# Levels of Pay or Levels of Pain? Migration, Status and Stratification in the GCC Arabian Gulf

# Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of status and stratification impacting highly-skilled migrant labor force participation in the Arabian Gulf region. We discover that the experiences of Gulf professional-level organizational migrants run counter to status and career enhancement findings typical in management and economic studies. In instances of South-to-South or West-to-East movement into the Gulf region, highly-skilled migrants have endured seemingly incongruous status displacements not entirely offset by income escalation or accumulation. The migration duration from emerging to emerging (South-to-South) or from emerged into emerging (West-to-East) (S2S or W2E) markets was also ephemeral in contrast to migration into Western or developed markets. Highly-skilled professional-level migrants have relatively high educational credentials and income but paradoxically lower status relative to the local citizens. Combined with a statutory transience, where migration is time-limited given minimal citizenship prospects within an already highly stratified citizenship hierarchy, this professional-level migrant situation calls for an array of coping mechanisms and responses not fully explained by current organizational, economic or sociological theory on migration. We extend existing theoretical boundaries on individual and emotional-level responses toward explaining the present puzzle of status-incongruent migration. We study the professional-level status-incongruence migrant phenomenon both as significant at the national level and as emblematic of larger organizational, technological, and equity issues in the six economically cooperating countries known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with implications for the Arabian Gulf region as well as elsewhere.

Keywords: emerging markets migration, migrant mobility, citizenship, status, stratification, Arabian Peninsula, Arabian Gulf, GCC/ MENA, internationalization

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“In the final analysis, we are all migrants, armed with a temporary residence permit for this earth, each and every one of us incurably transient.”

― Gazmend Kapllani (2017)

“The brick walls that appear are not there as obstacles, they are simply there for you to prove how much you want to stay.”

― Alba Kunadu Sumprim (2016)

“Our greatest human rights risk comes from migrant workers in the Middle East. We ensure compliance through background checks of all suppliers and ongoing monitoring, including accommodation site visits and employee interviews to check for recruitment fees and passport

withholding. We aim to begin a supplier training program in the next two years.”

—Values into Action: Agility Sustainability Report (2019: Item 414-2 P81)

# Introduction

Migration has existed for millennia and narratives of migration involving movement toward a better life, or liberation from oppression are compelling. Yet not all migration involves escaping political strife or striving for a better economic life by transitioning into the more developed economies. Of the approximately 270 million current international migrants, 40 percent have moved to emerging markets nations in emerging-to-emerging South-to-South (S2S) or emerged-into-emerging West-to-East (W2E) migration (IOM, 2020; UN DESA, 2019b). A specific form of this direction of migration that is both unique and for which we presently have limited understanding involves migrants with high human capital entering societies in which ascribed status is more important than achieved status or meritocracy. These migrants are well-educated and well-paid yet not necessarily aware of the obstacles facing them in a highly-stratified, hereditary, almost caste-like society (Diop, Tessler, Trung Le, Al-Emadi, & Howell, 2012; Khalaf & Alkobaisi, 1999; Thiollet, 2016) with, for instance, traditionally seven levels of patrilineal-descent citizenship for local citizens (e.g. Kuwait Nationality Law, 1959).

High human capital, S2S or W2E migrants represent approximately 10% of global migration totals in recent decades (Schewel, 2019). Particularly within certain emerging markets regions such as the Arabian Gulf, these more non-traditional and socially immobile migrants are worth examining further because of how their more permanent status-inconsistency runs counter to the popularized migration stories and trajectories. Examining the status-inconsistent migrant experiences can shed light not only on a relatively unexamined bloc of migrants but also on coping responses to longer-term immersion into aversive situations entered into for prospects of betterment, but with ultimately limited prospects for citizenship, permanent relocation, or improvement for the next generation in the migratory destination.

# Context for the Study

The emerging markets of the Arabian Gulf region have given rise to this high-human capital, status-inconsistent migration pattern due to various background factors. For millennia a trades crossroads and more recently colonized and then independent sovereign nations, the six economically cooperating countries of the Arabian Gulf—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE—form the shared-faith economic single market popularly known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, 2019). In 1973-74, while citizens in most of the GCC countries celebrated windfalls from recently regained sovereign status and massively increased oil prices, an economic and cultural shift occurred (Fletcher, 2015; Fryer, 2007; Onley, 2009). With the increased national and personal wealth, it was no longer essential for citizens of these countries to perform the less desirable forms of labor (Birks, Seccombe, & Sinclair, 1986). While a servant class had existed for centuries (Dickson, 1956), albeit drawn more from a regional than a global scale, in the 1970s contract migrant workers started arriving in steadily larger numbers (World Bank, 2019). The 1991 Gulf War, known in the region as the Invasion, brought tremendous environmental devastation and human suffering, as the invading Iraqis dominated and pillaged and the subsequently retreating Iraqis burned the oilfields in Kuwait; but the economy rebounded and the migrant flows continued (Khadduri & Ghareeb, 2001).

In certain countries such as the UAE, migrant labor has represented close to 90 percent of the total workforce (UN DESA, 2019a). Although a majority of GCC migrants have been lower-status migrants from other developing nations (World Bank, 2018), the number and proportion of higher status S2S and W2E migrants began to increase, lured by seemingly beneficial economic and career outcomes (Dito, 2010). At the same time, historic tribal affiliations and traditional status differentiation translated into multiple official levels of recognized citizenship for native citizens within the nations of the region (Colton, 2011). Citizens were not equal to each other but were vastly privileged relative to most migrants (Hvidt, 2013). Overall, the increased amount of labor—the result of higher-level work by the citizens and a spectrum of higher- and lower-level work by migrant expatriates—raised total real GDP. Ironically, per capita GDP in the GCC countries fell, due to the increased number of both citizens and non-citizens in the GDP denominator. At the same time, the proportion of GDP outputs flowing to GCC citizens skyrocketed. The disproportionate flow of GDP to GCC citizens reinforced the stratification and differentiation of citizens relative to non-citizens (Inklaar, de Jong, Bolt, & van Zanden, 2018).

While extant theory can help explain the motivation and circumstances of migrants (Guo, Al Ariss, & Brewster, 2020), we know far less about the experiences of S2S or W2E migrants than of East-to-West also known as Western-bound migrants. This gap in the knowledge indicates an unexamined puzzle due to the volume of S2S and W2E migrants, including high-status migrants entering into status-incongruent situations. Organizational management and public policy could be better informed by understanding the experiences of these migrants, who in the GCC are vetted by the government and employed in organizational contexts due to the *kafala* sponsorship system in the region. In addition, the experiences of these migrants enhance a range of theoretical perspectives on how high human capital workers manage in situations of aversive work conditions and status inconsistency. In essence, we can look at what helps these migrants endure in the presence of brick walls that remain brick walls (Sumprim, 2016: 7).

# Institutional and Theoretical Background

Emerging-market regions of the world such as the Arabian Gulf as well as the emerging-market giants such as China and India run largely (in the case of the Gulf) or not insignificantly (in the cases of other emerging market regions) on labor and talent originating from abroad. Some of this human capital can be deemed to fall into the category of expatriates, while other parts of the human capital flow are considered more migration. A key differentiating factor in perception is that expatriation has been classically driven by a home-country organization offering substantial rewards, benefits and incentives for defined-term relocation into a destination country, while migrants can be attracted by governmental or organizational incentives from within the destination country (Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld, & Dickmann, 2014). In a strict economic sense, expatriation and migration are not differentiated in that both involve labor flows from one country to another (Borjas, 1999). The origination of sponsorship has implications for the status and experiences of the migrants in our research context. In the GCC the sponsorship structure is known as the *kafala* system, which requires each individual migrant to have some form of organizational—which could include the government itself, a family or a family business—as sponsor and employer (Dito, 2010). Individually volitional self-selected migrants cannot enter (Malit & Al Youha, 2013). Governmental controls traditionally stringently restricted illegal entry as compared to many Western nations (Djajić, 1999),[[1]](#endnote-1) although it remains worth noting that human trafficking is everywhere, to some degree, an unresolved dilemma particularly for the most vulnerable categories of legal or illegal migrants (Hill, 2018).

