Praised, prized, yet penalised: a critical examination of low-wage hiring queues in the global strawberry industry

1. Introduction

Other than individual skill and qualification level, employers may recruit and/or promote workers based on group characteristics such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, class, race, age, family status, appearance, etc. Thus, certain identity traits may become more or less common within a workplace and even across a sector and may differ as one moves up or down an organisational hierarchy. These patterns of employer preference are referred to by Waldinger and Lichter (2003: 8) as 'hiring queues' and the challenge for researchers is not only to identify these when they are present, but also to seek to explain them.

Taking up this challenge, the paper explores hiring queues in a rural context by focusing on horticultural employment, in particular within the global strawberry industry.[1] In-depth interviews with strawberry growers in the US, Norway and UK are used to investigate the types of workers deemed by the employers to be more or less capable, committed and productive. We find that mobility, nationality and ethnicity (which we refer to collectively as geographical variables) appear to be the main traits of the low-wage employer hiring queue. Or at least they are the traits that employers are willing to talk most candidly about.

The fact that geography is the decisive feature structuring employer hiring queues does not suggest, however, that there are innate qualities attached to workers from particular areas. Rather, the importance of geography lies in the way in which it is reflective of the production, reproduction and activation of labour power across time and space (King et al., 2021, this issue). Crucially, essentialist explanations of hiring queues (i.e. that the work ethic is largely innate) are generally avoided by employers. Instead they articulate 'informed stereotypes' by emphasising certain political, economic, social and legal contexts as being key to their hiring queue preferences. However, it must be acknowledged that employers are generally better at identifying hiring-queues stereotypes than they are at fully explaining them; their explanations are often quite selective.

2. Employer hiring queues

[1] The industry is global in all three countries with respect to: the diffusion and use of new technology; labour supply; and inputs (such as new crop varieties). In addition, whilst exports appear to be largely insignificant in Norway and the UK, there are significant exports in the US strawberry industry.

Until recently there has been a neglect of the employer perspective in research into low-wage work. According to MacKenzie and Forde (2009: 142), migration have studies been characterised by 'a noted tendency…to focus on the behaviour of migrant workers and to ignore the role of employers'. This can be understood as a problem of both access and disclosure. In terms of the former, and especially for larger companies, it can be very difficult to find the right person (with enough of an overview) to speak to. One also has the related challenge of penetrating the bureaucracy of the organisation both to identify and then to persuade the appropriate person/people to cooperate in the research. In terms of disclosure, once access has been negotiated, we know that employer-driven data is likely to be selective in nature, offering one angle on what is likely to be a complex and contested reality (Scott, 2013a). Access and disclosure, however, are not reasons to eschew research collaborations with employers.

Thankfully, since MacKenzie and Forde's 2009 observation, there have been increasing insights into low-wage employers' perspectives on their often migrant-dominated workforces. One strong stereotype prevails in this respect. This is of the 'good migrant' and the many values and logics of targeting certain types of migrants to fill low-wage job vacancies (Baxter-Reid, 2016; Findlay et al., 2013; Friberg and Midtbøen, 2019; Scott, 2013b; Tannock, 2015; Thompson et al., 2013).

Notwithstanding the labour market discrimination that migrants can face (Tesfai, 2019: 298), mobility, nationality and ethnicity have been linked by many low-wage employers to high levels of worker productivity. Employers reveal that they are able to get 'more for their money' by looking abroad. In some countries they also report considerable frustrations via a second stereotype of 'lazy local' workers (Scott, 2013b).[2] The archetypal 'good migrant' has over recent years, in western and northern Europe, been from Poland (Friberg, 2012; McDowell et al., 2007; Wills et al., 2009).

What might explain the impressive performance of migrant workers in low-wage jobs? Why is the notion of work ethic geographically nuanced and linked to mobility, nationality and ethnicity? These are difficult questions to address and it is far easier to identify employer preference, and associated hiring queues, than to actually explain them in an evidenced manner. What is certain is that employers who pay low wages often connect migration/migrants and

[2] We use the term 'local' to refer to workers who have been resident within a country over a long-term period. Locals may have moved internally but are not recent labour market entrants from abroad. They are therefore positioned in contrast to 'migrant' labour. 'Local' is used in preference to 'native' or 'indigenous' worker given the problematic connotations of these two latter terms.

work ethic and that this is related to the 'soft skills' that migrants bring to otherwise devalued jobs. These soft skills include attitude, commitment, social skills, team working, flexibility, deference, etc. (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Moriarty et al., 2012; Tannock, 2015). The question remains, however: why do migrants have a superior work ethic and a greater level and range of soft skills? Or at least, why do low-wage employers believe this to be the case?

Some suggest that migrants, depending upon the context within which mobility arises, can be a self-selecting group, drawn from the more able/skilled within a sending country (Orrenius and Zavodny, 2005). Others point towards the high-quality education systems in certain countries of origin, allied with relatively high youth unemployment. At least until recently this was the case in parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Post-communist restructuring in Poland, for example, certainly acted as a major spur to emigration with youth unemployment and job insecurity major worries in the 1990s and 2000s (White, 2010).

