migrants' own agency (examined through the lens of reflexivity).

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