## Migration from a Global and Organizational Perspective

Migration is a global phenomenon, and migratory flows of people into and out of various countries and regions have been found to enhance international trade between those nations (Gould, 1994; Leblang, 2010). In North America, for instance, previous research has determined that higher-skilled migrants increase innovation and entrepreneurship, as studied in Silicon Valley (Saxenian, 2006) and more broadly throughout the US (Kerr, 2018). Migration has further been determined to enhance levels of new product development, internationalization, and new business development, as well as asset allocation and investment positions, in organizations internationally (Foley & Kerr, 2013; Hernandez, 2014; Wang, 2015) and to unlock knowledge recombination and managerial potential in combining resources from the sending to the receiving countries (Choudhury & Kim, 2019; Kulchina, 2016, 2017).

The phenomenon-based approach (e.g. Li, 2019) invites exploration into why high-status S2S and W2E migrants have experienced often substantial adversity and difficulty in their career experiences moving East. In counterpoint to the experiences of high-status migrants from many parts of the world moving into the Western developed nations (e.g. Borjas, 2014)—often culminating in long-term relocation, citizenship, and intergenerational socioeconomic mobility (Saxenian, 2006)—high-status S2S and W2E migrants into the Arabian Gulf region are involuntarily temporary, prohibited from citizenship, and situated within a context of hereditary class and cultural structures resisting infiltration (Hvidt, 2016a).

These circumstances occur to varying degrees for migrants into the nation states of the GCC (Malit & Al Youha, 2013). The GCC nations can be viewed as desirable destinations due to seemingly affordable yet luxurious lifestyles, income potential, career and educational opportunities, and affluent surroundings (Al-Ubaydli, 2015), but which have been surprisingly resistant to fulfillment of the traditional Western-bound migrant aspirations such as permanent relocation, citizenship, and intergenerational transmission of advantages in the new homeland (Colton, 2011). Extant migration and mobility perspectives have not been able to explain this particular coexistence of opportunity and constraint in GCC high-status migration patterns.

## Mobility and Immobility

Writing early in the twentieth century, sociologist Robert Park (1928: 881) observed, “Present tendencies indicate that while the mobility of individuals has increased, the migration of peoples has relatively decreased.” A century later—following the Great Depression, another World War, multiple escalating global political and environmental conflicts, the Global Financial Crisis, the Great Recession, and the COVID-19 global pandemic—we propose precisely the opposite. While global migration trends have remained remarkably consistent for more than a century at around 3-4% of the global population even as global population has dramatically increased in that time (Borjas, 2014), mobility of individuals upon arrival depends strikingly less on individual qualifications and more on the country of destination (Docquier, Peri, & Ruyssen, 2014). Marginalization of the newly mobile is not a new phenomenon (Park, 1928) and has been previously examined for S2S (Khalaf & Alkobaisi, 1999) and Westward-bound migrants (Saxenian, 2012). Our study uncovers severely restricted upward mobility and even deeper migrant marginalization—which we term status incongruence or status inconsistency—for high status S2S and W2E migrants into the GCC Arabian Gulf region. The temporary, constrained and marginalized experience for high-status migrants into emerging markets is not addressed by the extant research into lower-status or Westward-bound migrants. Likewise, the economic perspective of compensatory wage theory also fails to explain why simply higher levels of pay do not offset the psychological, professional and sometimes physical levels of pain experienced by the S2S and W2E status-incongruent migrants (Frum, 2016). Their experiences defy previous expectations of eventual status escalation through migration and mobility, and the analysis of this status-incongruent migration phenomenon draws our attention.

## Permanency and Impermanency

While the type of migration such as typically occurs in the Arabian Gulf, can provide substantial benefits to both sending and receiving countries, including considerable remittance inflows to the receiving country and the prospect of improved life, educational and career prospects for family members at “home” (in the sending country) (Ruhs & Martin, 2008), the system also precludes the longer-term benefits of more permanent high-human capital inflows into the destination (receiving) country (Hanson, 2009). Although the GCC time-limited migration offers abundant remittance opportunities as well as tight monitoring of documentation, typically decreasing some of the risks of exploitation experienced by non-documented workers (Casarico, Facchini, & Frattini, 2015), the GCC approach has also been found to promote exploitative practices such as visa trading, whereby a worker enters on a legal visa stating one type of employment sponsorship, but subsequently turns—or is turned—in another, sometimes illegal, employment direction (Al-Ubaydli, 2015). In addition, the extremely high levels of essentially hereditary stratification in the region perpetuate the paradox of plentiful economic opportunity alongside severely constrained individual and family mobility (Colton, 2011) and the dissonance of nurturing aspirations while enduring immobility (Schewel, 2019). Ironically also, larger numbers of lower-skilled migrants (Rath & Shaw, 2007)—appeasing a cultural aversion to citizen employment in low-skilled occupations—have been found to correspond to fewer rights and rewards for higher-skilled migrants (Ruhs & Martin, 2008). We concentrate on the conundrum confronting the higher-skilled migrant professionals in the GCC.

# Research Design

This paper elucidates the unique migratory experiences of professional-level W2E and S2S migrants, given that professional opportunities increasingly evolve in a global context. The experiences of migrants in status-inconsistent conditions and their means of coping with the associated hardships can inform theories of migration and economic development as well as our understanding of contemporary work experiences for mangers, professionals and knowledge/ technology workers. Research on patterns of innovation and internationalization from emerging markets had begun to surface the psychological but sometimes also physically symptomatic distress of highly skilled migrants. To further understand these issues, we study these migrants empirically in these types of contexts. The phenomenon of status-incongruent migration serves as a starting point for examining the confluence of pain and pay in the experiences of these migrants. Through this approach, we crystallize fundamental elements of the migrant experiences and reactions toward a deeper understanding of forces driving this type of professional-level status-incongruent migration even in the midst of pain.

## Research Setting

The Arabian Gulf countries provide a unique emerging markets perspective in the global context. We research the levels-of-pain status-incongruency phenomenon in S2S and W2E professional-level migrants in the context of the six culturally and economically interconnected countries of the GCC. During the period of our investigation, from 2012-2019, over 2 million individuals migrated into GCC Arabian Gulf region countries, swelling the national workforce at levels from street cleaner to CEO (World Bank, 2019). These migrants all enter in some form of organizational context, broadly construed due to the sponsorship system, providing strategic value and competitive advantage to business entities (Zikic, 2015). In contrast to other nations, self-initiated expatriation is not allowed within the GCC system (Al Ariss & Ozbilgin, 2010).

With the exception of Saudi Arabia, which still has a majority non-migrant population—and with the UAE at the other extreme—about 60-90% of GCC country populations consist of migrants. For instance, the stock of migrants in Kuwait, as an exemplar country in the Gulf, was 3.3 million out of a total population of about 5M in 2017, encompassing all skill levels, with around 1M migrants coming from developed countries. The 3.3M represents the total migrant stock and the 2M more recently entered are the migrant flow. Of the migrant stock, approximately 1M are W2E migrants to Kuwait, about half of whom are considered highly-skilled according to five standard occupational categories used in the nation (Kuwait Central Administration of Statistics, 2015). Approximately 10 percent of the S2S migrant stock falls into the managerial, professional or more highly-skilled labor categories (Al-Ubaydli, 2015; Hvidt, 2016b), reflecting the preponderant representation of S2S migrants in the lower-skilled labor categories. Although highly-skilled migration into the GCC represents a relatively small fraction of the global total of international migration, it is worth examining as part of the growing trend of S2S and W2E movement of knowledge-based workers and part of the phenomenon of status-incongruent and impermanent migrants, who cannot remain in the migratory destination (see Appendix A).

An emic perspective enables us as an approach to capture the experience from within the social group and specifically to look at what professional high-status migrants experienced and how they perceived their status dislocation as highly-skilled S2S or W2E migrants. We first found evidence of highly skilled migrants’ in some form of psychological but sometimes also physical distress, with a sense of displacement or dislocation, while researching patterns of innovation and internationalization from the economically cooperating states of the Arabian Gulf. We built on these foundational interviews with additional rounds of interviewing specifically toward eliciting accounts of experiences and observations from highly-skilled migrants into the region. Lower-skilled migrants were also interviewed in comparison. Interviews and participant observation occurred in several phases over a period of eight years. In total there have been hundreds of hours of interviews with over 250 citizens and migrants of different levels (see Appendix B). Data from successive rounds of interviewing are supplemented by statistical tracking of migratory patterns from governmental economic sources (IMF, 2018; INED, 2018; IOM, 2018; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016; UN DESA, 2017; World Bank, 2019; Zong, Batalova, & Burrows, 2019). Overall, we used participant observation, site visits and secondary documentary data collection from archival and online sources.