There are also norms and expectations in relation to what is an 'acceptable' career path. A particularly noteworthy concept here is the 'dual frame of reference' (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003). This means that migrant workers view low-wage employment through both a host- and home-country lens and that the latter perspective can elevate otherwise devalued employment in the host country (Scott, 2013b). As part of this transnational assessment that workers make, conditions in the host society are often measured favourably against those in the home country, even if they might appear retrograde to local workers (Maldonado, 2009; Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010). The dual frame of reference, it is argued, is key to understanding migrants' heightened productivity and is picked up by employers via their reference to a migrant work ethic. It also appears to be a useful concept in understanding why workers moving across a (semi-)periphery to core economic gradient are especially likely to offer productivity gains to low-wage employers (Scott, 2013b; 2013c; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003).[3]

In relation to periphery-to-core migration it is also true that workers in precarious situations tend to offer employers added value by virtue of their limited power. Thompson et al. (2013: 142), for instance, observe how: 'Goodness is wrongly attributed (mostly by employers) to essentialist cultural attributes, ignoring the highly specific circumstances in

[3] A wide literature has emphasised the importance of examining migration flows with respect to a country's or city's position, often principally its economic standing, relative to other places. The periphery/semi-periphery/core framework developed outside of migration studies, though it has been adopted by migration scholars (King, 2019). This notion of (semi-)periphery to core migration is, however, confused by the fact that workers may also be moving from relatively well-connected urban areas in the (semi-)periphery to relatively isolated rural areas in the core.

which labour power is activated'. Similarly, Mackenzie and Forde (2009: 155) find that: 'Management focused their recruitment policy on groups of workers who were lacking in power within the labour market' (see also Harrison and Lloyd, 2013; Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010). Thus, exploring the power imbalance between workers and employers becomes an important task in order to understand how labour power is produced, reproduced and activated.[4]

It may simply be that migrants work harder, for example, because they have no alternatives. Developing this point, Mannon et al. (2012) identify the Spanish guestworker system – involving bilateral agreements to supply temporary migrant workers, focused largely on agricultural employment in the province of Huelva – as a mechanism that keeps foreign workers 'in their place' (2012: 83). Numerous other guestworker schemes exist that provide migrants with partial citizenship status and thus render them more willing workers by virtue of necessity. Könönen (2019), for example talks of a 'juridical division of labour' whereby employers prefer to recruit migrants in temporary legal positions over local workers and permanent migrants (see also Anderson, 2010). There is, in essence, an absence of power that often lies beneath the 'good migrant' stereotype. Employers readily draw this stereotype to the surface but appear more reluctant to talk about the lack of labour power that may underpin it.

Hiring queues can be subject to change. Employers sometimes favour migrants who are ostensibly similar to the host population (Friberg and Midtbøen, 2019; Hopkins, 2011; Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006). In the strawberry fields of Spain, for example, Hellio (2008: 190) notes an initial 'predilection for Poland and Romania'. She then observes, however, following EU enlargement and freedom of movement, a turn to African and Ukrainian workers given their more limited rights and entitlements. Mannon et al. (2012) support these findings, observing a switch from Polish to Romanian to Moroccan workers in the Spanish strawberry fields that is linked to EU enlargement in 2004 (Poland) and 2007 (Romania). Beyond the context of EU enlargement, Papadopoulos et al. (2018) note a shift from Albanian to Bangladeshi workers in Manolada's (Greece's) strawberry fields. This can be explained by the fact that Albanian migrants have increasingly become regularised and are 'upwardly mobile' whereas the Bangladeshi workers are still largely irregular and 'trapped'. Thus, the preferences expressed via hiring queues are pragmatic and, crucially, depend upon the power that labour possesses (or lacks). This power may change over time and low-wage employers appear willing

[4] There is a distinction between the power workers have in the employment relationship and the notion of 'labour power'. The latter refers to the way in which labour is realised by capital and used (Marx would say exploited) to provide surplus value to capital. Labour power is uncertain and yet capital requires it to be maximised in order for profits to be maintained. Workers lacking power often provide employers with high levels of labour power.

to cross new identity frontiers when those once at the top of hiring queues slip down them often by virtue of their aquiring rights and entitlements, and labour-market integration.

In the US strawberry context, Holmes (2007) observes the employer adage that 'Oaxacans like to work bent over' and identifies the following associated recruitment hierarchy: White and Asian-American US citizen; Latino US citizen or resident; undocumented Mestizo Mexicans; undocumented Indigenous Mexicans (2007: 48). Holmes calls this a 'hierarchy of suffering' (2007: 50-51), reflecting the way in which those further down the hierarchy (the undocumented Mestizo and Indigenous Mexicans) are restricted to the poorest pay and working conditions. Crucially, and rightly in our opinion, Holmes does not single out the farmer as being solely responsible for this suffering but views it as also systemic. Farm employers are positioned at the interface of labour and capital in a harsh and unequal system and whilst there may be some 'bad egg' illegal employers, workers find themselves exploited, even in legitimate businesses, by virtue of the pressures of the broader supply-chains they are in.

Those workers favoured by low-wage employers to fill their 'secondary' (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Piore, 1979) labour market vacancies understandably often have aspirations to escape into work that is less exploitative and more rewarding. Thus, hiring queues often change over time as a result of workers being able to integrate into host-country labour markets and move beyond their initial secondary labour market niche. They also change because the 'work ethic' of migrants is not fixed and their attitudes and attributes can shift over time in response to past experiences, future expectations and a growing knowledge of the systems they are operating within. For example, MacKenzie and Forde (2009) talk of migrants becoming too 'Westernised' and Waldinger and Lichter (2003) too 'Americanised' (see also Bauder, 2006). Illustrative of this, Dawson et al. (2014) observe how migrants' absence rates are substantially lower than those for local workers, but that they normalise within two to four years. Hopkins (2017) argues these changes are linked to the changing labour market power of migrants. This is why some identify a 'revolving-door' for low-wage migrant employment (Martin, 2002; Scott, 2013b) that keeps those in low-wage positions 'fresh' (as many temporary guestworker schemes classically do).