The lead author lived, studied, researched, and traveled extensively in the region and then to and from the region and the US university home base for a total of eight years of higher education, graduate level and postdoctoral study, as fundamental in the emic and embedded perspective. The third author has over five years of experience in the region, contributing to the emic insider perspective in the data collection, economic contextualization, and initial data analysis, in addition to over two decades of experience in other emerging markets of the world. The second author also brings considerable migrant and emerging markets research perspectives and experiences and was highly instrumental in the coding and conceptualization of the model and interpretation of the results.

## Data Collection: Personal-Referral Based Elite Citizen and Migrant Management Interviewing

The initial phase was based in Kuwait with data collection also occurring opportunistically in neighboring countries and companies in the GCC. We developed a broadbased snowball sample drawing on personal referrals for elite citizen and migrant management interviewing for purposes of understanding issues of global strategy and innovation initiatives, global and multicultural leadership development, and internationalization. We accessed this first round of informants through the personal referral network established via the strong relationship building norms within the region and a few key initial introductions to senior business leaders and heads of prominent families based on university contacts and credentials. For instance, it was quite typical in this research for the researchers to be asked probing questions about their own families and backgrounds and also to meet family members of informants. While direct access or invitation into a home was not typical in the beginning, the multiple references and introductions to family members, with introductions occurring to immediate as well as extended family members in the business or professional setting, were common throughout the interviewing experience.

## Data Collection: Expanded Network-Based Interviewing across the Status Spectrum

In the second phase, as the initial round of international business and management related interviewing had been completed and unanticipated and what seemed at the time to be secondary phenomena—such as around the migrant experiences—had emerged, we began a second round of interviewing involving expanded network-based access to informants across a wider status spectrum in the region. In this phase, we became even more aware of our own concern and the potential concern of others around what could be perceived as probing into to the delicate dynamics of potentially sensitive topics that could perhaps prove in some way unflattering to individuals in the revelation. As the GCC strongly relies on migrant labor, and painful outcomes are frequently discussed *sotto voce*, we experienced an enigma as to how to surface the topics. The enigma essentially unraveled through increased demonstrations of cultural understanding, an empathetic perspective, and iterative interviewing and interaction. Those in pain seemed more willing to speak than those who could in any way be perceived as inflicting pain. As always in all such circumstances, pain infliction can occur from within as well as from outside the migrant groups under study and there were difficult moments, not reported in the quotes for confidentiality, learning of the stressors within migrant families, of violence encountered and jobs and relationships lost. Our research approach is toward explicating the phenomenon, the coping mechanisms, and the theoretical implications.

## Data Collection: Focused Interviewing Specifically on Migrant Experiences

In the third phase, we did data collection through open-ended interviews concentrating even more specifically on migrant experiences and comparisons at different status levels to ensure we were surfacing a specific phenomenon around status-incongruency experienced by professional-level migrants. The experiences we heard from non-professional-level migrants provide compelling counterparts in illustration of the main phenomenon. Two specific, dedicated, multi-week research trips to the GCC were conducted in December 2018 and February 2019 toward these third phase interviews, research meetings, and data analysis with partners in the region, and collecting further data on the research questions on migration.

## Data Analysis

Daily and weekly field notes, field note summaries, narrative blocs around pivotal events, and organizational and individual time lines were used in the collection and preliminary collation of the data. These primary data from interviews, informal interactions, observations, participant observations, and larger group meetings and events were used in conjunction with documentary and archival secondary data toward defining first order codes for our emergent phenomenon recognition of the status inconsistency experienced by high-status professional-level S2S and W2E migrants into the GCC Arabian Gulf. Due to the phenomenon-driven nature of this research, we did not begin with a research question but rather made a discovery in the initial round of interviewing, which we then pursued through subsequent rounds of interviewing and secondary data. From the first order codes, we developed second order categories and then overarching themes as the dimensions resulting from our analysis of the status-inconsistency phenomenon (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). The sequence from first order codes, through second order categories and then overarching dimensions involved an increasing level of abstraction in the conceptualization of the status-inconsistency phenomenon, (Gehman et al., 2018).

We approached the phenomenon from the perspective of understanding an unfolding sequence of events and exploring mechanisms contributing to the events and consequences of the events (Abdallah, Lusiani, & Langley, 2019). Based on a traditional emergence perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) consistent with our emergent detection of the high-status migrant status-inconsistency phenomenon, we became increasingly systematic in our data collection and handling, as demonstrated through the three phases of the interviewing; By the time of the third round of interviewing, with dedicated research trips specifically around the migrant status experience understanding, We could ask more comparative and also comprehensive questions, for instance, specifically around the motivations for migrating, what was it like upon first arriving in the GCC, and what have been pivotal experiences during the migration time in the GCC. For instance, we had noticed in the first round of interviewing the concept of the degrees of citizenship for local citizens. In subsequent rounds, we were able to pursue these issues when follow-up questions and closer inquiry, when the topics arose. Likewise, with the issues of migrants from different ethnicities and nationalities, we were able to more closely note and question to understand varying experiences.

For certain issues, such as around direct status degradation events of being badly treated or around ultimate departures (including demises), we experienced the challenges in the emotionality and rapport building to listen to these events (Malhotra & Hinings, 2015; Rapley, 2001). We began open coding aiming toward capturing key events and expressing initial codes as much as possible in the voice of the informants. Due to the wide-ranging nature of the emic and embedded perspective of two of the authors, interviews were almost never recorded, but rather extensive notes and follow-up notes and observations were taken. Interviews were conducted almost entirely in English, as noted also in the findings and as the high-status professional lingua franca and a requirement for professional work in the region, regardless of background. Phrases or colloquial expressions occasionally used in Arabic have been translated. For some of the initial top leadership interviews, a bilingual research assistant from the region participated. The research assistant was not required for translation, as again the comfort level and proficiency for senior executives who were either migrants or citizens of the region was very high—indeed we often heard that it was their preferred language, the language in which they had received all their higher education (sometimes all the primary and secondary education as well), or the equivalent of a second mother tongue—but to provide insights into cultural factors or sometimes helping with guards or other personnel where the English proficiency was not as high.

As the researcher knowledge of the region, phrases, and culture grew, the solo interview and discussion visits increased, as did the level of revelations. The immersive aspects of the research positioning provided greater insights and disclosures of both highs and lows in migrant experiences. Comparative interviews with S2S non-professional migrants mostly occurred in occupations such as household management and transportation or with what could be termed non-professional business employment or assistant positions in the restaurant, hospitality or travel industry, where the knowledge of English was expected to be—and was—much higher than for S2S civic or organizational guarding, cleaning or construction non-professional migrants. In addition, there were numerous S2S and Southern-origin W2E migrants in the higher professional levels, where overall the W2E migrants tended to be clustered.

We frequently compared informant comments and first order codes, seeking to identify points of conceptual convergence and divergence, in advancing from the first to the second order level of abstraction and then to the overarching dimensions. For instance, we noted many references in many ways to the idea of getting away, and we sought to differentiate travel for flight, as in an aversive or traumatic type of departure, from travel for escape in a more metaphorical or leisure sense, for having downtime or recharging before returning to the region, as actual travel or plans for upcoming travel were extremely popular evocations among both citizens and expatriate migrants. Travel purely for pleasure we could code as such and it entered into our higher-level categorization as one form of coping mechanism. Travel for flight and leaving permanently, we could likewise categorize at a higher level around departures. We also found another form of travel less clear in intention and outcome, involving the desire to get away which could be temporary to start, could be an aspiration to be permanent, could perhaps evolve into a temporary indefiniteness, before again return to the region. We noted the tensions between staying and leaving—in an internal balancing of the pressures experienced by the high-status migrants, as well as repeated instances of being either lured back by inducement or compelled to return under fear of sanctions. These first-order codes around traveling for separating from the family and minimizing the exposure of the family to status degradation, compared to deliberately if sometimes half-heartedly traveling and returning as a coping mechanism, compared to traveling with the intent to depart for good or as a genuine permanent departure all entered into different second-order categories—separate lives, acceptance, or staying-and-trying-to-leave—and then different aggregate dimensions—status disparagement and inconsistency, coping mechanisms in aversive situations, and difficulty in leaving. Figure 1 shows the data structure.

## Reflexivity, Retrospection and Ensuring Transparency and Trustworthiness

Finally, we note some factors as related to reflexivity, retrospection, and ensuring transparency and trustworthiness in ethnographic style research and interviewing (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008). Given the longitudinal scope of the study, some events unfolded across real-time observation and interviewing and other events were recounted in retrospection. To minimize retrospective bias, we triangulated from multiple sources, informants, and documentary evidence, as well as asking questions in different ways at different times, as there were generally repeat interaction opportunities with informants. The perspective of reflexivity in ethnographic research applies for the first and third authors each having lived in the region before beginning formally studying the region and then having parallel living and researching experiences. The concepts of reflexivity and existing cognitive frameworks are generally held as helpful in informing the interpretation of the data collected (Davies, 2012; Van de Ven, 2007). We ensured trustworthiness of the data through multiple interviews with many of the same informants, interviews with multiple members of shared networks, seeking commonalities across quotes or reputable strong divergence, and having multiple authors participate in the data analysis.

# Findings: Surfacing Status Inconsistency from the Inside View

The culture, history and geography of the region—including ancient civilizations and harsh climatic conditions—have created historical and present living conditions and momentum conducive to what could be termed guest labor and a “servant” class, currently for assisting at various domestic, organizational and professional levels. The invited workers are simultaneously needed, welcomed, and in various ways, from the subtle to the more blatant, reviled. The status-inconsistency for professional expatriate migrants may be known to some migrants to some degree before arrival into the region; but if the US society has been recently likened in many ways to a caste system (Wilkerson, 2020), the heightened recognition of the hierarchy and incongruency phenomenon will be stronger once entering and living in the GCC. The recognition of the dilemma can be accompanied by the development of various coping mechanisms, as will be further discussed in this and subsequent sections. The status-inconsistency has been dominant despite the recent oil price fluctuations and economic vicissitudes of the region (Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis, 2019). Economic analyses show that when the price of oil has declined, likewise, temporarily, has the number of migrants (Inklaar et al., 2018). Alternatives could also be relatively few as economic retrenchment can often be a global, or at least super-regional occurrence, adversely influencing opportunities in multiple nations. In this section we investigate (1) demarcation as an outsider in the professional migrant situation, in the introduction to the culture, logistics and unique elements in a society with codified and multiple levels of stratification; (2) the emerging concept of status-inconsistency and how migrants express and perceive the experiences of working and living in the GCC; (3) mechanisms developed for coping with aversive situations; and (4) overall why do the migrants into these situations find it difficult to move—what drives them to stay—and how do we begin to get glimpses of coping mechanisms convergent with other types of suppressive situations. We use the terms migrant and expatriate relatively interchangeably or together in this paper, as they are used in the region. We use locals, local citizens, and GCC citizens as terms for citizens of the various GCC countries. Figure 2 displays the emergent model from the findings.

## Demarcation as Outsiders—Culture, logistics and unique elements upon entering into the GCC

Typically, the introduction into the culture occurs first at the level of climate, depending on the exact month of arrival, simply as a reaction to the sheer level of heat from for instance May through October. "*What ring of hell is this*?" commented one expatriate respondent, who recounted the physical and psychological debilitation of being lost in a parking lot in 47C/117F heat outside a giant mall within the first week of arrival. Granted indoor parking exists, typically at quite a modest price relative to major urban centers in the US, but the need is perhaps not immediately compelling, until the first bad heat experience. A second level of recognition can concern clothing, including the traditional garb of a floor-length black abaya for women and a floor-length white dishdasha for men, although many also wear Western attire. As explained by one of the GCC citizens interviewed: "*Westerners often make the mistake of thinking an abaya has to have religious implications. It does not always. It is the traditional dress for women and always an appropriate choice*." An Arabic-origin non-citizen, after multiple meetings, remarked that she frequently wore her abaya as a student to avoid having to compete with the designer wear of her more affluent classmates. A third level of realization could be about lines—that some of the traditionally clad individuals as well as some of the Western-attired (but usually only GCC-citizenship unless one carries a diplomatic passport) individuals seem not to be standing in lines. There are special lines, shorter lines, skipped lines.

The logistics of life in the GCC can be daunting to many unaccustomed to the high levels of paperwork, bureaucracy and seemingly endless delays, the need for currying of favor and the differential treatment of non-citizens. Remarking on what it was like to live in the region in pre-war times, one 40-something long-term expatriate reflected "*Kuwait was heaven before the Invasion [1991]. Life was easier. The treatment of foreigners was not as different as it is now*." Another long-term expatriate recalled, "*my kids growing up could go to the government [public] schools. It was allowed back then [before the Invasion]*." The feelings of betrayal by the local citizens during and after the Invasion ran deep, not just in relation to the outside invaders, where there had been longstanding tension or even enmity, but also from within, from political factions seeking homelands and attempting external alliances later deemed treasonous. As commented by one expatriate informant, "*My mother is Palestinian. The Palestinian women are said to be among the most beautiful. It is alright if you are a woman and married by a man willing to overlook your background due to your beauty*." These quotes all give indications as to citizen-non-citizen differentiation, heightened degrees of differential treatment even of professional expatriates after the Invasion, and different treatment depending on not just professional level but also country or ethnicity of origin and gender. In addition, the emphasis on appearance emerges.

The relative levels of privilege between citizens and non-citizens also quickly becomes apparent. As commented by an affluent and highly-educated Western-heritage expatriate:

My kids attend [one of the top private schools in the region]. I will tell you right now it is a situation of the 'haves' and the 'have nots.' We [Westerners] are the ‘have nots.’ Yes, our kids are at school together. But my kids do not have their lunch delivered every day by the driver. That is just one small example. My daughter came home the other day and asked me, ‘Mom, where is our chalet?’ I said, ‘In Milwaukee, our chalet [shaking her head] is in Milwaukee."

Another expatriate “joked,” "*Whenever a [citizen] receives a speeding ticket, it is simply passed to a Westerner*." That is apocryphal, but from research experience in the region, it can be reported the initial rental car seemed to rack up almost a speeding ticket a week, from hidden cameras and varying speed limits on signs difficult to discern in a windy and sandy climate. When the researcher obtained a longer-term car lease with citizenship sponsorship, there were never again any speeding tickets in the course of over two years of field research with that particular car. The car represented part of a series of introductions into a network of relationships broadening research access.

The stratification applies within the citizenry as well as between citizens and migrants, and even between citizens and elite migrants. An interview respondent and citizen seeking to apply for graduate school and then for jobs, lamented his chances because "*I am from a small family*." The smallness referred to hierarchical and not literal stature, as became apparent in subsequent interviews. Another aspiring graduate studies applicant, also a citizen, explained:

I am a citizen, yes, and that does bring certain privileges, but it also depends on your level of citizenship. My grandfather was a traditionalist living in the desert and one of those who delayed coming forward when the country established its sovereignty and citizenship-granting powers. By the time he came in, he could prove only sufficient heritage and longevity in the country for a lesser degree of citizenship. We are seventh degree citizens.

A seventh-degree citizen receives lower governmental allowances, fewer privileges, and has less access to study-abroad scholarships and national career opportunities than a first-degree citizen. Another informant, an Arabic-heritage Canadian expatriate married to a local citizen, also noted very directly:

When I married my [local citizen] husband I did not even know about this [degrees of local citizenship]. I am Canadian and a native English speaker but I also speak, read and write Arabic. It was not until my son was born and I saw and really noticed how his birth certificate [in Arabic] said first degree, and then I began to notice it on more and more government documents [also in Arabic] that I dealt with in the course of my [predominantly English-speaking] job.

When asked how this would affect her directly and whether she would need or want to become a citizen, she responded,

I don't think so because I'm Canadian. I don't think I need to have [local] citizenship because I am fine with my Canadian citizenship. But for my son it seems to be a very good thing to have this status from my husband and, also, Canadian citizenship from me.