So far, hiring queues have been discussed in relation to mobility, nationality and ethnicity and often this can result in what might be termed 'immigrant niches' (Waldinger, 1994). Employers may make recruitment and promotion decisions, though, based on other characteristics such as gender, class, race, age, family status, appearance, etc. Clearly, a key factor behind certain migrants' elevated position within hiring queues is age. Harvest work,

obviously, is tough and physically demanding. It also often requires one to be housed on-site and usually the on-site housing does not allow children to be present. The work is, in short, best suited to those who are young, physically fit and without major family commitments. Crucially, much labour migration conforms to this as evidenced via the 'model migration schedule' (Barcus and Halfacree, 2017: 152) which shows how people in their late teens and twenties are the most mobile.

Gender and family status also appear to be considerations in the hiring queues of strawberry growers. The delicate fabric of the strawberry demands careful, considerate and dedicated workers. Farmers thus stress the need for 'delicate hands' (Hellio 2008: 190) and women are often seen as having more 'nimble fingers' than men. According to Mannon et al. (2012: 95), well over 95% of the guestworkers recruited to Huelva (Spain) have been women. As well as their dexterity, Spanish employers targeted women who were married with children back home. This is because they were seen to limit their movements to the strawberry fields and to the residential camps (often to save money) and be certain to return home to their family/children at the end of the season (2012: 95-96). However, and highlighting the way in which gender preference may vary, Papadopoulos et al. (2018), in their study of Manolada, note a shift from Albanians to Bangladeshi single men with a low educational profile who, crucially, maintain economic and social relations with their families in their country of origin. As with Mannon et al.'s (2012) study, it is the presence of transnational family ties more than gender that marks migrants out as 'good' workers (Jakobsen et al., forthcoming).

Overall, then, it is clear from the literature that employers' low-wage hiring queues within core economies are often geographically structured. This reflects a preference for certain types of migrant worker and sometimes a prejudice towards would-be local labour. The factors underpinning these preferences and prejudices are complex and multifaceted and are not always as easily observable, or as readily disclosed, as the hiring queue itself. Essentialist interpretations focused on innate differences between workers of different nationality and/or ethnicity are to be avoided. Instead, one must consider the way in which labour power is produced, reproduced and activated differently across different time-space contexts.

3. The strawberry industry

Labelled the 'red gold' of agriculture (Hellio, 2008: 185), the strawberry has certainly been seen by many farmers as a potentially lucrative crop. Its potential comes against a backdrop of a toughening economic climate: only around 7.5% of the final retail price of food now returns to farmers (figures are for the UK), compared to 50% 60 years ago (Calleja et al., 2012: 604).

Despite their potential, strawberries pose a challenge as they are seasonal in nature and labour-intensive. Although the growing season has been extended (especially via the introduction of new varieties and polytunnels), we have not yet witnessed any significant mechanisation in relation to picking the crop (though prototype robots are now available). Labour, particularly seasonal labour, is therefore still a huge concern for growers: often with around 50% of production costs going towards harvest workers (Guthman, 2017a: 31; Wells, 1996: 90). It is also a concern for labour activists and organisers, with work in the strawberry fields characterised as low-paid and precarious (Holmes, 2007; 2013; Wells, 1996). Nevertheless, there are different roles and tasks within the strawberry industry and so it is important that one differentiates both within and between what might be termed 'primary' and 'secondary' forms of employment (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Piore, 1979).

According to Calleja et al. (2012), there are two distinct business models in the strawberry industry: one associated with large-scale specialist production (productivism) and the other with a smaller-scale and often mixed farming model (post-productivism). Globally, it is also true that there exist different tiers of producer: some large and efficient enough to sit at the cutting-edge of the industry, whilst others (usually smaller-scale producers) tend to be later adapters of new technology. Thus, the use of polytunnels, new strawberry varieties, table-top production, use of non-soil substrate, and so on, may be driven by a search for greater profits and the classification systems used by supermarkets; but this does not mean that all growers are equally willing or able to adopt such technologies.

The specialist knowledge and dependence on seasonal labour of the strawberry industry may help explain why there is a tendency in some countries towards the clustering of growers. In Spain the Huelva area stands out (Hellio, 2008; Mannon et al., 2012), and in Greece the Manolada district is highly significant (Gialis and Herod, 2014; Papadopoulos et al., 2018). In the case-study countries (US, Norway and UK) there were different levels of concentration, with the US strawberry industry heavily focused on California and the Norwegian and UK strawberry industries more dispersed. Migrant labour recruitment into the strawberry industry occurs through a combination of recruitment agencies (Findlay and McCollum, 2013; McCollum and Findlay, 2018), social networks (Wells, 1996) and direct employer recruitment.

3.1 The US Context

California dominates the US strawberry industry, accounting for 88% of total national production (Guthman, 2017a). Production is focused on a few locations along the Californian central coast (such as the Watsonville/Salinas region, the focus for this study) with particularly

good soils and climatic conditions. Farm structures are heterogeneous. There are many smaller farms which, at least nominally, are owned and operated as independent family farms. Farmers are ethnically heterogeneous, including farmers of non-US origin, some of whom started as field workers but have acquired capital to buy or rent land. Sharecropping is one system traditionally used in the Californian strawberry industry (Guthman, 2017b; Schlosser, 1995; Wells, 1996) that explains the continued presence of small operators, though its dominance has ebbed and flowed (Sanchez, 2013; Wells, 1996; 2000). Alongside the small operators, who may sell directly to consumers or at various farmers' markets (which are numerous in the nearby Bay Area), there are major corporations with Driscoll's the most prominent. Overall, and despite the presence of small-scale producers, California is characterised by a 'super-productivist' business model (Calleja et al., 2012). Labour is provided mainly by migrants from Mexico. Some are seasonal workers, though recent changes in US immigration policy and implementation have made it more difficult to cross the border (Martin, 2019). Thus, many workers are now long-term US residents, with and without legal status. Recruitment strategies vary: some farmers hire directly, often through the social networks of existing workers, whilst others recruit workers via employment agencies (contractors), with many combining recruitment channels. About half of the workers are undocumented, mainly from Mexico, and though there is a specialist 'H-2A' seasonal worker scheme in the US, this was not widely relevant in the Californian strawberry industry at the time of the research. Unlike Norway and the UK, workers in the Californian strawberry industry tend not to live on the farm, but commute to work from areas of relatively affordable housing.