Several subsequent interview respondents further commented on the expatriate spousal citizenship issue:

A non-GCC woman who marries a first-degree citizen could become a [local] citizen but she could never take the first-degree level herself. Her children can take it if it is the level of the husband, but the highest an expatriate wife could get would be third- or fourth- degree citizenship after a minimum of five years of marriage and the birth of a son.

Clearly access to citizenship and degrees of citizenship were partly submerged but large issues.

These comments from bilingual local citizens and others also indicate the exceptionally high levels of English conversational fluency occurring in the region, particularly among the elite and educated citizens, with the English linguistic proficiency levels increasing since the 1990s in the greater travel and international exposure of the generation raised in the aftermath of the Invasion (Al Barrak, 2012). As commented by more than one local citizen informant about the “English native speaker” level of their accents:

I can travel to the US and talk to people and they just think I am from the US until they see or hear my name, and suddenly they will ask me, ‘where are you from?’ Until that point they just think I am one of them/ Hispanic/ African-American [depending on the complexion of the speaker and we heard variations on this quote repeatedly].

Certainly, the native-English-speaker accent was not the most common, but it was common enough that even a member of the research team, on a return flight and seated next to a university student who was talking about their experiences in the US asked “where in the US are you from?” to receive the response “*I am from [GCC country]*.”

As seen from these interview excerpts, the stratification has ramifications for citizens and non-citizens, but for non-citizens it can be perceived as a bewildering and impenetrable barrier. Applying for citizenship as an expatriate apparently occurs very rarely, and by law an application can be made only after 25 years of residence and additional requirements have been fulfilled. As high as the stated requirements sound, the actual requirements are apparently even higher. A frequently repeated comment heard in our interviewing about business leaders was about a prominent expatriate banking leader who received the honor of being offered citizenship. In the words of many informants describing this business leader: “*He did such an incredible [amazing, outstanding, turnaround, remarkable. . . various superlatives are used] job that the government even offered him citizenship*." It was viewed as one of the highest accolades. When it was inquired did he take it, each informant who had brought up the story said no he did not. When the inquiry was later made, upon hearing the story after other interviews had transpired, as to what level of citizenship he could have obtained, the answer was:

He [the prominent non-citizen business leader] would probably have been offered third- or fourth-degree citizenship. He would not have been offered higher than second. You can only be born into first-degree citizenship. In that situation, the rank of the mother does not matter, only the rank of the father, as long as the child is born of a legal pregnancy, meaning in a marital relationship with conception occurring after the marriage date.

The phrase "legal pregnancy" entered our vernacular multiple times. In addition, one non-first-degree local citizen informant asked a US-citizen researcher, "*well you have citizenship levels in the US, don't you?*" When the researcher responded that the US does not have citizenship levels, the respondent insisted, "*no, that is not true; your citizens who are born are different from your citizens who are made, aren't they?*"

## Emerging Concept of Status-Inconsistency—Expressing and perceiving the status inconsistency and experiences of living in the GCC

Knowledge of the status hierarchies, stratification and potential incongruency may be minimal to essentially nonexistent before entering the region for many W2E migrants, who have the inherent status advantage of coming from economically more established countries. One of our local citizen informants remarked, again after many interactions, that as high as the educational, wealth, travel, and privilege levels are for many citizens in the region, there is still the perception of being a third-world country and needing the expertise of W2E migrants. As commented by a non-citizen informant, “*These [nations in the GCC] are third-world countries with money*.” For professional-level W2E migrants, it could come as a surprise that they could enter into regions of the world where, as much as their expertise would be needed, they would also in various ways be viewed as inferior. For professional-level S2S migrants, originating already from emerging markets, the situation could be more complex, as there could be already be several generations of migrant labor tradition from these countries into the Gulf region, informing the most recent migrants of both the status perils and pecuniary promises ahead. Many W2E migrants are at least passingly familiar with the notion of the caste system in India and the class system in the UK, the former ordained by birth and the latter potentially traversable, Nevertheless, it could still be a shock to encounter a system with elements of both, although skewed more in the caste direction. Less familiar to many has been the experience of the burakumin in Japan, who have been a legally equalized but traditionally separated hereditary underclass for years, although one that can be escaped through migration (Martin, 2019). The Hindu caste system cannot be "escaped" through migration, although the affects may be attenuated in a different location (Crèvecoeur, 1782/1904; Samel, 2009). Similarly, the status concepts and status-incongruency in the GCC supersede the borders of the nations, but the effects are less severe outside the country.

For anyone from a typically more privileged background who has experienced any form of status degradation in the Gulf, leaving the country can be a temporary to a permanent solution. As observed by an Asian-heritage Western-citizenship expatriate, married to a European-heritage, Western-citizenship expatriate, who was one year in the Gulf, "*They [citizenry and their allies] treated me like s\*\*t and so I left*." In a somewhat similar vein, a high-status Gulf citizen married to a US citizen chose to reside with his wife and their children in the US rather than in the Gulf. As reported to the researchers by the family in the Gulf:

They [our uncle, his children and his American wife] are lucky living in the US. It is much nicer there for them and definitely for the wife in many ways. But when they come to visit us [here in the GCC], the kids are amazed. Their eyes pop. They cannot believe how we live here compared to their lives. It could be their lives also, they just don't know that fully, they haven't learned how everything works here, and, also, they have not grown up speaking any Arabic.

The results of earlier interviews clued in the dynamics that the children of the marriage have the high- status Gulf citizenship of the father and could be part of that life and lifestyle, but a non-native-citizen wife cannot fully share in that status. Yet another example comes from a European-heritage high-status Western expatriate migrant married to a wife of Southeast Asian heritage, also a professional-level expatriate migrant:

My wife has worked extremely hard to establish her professional credentials and to get a visa enabling her to work in [Western country], where I can easily spend time with her, rather than here [in GCC country], where she still has a professional position but is looked down on. She has made it clear to me that now that she has the new [Western country] visa, she will not stay in [GCC country].

Despite his own higher position in the Gulf, this European-heritage W2E migrant chose to settle his wife and children in the Western country to avoid the even greater stigma and status-incongruency that would be experienced by his wife.

If a European-heritage Western-expatriate with top-level professional credentials and a high professional position can experience status inconsistency, the effects are typically even more greatly magnified for any non-European-heritage expatriate even with similar top-level credentials and employment. These quotes speak to the experiences of professional expatriate migrants from different national and ethnic origins being in the GCC.

Initially, minimal knowledge of the status hierarchies can be relatively quickly to more slowly offset by an accumulation of information from multiple sources before or upon arrival, particularly from other migrants. As mentioned by an informant of Asian heritage with Western citizenship and graduate education, migrating into the Gulf for professional employment:

Our friends of similar heritage warned us very clearly in advance. It doesn't matter how well educated you are or that you are a US citizens people [in the Gulf] will [tend to] first judge you by appearance. You must always be very careful to lead and open every conversation with 'I am Dr so-and-so with such-and-such organization. I am a US citizen and all my degrees are from the US.’ Our friends warned us ‘you must be sure to do this every time.’

Another informant from an emerging markets heritage told only her very closest friends her first name and otherwise went strictly by "Dr" and her last name. She developed a persona of what could be termed empathetic professionalism in her healing profession, as she described:

People here have really been very nice to me. I go into many homes. I am invited many places in the city and at the seaside. I sit and chat and eat. But people know I can help them [from my profession]. I have proved I can help them. Every day that I work, I can see no more than five patients a day for my practice. I work very intensely not just from my medical knowledge in my mind, but also from the hands and from the heart. It takes a tremendous amount of energy to sustain, and I have learned I have to be sure to refortify myself. Recently it has become more difficult. I have educated my children, cared for my elderly mother, and bought property for my family based on my work here. But it is becoming more difficult. I am finding I need more and more time off. In fact, I am now taking more time off. Starting this year, I am taking two long holiday breaks each year—for myself and for my assistants—and spending no more than eight months of the year here. I have to or I cannot continue.

After over 15 years in the region, learning Arabic, earning a good living, and connecting with multiple powerful and influential citizens, she seemed to be envisioning finally a winding down.