3.2 The Norwegian Context

Norway's strawberry industry is small-scale compared to that in California and producers are dispersed and often isolated. Most are family farms, owned and operated by ethnic Norwegians, and conforming to the 'post-productivist' model identified by Calleja et al. (2012). Nonetheless, between 1999 and 2010, 64% of strawberry farms closed down or changed their production (Statistics Norway, 2014), with the number of operators dropping by a further 35% the following decade (Landbruksdirektoratet, 2020). However, those farms that remained have extended their operations, often specialising only in strawberries. Norway's strawberry production is exclusively directed towards the domestic market. Furthermore, and reflecting the harsher climate, the season is short: traditionally mid-summer only. Nevertheless, some farmers have managed to extend the season from mid-May to September by use of novel production technologies. For the remaining part of the year strawberries are imported. The

uptake of new techniques/technologies (e.g. polytunnels) appears to vary; some growers rely on traditional methods, whilst others are at the forefront of innovations. Value-chain integration is strong and, although most of the strawberries are distributed to retailers by two distribution agents only, farmers and their collective organisations still exert considerable power: for instance by informing agricultural policies and state regulations. Also important is the relatively extensive and worker-friendly labour market regulation, including requirements for written contracts, safe working environments, fixed working hours, holiday and overtime pay, etc. (Rye 2017). These also apply to migrant workers, though practices in the fields at times do not always match the formal requirements (Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010). Whilst not present at the farm level, trade unions in Norway also have a strong voice in labour market regulation and rights to bargain on behalf of workers, including non-union members. Starting in the 1990s, migrant labour from Eastern Europe has been the mainstay of Norwegian agriculture, predominantly workers from Poland and the Baltic states (see Lulle, 2021, this issue). Workers are mainly recruited directly, though there are some recruitment agencies. Work is almost always circular and seasonal; workers will arrive for a few weeks or months, then return to their home country. Some will then return year after year, in some cases establishing a lasting transnational work 'career' as a circular migrant.

3.3 The UK Context

The UK strawberry industry is medium-scale compared to that in California (large-scale) and Norway (small-scale). Growers work within a climate of multiple-retailer dominance where the 'big four' supermarkets (Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda and Morrisons) control the majority of the market, though their market share has been eroding recently (Rhodes, 2018: 12). In the UK strawberry industry, around 25% of produce was sold through supermarkets in 1996, but by 2015 this figure had grown to 60% (British Summer Fruits, 2017: 17). The economic system has meant that growers have shifted to a 'productivist' regime (Calleja et al., 2012). There are some small-scale growers left, but high levels of production are important for survival against low profit margins and against the need to innovate. The increase in tonnage of strawberries produced since the 1990s has been impressive and, with only a relatively modest increase in crop area, this has meant a dramatic growth in average yield. The growing size and value of strawberry production in the UK has been associated with considerable change and innovation. There has been a shift in cultivation techniques with an increasing preference for table-top and covered production (i.e. polytunnels using irrigation systems) and substrate rather than soil (often coir). Moreover, new Autumn fruiting varieties of strawberry have been developed to

further extend the growing season. To put these changes in perspective, and to illuminate the pressures underpinning them, Evans (2013: 63) shows that Class 1 (premium quality) grading was once achievable on only 50% maximum of the outdoor crop in the UK but that polytunnel use has now increased the Class 1 fruit production (the fruit accepted by supermarkets) to around 90%. The strawberry season in the UK is now approximately April through to October and although some labour is needed all year round, seasonal workers tend to get employed from February through to October, with peak demand from May to September (British Summer Fruits, 2017: 11). The strawberry industry in the UK requires an estimated 18,000-20,000 seasonal workers per annum (British Summer Fruits, 2017: 6, 17, 20). Most of the crop is produced for the domestic market: only 2,600 tonnes of strawberries were exported in 2018, versus 25,500 tonnes that were imported, and 131,600 thousand tonnes home-produced (DEFRA, 2019).

4. Methods

The remainder of this paper is based on material from 15 in-depth interviews with strawberry producers in three localities: Watsonville in California, USA; West and South-West England, UK; and the Trøndelag region of central Norway. Interviews were conducted in the employer's mother-tongue and lasted for around 60-80 minutes. They were semi-structured and so whilst there was consistency in order to facilitate comparative analysis, there was ample room for variation and sensitivity to local circumstance.

Sampling was designed to capture a range of farm and workforce sizes with the aim being to speak to actors who were a 'spokesperson' for their particular farm/firm. Some respondents were recruited via existing contacts in the industry (convenience), some via snowballing from these, and some via 'cold-calling'. Recruitment was set at five interviewees in each locality.

The testimony generated through these employer interviews, as with any kind of data, must be viewed as one angle onto what might actually be complex and multiple truths. Employers or their representatives may, for example, be fearful of full disclosure; prefer talking off the record; be inclined to present a selective and in some ways stage-managed corporate front; have different stories to tell, and different levels of freedom to tell them, depending upon where they are in a corporate structure; and be conscious of presenting positive 'success stories' or at least not mentioning potentially contentious or controversial issues (Rye and Scott, 2021; Scott, 2013a). That employer-driven data has its limitations is not in itself a reason to marginalise it. Instead, one should think of the stories employers construct and tell during the

interview process as an important window into first highlighting, then understanding and conceptualising employment practices.