In an interesting counterpoint to the high-status migrant experience, many local citizens also flee or long at least temporarily to flee from some of the cultural and climatic constraints. Switzerland is a popular destination as recounted by several respondents. For instance, one informant mentioned in the course of a conversation about GCC businesses, “*My father knows a lot about this, but right now he is in Switzerland*.” When the researcher asked, “*Oh, he has many business interests there*?” The respondent replied laughing, “*No, he is in Switzerland to get away and have a good time*.” As recounted by another respondent: "*You are lucky to have caught him [your business research contact] here. He is just about to fly out to Switzerland for the month*.” As noted directly by an affluent local citizen, "*I like to go to Switzerland periodically to visit my gold. I know I have it; I see the evidence electronically in my accounts every month; but I like to actually walk into the bank periodically to view it [the more tangible evidence]*."

Reflecting on the topic of flight from a different perspective, another European-heritage W2E migrant recounted:

Every [cycle in my company] we see new [expatriates] arrive and every week there would be betting going on as to how many of the newly-arrived people would have left by the end of that week. We knew that every week that would be at least one new person on the plane back home.

This comment makes the experience in the region sound almost more like a boarding school hazing or military indoctrination than professional migration. In the migrant situation, considerable inducements are offered and the departing migrants would have already signed contracts assuring them of professionally high salaries, quality living conditions, and generous home leave at the end of the work cycles. For non-professional migrants, all S2S in our sample and whom we interviewed as mentioned in the research design to learn of their experiences in counterpoint, the were risks of the employer withholding the passport, salary, or home leave. We encountered many stories at the non-professional level of these transgressions occurring. For instance, as recounted by one migrant domestic worker:

I have not been back home in almost five years now. Sir [the husband side of the employer] needs to return my passport and madam [wife side of the employer] needs to let me have a copy of her civil ID for me to take when I book my ticket to show that she also approves my travel. He gave me the passport but she won't give me the paper I need, which is the copy of her civil ID. . . .I do not always get paid every month. . . They have been promising me a better salary and a better visa [known as the “18” visa] for several years but so far it hasn't happened. They love my cooking. They want me to cook as a business, working for them and for other places. I do and they make money from it.

There are two visa levels at play in that particular country in the Gulf, called the "18" visa and the "20" visa. The “18” is the visa applicable to professional or business positions as opposed to “20” for domestic, janitorial, or cleaning work. For S2S migrants seeking to improve their positions, being able to have an “18” instead of a “20” visa was a status symbol and a basic distinction for being at the entry level of a more business or professional type of occupation. The expatriate migrants in our higher status sample would all hold the higher level of visa. The professional status was taken for granted by W2E migrants to the extent that they often did not even know the number type of their visa. The professional visa status carried far less risk of abuses such as passport, salary, or leave withholding, and we did not hear any of these types of experiences from S2S or W2E higher-status migrants. The pains perceived were around what could be termed psychological, lifestyle or comfort factors and the accumulation of stressors from being an affluent professional yet being consistently part of, in the aforenoted words of a professional-level migrant, the "have nots."

The unique form of caste system in the Gulf can be slowly to rapidly perceived, with varying levels of stress experienced from cultural constraints by migrants and also interestingly by citizens. The perceptions of and reactions to the status-inconsistency and the strictures of the hierarchy range from flight, to acceptance, to embracing and thriving, as will be discussed further in the next section.

## Coping with Aversive Situations—Mechanisms from resistance to reconciliation

We determined a spectrum of coping responses, ranging from flight and avoidance through acceptance, engagement, and even, for some, thriving with an active strategy of personal and family enhancement within the migration situation. The avoidance-flight and acceptance are the resistance strategies of essentially shortening or biding time in the region. The engagement and enhancement responses are forms of active reconciliation to and achieving improvement within the migration circumstances. Specific sub-strategies occur within each classification.

As mentioned in the previous section, one strategy could be early departure from the region or a relocation for family interests, for instance in the two examples provided and illustrated with quotes it was for the protection of the non-breadwinning spouse. Another example mentioned is the repeated explanations, almost like a mantra or a pledge and again as a form of protection against excessive status degradation. Yet another strategy can involve alliance or a form of guardianship, as evidenced by the doctor who found powerful friends and allies who wanted and needed her services and therefore her life became more comfortable congenial in the region. As noted by more than one professional migrant expatriate:

It is extremely rare for [local citizens] to invite [non-citizens] into their homes. I have been here [5,10,15, 20] years with this happening rarely or never into the main part of the home. It can be easier if you are a man to obtain an invitation to a diwaniya [evening discussion and social gatherings usually only for men and usually held in a special separate hall on the property or a dedicated ‘public’ space near the entrance to the home or even sometimes in an entirely separate location] and, if you are woman, sometimes to the female festivities of a wedding, celebrated in a hotel or another external location. It is very rare to be invited into the family areas of the home to have a coffee, tea, or a meal and to sit and chat and meet the family directly in the home.

The doctor in this example achieved that level of intimacy repeatedly through her practice. A third type of strategy, related to the ease of forming alliances or receiving a form of sponsorship or guardianship, involves performance. The previously mentioned top-level businessman who produced astounding improvements year and after year in shareholder value for his institution received a (non-first-degree) citizenship offer.

Still another example, related to some of the above, can be strategically dividing up the year to separate life in the region from a different, more relaxed and comfortable sort of life outside the region. The "expatriate" contracts typically have longer periods for home leave or holiday than would be the norm in the home country itself. Then there is the evidence that even the local citizens within the region perceive benefits from time away. We were told that the average GCC citizen makes five trips a year outside the home country—a quite extensive level of international travel relative to citizens of other countries. In one pair of respondents from the UK, who had been many years in the region and had acclimated to local conditions with working for a firm with interests allied to the energy industry and who no longer had close ties or a residence outside the region, the wife commented with a half-laugh:

My husband upset the other expatriates in his company because he is senior enough and has been here long enough that he insisted that the company policy change to reduce the number of holidays and days of home leave, because he thinks we no longer need it and he no longer wants all those days off, but most expatriates still do and were quite upset with him about that decision. They do want it and need and were angry with him.

Her tone suggested greater sympathy with this perspective than the fewer days off perspective. This quote also points out what has in other research contexts been referred to as the "going native" acclimation approach. From our research, we found less evidence of this approach in the sense that the barriers to entry to becoming a citizen or being acknowledged as having a status in some respect commensurate with citizens are much higher in the Gulf region than other areas.

Yet another strategy can involve advantaging one’s children. The success story for GCC professional migrants is different than the East-to-West style success of permanent relocation, citizenship, and upward mobility for self and children in the new destination.

Coping strategies can also vary according to the heritage and passport status of the migrants, with African-, Arabic- and Asian (including Southeast Asian and Indian-)-heritage migrants using different strategies and depending as well on whether individuals regardless of heritage have Western- or Southern-nation passports. In addition, ironically, local citizens also use some of the coping strategies, specifically in relation to time away and helping children.

Even with the various strategies of mitigation of the status-incongruency situations—leaving early, relocating the family, dividing the calendar year to carefully minimize the amount of time spent in country, alliances with powerful and congenial figures, or a fuller extent of acclimation leading to interest in remaining for longer blocks of time—conditions were never held to be easy. The wife in the couple where the husband wanted less time off seemed to be expressing a different point of view, that her sympathies lay more with those wanting the time off. This time away was perceived and expressed by many as essential and restorative. As commented by one migrant family:

We have a house back in [our home country], we go there as much as we can, we try to stay as long as we can; my husband and I love it, the kids love it; we come back only reluctantly. I worry about the impact it will have on my kids growing up on in the GCC. If my husband and I could find comparable positions [back home] to the ones that we have here [in the Gulf], we would take them, but the job market is very bad for that [at home].