To this end, in section 5 that now follows we identify two dominant employer discourses: the 'good migrant' and the 'lazy local'. These discourses are used by the employers to construct meaning and present recruitment and employment decisions in a particular light. They emerge, consistently, from employers' shared drive to maximise labour power at the bottom of the labour market and maintain profitability in a highly competitive sector that is dominated by large retailers. Crucially, though, employers do not only focus on the 'good migrant' and the 'lazy local' discourses but they also seek to explain them, albeit selectively. Thus, reality is constructed both by employers' willingness to present worker stereotypes and also by their readiness to offer a plausible, yet partial, rationale for these. What employers reveal and what employers fail to reveal at interview, and the consistency in this, offers critical insight into the ways in which work and workers are constructed by those with an interest in maximising labour power and therefore profit (Flick, 2018: 500-505).

5. Findings

We now move to identify the hiring queues of the global strawberry industry, as articulated by the employers we spoke to in the US, Norway and UK. We will also seek to explain these hiring queues and identify any changes over time. Our findings suggest that 'geography' (mobility, nationality and ethnicity) is the most significant variable used by employers to identify the 'best' low-wage labour. Nevertheless, whilst geographically orientated preferences appear to be a ubiquitous feature of horticultural employment across core economies, there are important temporal and spatial nuances. Not least, the 'best' low-wage workers often do not occupy this position indefinitely, but aim instead to move up the job hierarchy, and so fresh sources of labour are often eventually sought by employers to maintain the work ethic. Moreover, the exact migrant groups favoured by employers vary not only over time but also between countries. The result of this is that, whilst our three agricultural case-studies are all characterised by geographically orientated hiring queues, they are not identical.

5.1 Good work: good migrant workers

Employer preference for migrant workers was universal across the three case-study countries, though the favoured national/ethnic groups varied (see Table 1). In the US, Mexican migrants were preferred; in Norway, Polish migrants were preferred; and in the UK, Romanian and Bulgarian migrants were preferred. The vast majority of the Norwegian and UK harvest

workers were legal/documented because of the EU enabling context and specifically the 'A8' (Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary) enlargement in 2004 and the 'A2' (Romania, Bulgaria) enlargement in 2007. In contrast, US agriculture relied on a mix of documented and undocumented workers, mainly from Mexico.[5]

That the migrant worker preference varied between case-study countries is partly explained by proximity in the sense that Norway and the UK attracted fellow-European migrants and the US attracted migrants from a neighbouring country. Nevertheless, there are instances in the horticultural sectors of core economies where migrants move over longer distances. For example, in Greece many strawberry pickers now come from Bangladesh (Papadopoulos et al., 2018); in Sweden wild berry pickers are drawn from elsewhere in Asia, mainly Thailand (see Hedberg, 2021, this issue; Mešić and Wikström, 2021, this issue; Woolfson et al., 2012); and in Canada seasonal workers come from Caribbean countries and Mexico (Preibisch, 2010). Similarly, anecdotal evidence now points towards some Vietnamese picking Norwegian strawberries in the southern parts of the country. Thus, proximity alone is not enough to explain low-wage employer preferences for particular national/ethnic groups.

A central question in light of the migrant worker preference is why do workers from certain foreign countries work so hard? There are essentially two types of explanation here: one centred upon the positive opportunities migrants are presented with, and the other centred upon the constraints that migrants face. Understandably, employers were more likely to mention the former.

In terms of opportunities, the idea of a 'dual frame of reference' (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Waldinger and Lichter, 2003) is of central importance. This relates to the home and host contexts migrants are embedded within and their experiences of, and use of, these contexts. To elucidate, migrants may assess pay and conditions in the host-country against those in the home country, and view host country conditions relatively favourably, especially if they move from a peripheral to a core area of the global economy. They may also send money home (remittances) in order to benefit from favourable differences in exchange rates, house prices and general living standards. Moreover, low-wage jobs may appear as stepping-stones along a transnational class trajectory rather than dead-ends (Rye, 2019). In all these respects low-wage work in the host country can represent an opportunity for migrants

[5] In effect, the two enlargements applied to the European Economic Agreement (EEA) in which the EU member states plus three Western European non-EU member states (including Norway) participate in the common European labour market. Thus, Norway, despite not being an EU member, is an integrated part of the European labour market. The UK has now left the common European labour market (because of Brexit) and so the freedom of movement for the A2 and A8 nationals mentioned by UK interviewees applied only until the end of 2020.

that would otherwise not be available in the home country. This is certainly an aspect of low-wage work that employers stress (Rye and Scott, 2021).

Alongside the positive dimensions of low-wage labour migration, there are also undoubtedly constraints that explain why some migrants work as hard as they do. Some people can be pressured to move abroad by limited opportunities at home but vulnerability can then be increased by limited citizenship rights (especially lack of access to welfare and lack of permanent status). Moreover, limited language skills can also place migrants in a position of vulnerability. Together, lack of opportunities at home, limited rights abroad, and poor language skills often combine to render migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation, especially in sectors like horticulture where work appears to be intensifying (Rogaly, 2008; Scott, 2017).