In evidence of the desire of many professional migrant expatriates to stay away as long as possible, organizations in the region typically have to impose strict requirements and sanctions around return dates. Typically, professional-level employees in a Western nation would be expected to return from holiday simply as stated, or to show up on time at the start of a new cycle as stated, or to self-monitor on their vacation lengths in accordance with company policy. Evidencing the repeated accounts we heard of professional migrants simply not returning from holidays, the sanctions could be severe for not complying with contractual terms. Alternately, breaches can be perceived right from the start. In our sample, we have at least two examples of European-heritage Western expatriates, both women as it happens, who were adjudged to be contravening their contracts in some ways very soon after arrival and who were released from their contracts and sent home. In yet another case from our sample, in accordance with an earlier quote, an Arabic-heritage US-citizen, left of her own choice within the first month of arrival. Many people who had worked closely with her simply said, "*because she had background in the region, she quickly realized that what she was dealing with here was going to be even more difficult than she had thought, and she left*." Granted we did not hear from her directly, but none of the surrounding comments in any way concerned contract disputes but rather simply her "dislike" of the circumstances she was encountering even as a professional.

The experiences of European-heritage, Arabic-heritage and Asian-heritage expatriates, even when all of high professional status, could be quite different.

**Arabic-heritage expatriates**. Arabic-heritage expatriates even when holding Western nation citizenships often had the advantage of knowing something to quite a bit of the language and the region, and that could also make them more cognizant of the risks and more subject to disdain. The history and culture of the GCC are unique within the broader region known as the Middle East North and Africa (MENA). The broader region is known as the GCC/MENA and there are policy and affiliations recognized across the Arabic and Islamic nations of the broader region, but the distinctions are also omnipresent in the Gulf. As commented by one local citizen:

There is something I really hate about these US citizen Arabic descendants who come here. They want to keep insisting to us [GCC citizens] about how they are US citizens and therefore different. They are not; they are still the same as they were before; and we resent their trying to hold it over us that they now have US passports, but that still does not make them really from the US.

Another local citizen commented to a researcher, "*well there are only some of you US passport holders here who are real US citizens*." An Arabic-heritage US-citizen migrant commented:

As soon as someone here sees in my US passport the country where I was born [in the broader region] and they can hear that I have a bit of an accent in speaking English, they right away treat me differently.

Another Arabic-heritage Western-citizenship professional migrant commented, "*I do not want my children growing up here forever, I want them growing up in the [Western] country where we are citizens, where no one will look down on them, where they know they are free*." In yet another example, a Western-heritage interview respondent commented that her daughter in international school recounted an incident of the intervention of state demographic classifications entering into the schoolroom:

My friends from other US and Canadian families we all started together with similar schedules and in similar classes and suddenly some of my friends disappeared into different classes. When I asked them, they told me it was because of religion. Everyone [every adult migrant] is officially required to disclose [or to be classified into] a religion, and that kids are automatically held to be in the same religion as the father. If the father has been officially noted as being in the Islamic tradition [due to self-designation, place of birth, or inferences due to family name], then the kid has to go into the official religion class for Islamic studies. We all have to take Arabic classes and there are different classes for native and non-native Arabic speakers; but this is different; it is about [actual or presumed] religious affiliation, not language.

When asked how her friends felt about this, the teenage respondent shrugged and replied, "*They don't like it I guess but sometimes they say it is only temporary, only while they are here*."

An Arabic-heritage Western-citizenship migrant with a younger child recounted how her daughter had run for a class office, had been told by the teacher that she received the most votes, and the next day it was announced that a [local citizen] child was in fact the winner. Several days later the mother of the frontrunner child received a phone call from the tearful class teacher, also an Arabic-heritage professional migrant, reporting:

I am a religious person and may God forgive me. Your child won the election but I was forced on pain of losing my job to announce that [a local citizen child] had won the election. Please do not tell anyone that I am making this call, or I would lose my job, but I had to let you know.

The real winner was indeed the child of the professional expatriate migrants with their own heritage into the broader region, but without sufficient connections to outweigh the influence of the local citizen family whose child who had been declared the winner.

**Advantaging the next generation**. Part of the strategy of acceptance for oneself could also involve increased recognition of opportunities for the advancement of one’s children. The aforenoted respondent whose child won/ lost the election further recounted:

I eventually had to have my kids change schools. We had been told this was one of the top international schools, and I wanted them to have the exposure to the Arabic cultural and language traditions, and with some kids they were fine and made friends, but other [local citizen] kids horribly harassed them. We changed into another top international school but one with much higher numbers of [Western] international kids.

As another European-heritage Western-expatriate teenager and his parents commented:

There is a bright side to all of this. When you apply to college in the states [US] from one of these schools, your application goes into a special candidate pool for [US] kids applying from international schools overseas. Your odds of acceptance into a top US university [we are told] go way up. Our school every year has kids going to Ivy League and top universities in the US.

Given recent US scandals around celebrity and high-bank account parents trying to bribe or buy positive admissions results for their children at top US universities, this was no small advantage counterbalancing the parental level suffering from the professional migrant life in the GCC.

On a related theme of advantaging children, we also encountered repeated stories of non-US professional expatriate migrant parents, as well as GCC citizen parents, providing their children with US citizenship advantages. We heard many stories along the lines of this specific account, as recounted to us by an Arabic-heritage S2S professional level migrant:

I have a Lebanese passport and my husband holds a passport from India, both of us with 18 visas. My brother lives in the US and has become a US citizen. Each time I was pregnant, I flew to the US to visit him to have my kids born there. They are US citizens. I make sure to have their passports renewed when required. My daughter is now applying to college in the US. We could not afford the top international schools here, but she is very artistic and was a very good student at one of the “Indian” schools [international schools set up by Indian expatriates and charging lower fees than the international schools favored by the W2E and local citizen parents]. You have met her; she speaks English perfectly; and her Arabic is almost as good.

As with some of the other migrant coping strategies, the strategy of advancing the next generation was also embraced for local citizens. A GCC citizen commented about his sister and brother-in-law, both also GCC citizens:

My sister did her undergraduate and master’s [degrees] in the UK and then became engaged and her husband now is working on his graduate degree in the US. Their baby will of course be born there. My mom has already made plans to fly out for six months to be with them.

A favored strategy we were told by the adult local citizen dual passport holders in these situations was flying out of the GCC country on the GCC passport, into the US on the US passport, and then back into the GCC country on the GCC passport, minimizing the lines and delays on both sides.

**African-heritage expatriates**. The varied experiences of S2S or W2E professional-level migrants from Asian, Arabic, European, Southeast Asian, and Indian backgrounds have been recounted and interwoven at various points in the findings. Interestingly there were three UK or US passport holders with African heritage in the sample who recounted rather different experiences. One African-heritage Western-citizenship respondent mentioned simply:

I like it here. I think it is fine being here. My wife [European heritage] not so much and we have had to adjust and figure things out in certain ways but, basically, I like it and could see being here indefinitely. I have a good job; I earn a good salary; once you figure out how things work here, it is fine and just as good or better than anywhere else.

Another African-mixed-heritage Western-citizenship respondent commented:

It's been good here, I was learning Arabic before and now my Arabic has gotten even better. I go to diwaniyas [all-male daily evening gatherings for social purposes and discussions]. I like it. . . My wife [Latin heritage] and I both pretty much like it here. We are looking forward to raising a family here.

Multiple [local] citizens affirmed his conversancy with Arabic, his making of many local friends, his attendance at many diwaniyas, and the many congratulations he and his wife received on the birth of their first child, a boy. Another respondent explained:

I came here after I was divorced and my kids were grown to take a job here for a new experience. To my surprise, I met someone [local citizen] also older [pointing out her husband] and previously married. We got married, and we even had a baby [pointing out her now 10-year-old daughter]. I call her my menopause baby. She's my joy. It was all unexpected and all good and she is a citizen of both countries. We mostly live here; she goes to [a top international school] here; and we also spend a lot of time in the US.

Although the numbers are small, the accounts are striking.

The conjecture could be that individuals who due to heritage or skin color have perhaps experienced discrimination in the Western home country are better prepared for aversive circumstances in the migratory region. We hasten to add that our research indicates that any greater comfort level is not due to lack of racial or skin color consciousness in the region [ref]. As commented by a local citizen respondent: "*If we see a couple where the wife is darker than the husband, we know they have to be American*." When asked why, she looked puzzled, saying here the women should ideally always be lighter. Words such as “black” and “dark” were frequently used as skin tone descriptors, when applicable, and not always in an entirely favorable sense as inferred by the abundance of skin-lightening products and advertisements for both men and women. The word “white” was usually applied as a straightforward descriptor for an unusually fair complexion and not in a racial classification sense within the region. A “fair” complexion comment was typically framed as “praise” while a “dark” complexion comment could be either a straightforward descriptor or applied when indicating some level of upset or distress. For instance, one of the informants from the region, who referred to himself as dark or black in several statements, also used the words less flatteringly in telling his reaction to an incident noted by a researcher, when he was cut-off driving in his Toyota sedan by a modestly-attired, hijab-wearing, darker-skinned woman driving the latest model Porsche.