Migrant work ethic, then, is clearly two-sided. Farmers, however, appear more willing to identify the positive side of this construction. Illustrative of this, emphasis was placed by employers on how seasonal strawberry employment allowed people to 'work hard and save hard' and invest back in the home country in property and in supporting family:

> [The work] does suit someone who's living cheaply onsite, who has made the decision to come to make money really…And you know, if you can come, earn £11,000 as quick as you can and then go and build your house for six-months, that's quite a nice, quite a nice way of doing it, isn't it? (Victor, UK)

> During a good season, an employee will pick over 150 boxes a day…That's considered good money. They make a good amount of money…They would make a decent amount of money and a lot of them would send it back to Mexico to build their homes over there…When it's a good season, I think employees make a lot more money than employers, because the employer has a lot of costs that they have to cover, and the employee, all he's covering is his transportation from home to work and maybe his food throughout the week and that's it. The rest, he can pocket it. (Eva, US)

> They are here to make money, they are eager, really. And they see the potential: 'Wow! I can pick two boxes per hour, maybe three boxes!'. Some among my employees make

2500-2600 NOK a day. And that's more than a month's minimum wage in Lithuania. (Anders, Norway)[6]

Employers are clearly more likely to link the good migrant worker stereotype to the fact that they provide opportunities that would otherwise not be available to their migrant workers (Rye and Scott, 2021). The constraints facing these workers, especially undocumented migrants in the US, were not mentioned (including violence towards migrants at the border and the threat of detention and associated family separation).

Summarising the above it is clear that horticultural employers' hiring queues are driven by the need to maximise labour power amongst low-wage workers and thus maintain profitability. The questions of why certain groups of workers provide more or less labour power at the bottom of the labour market is one that employers seem to engage with and reflect upon. They tend to avoid essentialist explanations (based on innate qualities and characteristics), however, and also tend to avoid more negative constraint-based causes when accounting for why migrants work as hard as they do.

5.2 'Lazy' Locals

Alongside the preference for certain migrant groups in the US, Norway and UK, and the assertion amongst employers that the work they provide really does pay, there was negativity expressed towards local labour. Local labour it seemed had a higher reservation wage than migrant labour and/or was less reliable and less productive when employed. Reasons for these differences undoubtedly relate to expectations amongst local workers, with precarious seasonal employment falling short of the employment norm. In addition, local labour would generally baulk at having to live in temporary (usually caravan-style) accommodation on-site (as in the UK and Norway). There is also a welfare safety-net available to citizens unable to find employment.

All employers viewed would-be local low-wage labour in a negative light. However, rather than explain this with reference to the various factors mentioned above, the lazy local stereotype was pinned very firmly by employers to one major factor: the welfare state. This was especially true in the US and UK where, ironically, the welfare state is actually more

[6] Note that the informant's knowledge of the Lithuanian minimum wage is at the best imprecise; it was 400EUR per month (about 3600 NOK) at the time of the interview (2018); however, it had been below 200EUR as late as 2010 (Eurostat, 2020).

residual in nature than in Norway. Across all three case-studies, though, there was evidence of employer disdain towards welfare support for the unemployed:

> This is the problem with the United States. The United States has free help. If I'm lazy, I could quit my job, and go apply that I don't have a job. That I need help…I'll get $900 a week every two weeks, and I'll learn to live with that…There's a big difference between a migrant employee and a local employee. They have an urge to get money, and get better. They need it. They have a necessity. The locals don't have that necessity. (Cole, US)

> They (those on benefit) get a pat on their shoulder and 25,000 kroners per month, completely crazy. (Anders, Norway)

> And it's silly that we've got a person from Romania who is travelling two and a half thousand kilometres to come here and he's paying tax to English people to do nothing. It's not like the English people can't do it. You're not asking them to work ten times as fast, it's just do a normal job and stay and pick strawberries… No. There are people whose parents don't work and their grandparents don't work and their uncles don't work. Nobody works and that's got to stop…Control benefits harder. I think a lot of people are claiming benefits and could work. Like I said earlier, personally, I'd make people work. (Trevor, UK)

Reference above to 'They need it. They have a necessity. The locals don't have that necessity' (Cole) and 'I'd make people work' (Trevor) underline the importance of coupling hiring queues with an understanding of the power/agency of workers (or lack of). Put simply, migrants and locals are not in the same position in terms of the degree to which they need low-wage harvest work and in terms of the value this harvest work brings to them (Scott, 2013b).

Linked to the criticism of welfare support, there was also a concern amongst employers that there had been a generational change and that the current stock of local young people had become work-shy and, for all practical matters, were no longer viable as prospective workers. The following quotations are indicative:

> They [local young people] lack motivation, and it is hard work – so after a couple of hours... they would rather have been at the beach, and the back hurts, so they say

> ‘coming back tomorrow’, and they may do so but...we have hardly ever had anyone lasting more than a day. (Daniel, Norway)

> Bullshit! They’re lazy, they are absolutely lazy. My kids are that generation, will they do the job? No. They’re lazy. They get it too easy...They can’t face reality, reality is hard work. I think our generation is the last generation that will be used to this sort of hard work…You need to whip them and say, get off your lazy arses! (Paul, UK)

> The average [second-generation] teenager says, ‘All I wanna do is get a little bit of money so I can go have fun.’ So they don't work as hard, they don't put as much effort, they do what gets them by…they don't have that need…And we wish that they worked just as hard as their parents, but they don't, because they don't have that drive, they don't have the necessity of working like they [the parents] do. (Dennis, US)

Employers clearly experience and identify a differential work ethic between certain migrants and locals (especially the young) and then construct hiring queues in response to this. They also mainly explain the phenomenon of ‘lazy locals’ via reference to innate deficiencies in the work ethic, welfare safety-nets, and a generational shift. What is missing from these explanations, however, is an explicit appreciation of both the nature of the precarious employment being provided and the constraints migrants face. In terms of the former, it is very clear that seasonal low-wage work is tough – arguably getting tougher due to retailer demands on farmers (Rogaly, 2008; Scott, 2017) – and that productivity is increasingly closely controlled and monitored. As one employer explained:

> Everything is productivity…For us, you know, they're all monitored on what they do every hour…And you know, if they don't achieve, then you know, they end up going back into their caravan…But it's a very achievable rate. I'm not, you know, I'm not the cat of nine tails whipping them to you know…blood coming out of their eyes, because…I'm thrashing them. (Spencer, UK)

In terms of the latter, it is clear that migrants have more limited choices open to them than local labour and that these constraints are part of the reason why their reservation wage is lower and productivity rates and reliability higher.

It is apparent, then, that low-wage employers' drive to maximise labour power and facilitate surplus accumulation is associated with hiring queue formation. Hiring queues are underpinned by systematic differences in the way that labour power is produced, reproduced and activated. Employers explain hiring queues but seem to do so in a selective manner. The stereotypes they present are thus 'informed' in three important respects: they are informed economically by the drive to identify the most productive sources of labour and maintain profitability; they are informed by virtue of employers' explaining them beyond essentialist frameworks; and, they are informed by employers' selective engagement with certain types of explanation. In terms of this latter point, the 'good migrant worker' and 'lazy local' are rarely linked to the presence of low-paid, precarious and demanding employment or to the relative exploitability of migrant over local labour. More externally palatable interpretations of the stereotypes are presented by employers that do not challenge the economic structures on which the food industry is based.

5.3 Keeping labour 'fresh'

The 'informed stereotype' of the good migrant varies over time as well as space. Put simply, the reasons some migrant workers work as hard as they do are context-dependent and contexts can and do change. Migrants' language skills may improve, they may start families, they may change their status, they may become full citizens, or their priorities and motivations may change. Thus, even amongst first-generation migrants, employers worry about the maintenance of the good migrant stereotype. Moreover, by the second generation most low-wage employers accept that this stereotype no longer applies, as Dennis explained in the quote above.

The fragility of the good migrant was most evident in the UK, where employers have had to move from Polish pickers to A2 (Bulgarian and Romanian) seasonal workers; though even after this move there was anxiety over how long the A2 work ethic would last:

> I think the Polish people who have been here for several years have settled down – they wanted all year-round employment and got families. The problems with strawberries is we need – today we've got two workers, three sorry. In February we've probably got 40. In May we've probably got 150 by June/July up to 300…The Romanians and Bulgarians within 10/15 years won't come. The same as with the Polish, there are no Polish picking strawberries now…Yeah, the people that have come here to pick strawberries have now settled down in the UK and got families and got better jobs or built a house – you know

they got their goal of money and gone back home. Their way of life has got a lot better. (Trevor, UK)

I think Bulgarians and Romanians are now moving up the ladder. It's always evolution...Same as the Polish have done and the Romanians will do. You know, who blames anybody, you know. Do you think this is a job for life? Picking in the field is a difficult job. It's harder than being Prime Minister of England because, you know, it's mundane. (Paul, UK)

No Polish now. All my picker Polish people didn't really want to come back and my supervising Polish people got really good jobs back in Poland so…they could use that going back and achieve good jobs in Poland, which is great because that was the point of Poland joining the EU to build it up and it has built up its economy and why would they want to leave Poland to come over here, you wouldn't expect them to anymore. So, they're just from Romania and Bulgaria. (Rosalyn, UK)

Similarly, in Norway, Polish migrants were seen to be becoming less motivated than in the past:

The Thais now are very eager. They work hard. But it is about the same with the Poles, they had been hard-working as well, but it is also true, those who have been here for about 20 years...they have become accustomed to how it is here, kind of 'over-familiar' you know, and the speed is not the same as 20 years ago. (Charles, Norway)

In the US the fragility of the good migrant worker stereotype was also evident, but it manifests itself differently. Most obviously, there was a concern that employers were unable to get the same work ethic from second-generation Mexicans as they were from their first-generation migrant parents:

The first generation of people that got here from Mexico came here to work in the fields, and the successive generations are much more reluctant to work…The further you get away from the first generation, the more reluctance there is and oftentimes people feel that doing field work is not a very glamorous thing that they want to be doing, and there's other opportunities that come up that pay better with better working conditions...So their

offspring, it's pretty unlikely that they're going to be looking for work on farms. (Adam, US)

The ones that are here have learned of the struggle that their parents went through. And instead of staying there, or going into that struggle, they've learned to go to school and universities and become something else. (Dennis, US)

In all three case-study countries, a 'revolving door' for migrant labour appears to be a vital part of the good migrant worker stereotype, whereby work ethic is contingent upon one being a first-generation migrant (in the US) or a recent first-generation migrant (in Norway and the UK). As to why Mexicans may continue to work hard for longer in low-wage harvest roles, this may be due to their undocumented status; higher barriers to entry (racism) in other US labour markets; more limited opportunities to return home to live and work; or a longer growing season in the US offering almost year-round employment.

The problem with the revolving-door nature of the good migrant construction is that it requires migration policy to be continually open to new arrivals and/or to turn a blind-eye to undocumented workers. It also requires a source of migrants with a strong work ethic to be readily available and easily exploitable. In both the US (partly due to the anti-immigration stance of President Trump) and the UK (partly due to the 2016 Brexit vote) employers expressed uncertainty about where the next flows of migrant workers would come from. The following quotations are indicative of how, according to employers, hiring queues are now shortening and recruitment choices are becoming more limited:

Where, where I would blame Brexit, if you like, is more down the new recruit side. We're finding that people are – we're just, we're just getting much less applicants, so where we were comfortable at ten to one, so ten applicants for one role, we're now at two-and-a-half to one. (Victor, UK)

There's become a huge competition for employees in the Valley here, and that's something that's very new in the last...I want to say five years or so. You never used to see signs posted on fields soliciting employees in Spanish, but that's become a regular thing now. Almost every field, if you drive around Watsonville, you'll see big signs up seeking employees. (Adam, US)

Thus, the good migrant worker construct is fragile in nature, likely to last a few years or at most one generation. It is also dependent upon the continual 'freshening up' of harvest labour but the revolving-door replacement employment that ensues is certainly not to be taken for granted. On the contrary, employers felt very strongly that their hiring queues were getting shorter and that their ability to select those with the strongest work ethic was on the wane. To be sure, it is in employers' interests to emphasise labour shortage and keep labour supply as high as possible. However, one got a real sense that events both in the host countries (political events such as Brexit and the election of Trump) and in the home countries (economic growth, reduced unemployment) were making it harder to find the good migrant worker and were potentially threatening the viability of a crop where around 50% of production costs are accounted for by harvest labour.

6. Conclusions

A lot of research has been carried out into migrant agricultural labour since the turn of the century (King et al., 2021, this issue; Rye and Scott, 2018; Rye and O'Reilly, 2021) but there has been relatively little comparative, crop-specific, or employer-focused research. This strawberry industry case-study responds to these gaps. It shows that geography (mobility, nationality, ethnicity) is key to understanding employer hiring queues in low-wage labour markets. Beyond this, we have sought not only to describe but also to explain the 'good migrant worker' preference and 'lazy local' prejudice from the perspective of employers. Most obviously, employers are united by their desire to maximise labour power and maintain profitability. Alongside this, employers then selectively identify contextual (political, economic, social and legal) factors more than innate characteristics as being key to understanding hiring queues. Thus, one is presented with consistent stereotypes that are constructed and explained by employers in ways that do not challenge the capitalist status-quo. They are very much, therefore, 'informed stereotypes': informed by the logic of capitalist accumulation and the need to maximise labour power; informed by reference to contextual factors more than to innate characteristics; and informed by an awareness of the need to explain differences in labour power between groups in particular selective and strategic ways.

Looking at the detailed findings across the three countries studied, we find (see Table 1 for a synthesis): a clear and enduring preference for first-generation Mexican harvesters in the US; in Norway, Polish migrants have been at the top of low-wage employers' hiring queues for quite some time now; and in the UK, employers have shifted from Polish to Bulgarian and Romanian harvest workers. Alongside this, in all three case-study countries, there was disdain

shown towards local labour. Hiring queues, and the 'informed stereotypes' accompanying them, come with a warning, in the sense that they are not fixed and can be fragile, lasting at best (in the US) one generation, and in other contexts (most obviously the UK) for far less time. This means that a constant refreshing of labour may be required through migration policy mechanisms, with problems arising either when political barriers jeopardise low-wage mobility into a country, or when economies at source improve and emigration reduces.

Focusing on the preferential treatment employers show towards certain migrant groups, the hiring queues we have observed, at a superficial level at least, are not reflective of broader social stratification: in the sense that migrants (Mexicans in the US, Polish in Norway, Bulgarian and Romanian in the UK) do not experience preferential treatment in wider society. On the contrary, migrants are favoured only in so far as they are prepared to work hard in relatively low-paid and precarious jobs and shoulder what might be termed an 'ethnic penalty' (Ballarino and Panichella, 2015). Thus, their preferential treatment is, paradoxically, the outcome of their ability to provide capital with greater surplus value and to be prepared to experience more exploitation (in a Marxist sense) than other members of society.

The positive stories employers tell about certain migrants and the preferences shown towards them are actually reflective of broader systemic constraints and penalties. These place some migrants at the bottom of social hierarchies but at the top of the hiring queues of certain low-wage sectors and firms. The hiring queue is interesting, then, for what it reveals not only about employer preference but also for the way it emerges out of a broader structural context within which this preference is rooted. To this end one might see the 'migrant divisions of labour' (Felbo-Kildin et al., 2018; Wills et al., 2009) that emerge out of employers' hiring queues as more discriminatory than might first appear. Migrants may well be praised and prized by employers for their work ethic; yet at the same time they are penalised through their position at the bottom of often deteriorating (Rogaly, 2008; Scott, 2017) host-country labour markets.

Acknowledgements

A debt of gratitude is owed to Russell King, Aija Lulle, Ben Rogaly and Emilia Melossi for inviting us to contribute to this special issue and for supporting us throughout the writing and review process. We are also grateful to two anonymous reviewers for extremely thoughtful, insightful and constructive sets of comments that have helped to improve the paper immensely. The research is part of the 'Global Labour in Rural Societies' research project financed by the Norwegian Research Council (grant no. 261854/ F10) and findings were initially presented at the 16th Annual IMISCOE Conference (26-28 June 2019) at Malmö University, Sweden.

Conference participation was funded by the University of Gloucestershire, School of Natural and Social Sciences.

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Table 1: Low-wage hiring queues in the global strawberry industry

	US (California, Watsonville)	**UK (West and South-West England)**	**Norway (Trøndelag)**
Highly Favoured	First-generation Mexicans, other Latin Americans (farmers claimed to be indifferent as to whether these were indigenous or Hispanic and citizenship/ residence status	A2 and A8 (but A8 now much less available than A2)	A8 and A2 (but A2 much less significant than A8)
Favoured			Third-country (non-EU) nationals (for instance: Thailand, Ukraine, Belorussia)
Occasionally Used	Locals (second-generation Mexicans)	Third-country (non-EU) nationals	Local youth Refugees
Unwilling, Poor Quality	Locals (local white American)	Locals (local British)	Locals (local Norwegians)