Although the skin color and ethnic background consciousness factors are quite high, as would need to be addressed in a separate article and as have been addressed in previous research [ref], our indications additionally are that the intensive patriarchal and status system can also offset these factors. Several other local citizen respondents directed attention to a former crown prince of one of the countries saying very directly, "*You see how he is darker than his brothers? His mother was from Ethiopia. He was very popular here and in [the royal] line but he passed away before he would have been [ruler]*." As the royal inheritance into the rulership is not by agnatic (male) primogeniture but more often by turns of brothers, it is not unusual for some brothers to have passed away—or sometimes to be deemed unfit—when it would have been their turn to rule, and for successive rulers to become more and more elderly upon ascendance until eventually the specter passes to sons of the next generation.

These additional comments about management or mitigation of aversive situations lead into brief clarifications around present or past situations of nomenclature, slavery, and multiple wives in the region. Depending on the royal nomenclature in the particular nation of the Gulf, the son of a “royal” father and a “slave” mother was still a “prince” or “sheikh” as regionally the baseline status and religion of a “legitimate” child (as well as the first middle name) derive from the father (Lacey & Haines, 1982). Slavery per se was outlawed in all the GCC nations during the second half of the twentieth century (for instance, in 1956 in Kuwait, 1962 in Saudi Arabia, and 1963 in UAE) (Pettigrew, 2020). While the status of the father dominates, the status of the mother also carried not inconsiderable weight in enhancing the total standing of the children, as all the Saudi kings for almost 100 years were brothers from what is known as the “Sudairi 7” meaning the seven full brothers and sons of Hessa (meaning "treasure") bint Ahmed Al Sudairi, the favorite patrician royal wife of King Abdulaziz ibn Saud (Aarts & Roelants, 2016).

The possibility for multiple marriages facilitated wives from many backgrounds. According to Islamic law as set forth in the Quran a man can have up to four legal wives simultaneously if all can be afforded, treated well, and maintained equally. In reality within our research sample in the younger generations we were told: “*Now the wives, and parents and families of the wives, often prefer that there be only one wife and they can request or find ways of enforcing this condition in the agreement for the marriage and after the marriage*.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Author Jean Sassoon (2004) who spent many years living in the GCC and specifically in Saudi Arabia recounts in one of her books how a royal wife used her own financial influence, preferences and wiles to prevent her husband from taking a second wife. When multiple wives occur, as has typically traditionally been the case for royals—the assertiveness of the Sassoon exemplar notwithstanding—while culturally there has been a preference for fair complexions in women, as expressed in a previous quote, the reality given multiple choices has been for beauty in a range of colors. When an observation was made at one point to a local citizen on how beautifully one of the princess consorts spoke English and how Westernized she appeared in her UK TV interview, the local citizen laughed and responded: "*Oh that is just the wife he [the prince] shows to the Western world. He has many more at home. They would not all look like her or speak English like her*." The appreciations and flexibilities afforded to GCC citizens were not typically available to non-citizens, but non-citizen professional migrants of various backgrounds could still sometimes benefit from their coping strategies for being in the region.

## Difficulties in Changing Locations—Motivations for remining and mechanisms convergent with other types of suppressive situations

Here we explore some reasons why professional expatriate migrants remain in these situations. We examine why it is often difficult for individuals or families to move, what drives them to stay, and how we begin to get glimpses of coping mechanisms convergent with other varieties of suppressive situations. We observed motivations around finding it difficult to leave—or needing to remain—which we group into four categories: (1) difficulties in finding an equivalent position, (2) difficulties in duplicating the perceived positive aspects of the lifestyle, (3) having or developing family connections and responsibilities in the region, and (4) becoming emmeshed in financial or other dilemmas complicating leaving. Finally, we also look at a form of leaving, which involves serial migration either within the GCC or to other migrant destinations not always of a permanent nature, where uprooting will again become necessary.

As mentioned in an earlier quote excerpt by a dual career couple, it can often be challenging to find an equivalent position out of the region the longer one stays in the region. The risk of not diversifying contacts or not creating additional professional opportunities arises when expatriate migrants are legally required to leave, typically by age 65.[[3]](#endnote-3) As commented by a European-heritage EU-citizenship professional:

I have had job opportunities arise and have been offered positions back in [my home country] or in other countries in Europe. The titles, responsibilities and organizations have all been fine. The salaries have quite simply not been as high. As long as I can continue to generate these kinds of alternate offers, I am comfortable to remain here and pile up euros in my account for a few more years and then take advantage of one of these other opportunities. I am making about two to three times as much here per year as I would be in an equivalent position in Europe. I know that the institutional prestige is not as high here, and therefore I maintain non-paid professional institutional affiliations in Europe. I know there is a risk that by the time I am ready to take one of the other opportunities, it might no longer be there.

An additional useful fact is that expatriate migrants from the EU pay or paid no income taxes of any form on earnings from the Gulf countries, due to the tax treaties negotiated between EEC countries and countries in the GCC. Expatriate migrant citizens of Canada and the US have still been required to pay various forms of income taxes, with the US typically having the strictest expatriate income tax laws and Canada not far behind, particularly for expatriate Canadian citizens still owning homes in Canada. Ironically, while it has been seen as desirable to have a dual citizenship with a GCC country and the US, the responsibilities of US citizenship in the form of US income taxes have caused some to reconsider the benefits of the dual citizenship or at least to be aware of potentially being in violation of the US tax code.

The difficulties around finding an equivalent position can also translate to the difficulties in maintaining an equivalent lifestyle outside the region. As commented by one migrant professional expatriate: "*Here it is possible to have more income, more help, more holidays, more deference, and a more luxurious lifestyle for myself and my family than in the US. Here I can live like a king; there I cannot*." As observed by another migrant professional expatriate:

Here I have two nannies, private international school tuition fully paid for my children, three months holiday per year, and proximity to travel to many international locations. We live in a nice place, we have good jobs, and we can still see family on the holidays or have them come visit us.

Yet another migrant professional expatriate noted:

For the first time ever in my working life, I have a maid. Honestly, I am not always sure that I like having a maid. I have to manage her and she does not always understand what I am saying and people have warned me to always lock up the valuables; but it is not really a choice. The maid comes with my living situation, and for the first time in my adult professional life, I am not doing my own cleaning.

It was a mixed experience of enjoyment, convenience and also exasperation.

The comments made about "locking up" resonated with other respondent observations about the prevalence of locks everywhere—on each door inside a house as well as on all the exterior doors to any private dwellings, on the thermostats, on the refrigerator, and so on—and as commented by another professional migrant long-term resident in the region:

I have three helpers [maids] and every time I go out, I lock the door to my large closet room with all my clothes and the smaller interior room with my jewelry. When I come back, I unlock the larger closet door. I bring out the laundry and ironing to be done before I leave and then ask them to put it back in after I have returned. The jewelry door I always leave locked and put the key with me. Some of the most valuable items, my ring and my watch, I always wear.

Her experiences with her household help, and also the frequent turnover she experienced with the helpers, were as much constraining as liberating.

It was extremely common to see families with almost any age children, including locals and also sometimes professional migrants, be accompanied by one or sometimes more nannies or “helpers” when out in public, in addition to sometimes also having had a driver bring everyone in the car. Incidentally, except for until very recently in Saudi Arabia, women in other GCC countries were not restricted from driving. Driving oneself in a luxury car is extremely popular for both men and women. But for the occasions involving more passengers, shopping, or complicated parking or logistics, drivers were popular as well. There was a frequently repeated observation along the lines of:

The typical [GCC citizens] family has a car for every driving-age family member plus one to two cars for the drivers for driving the help, the kids, for the household shopping, or for when 'madam' or 'sir' for some reason cannot or prefers not to drive.

The "luxurious" lifestyle of pampered attendance, vastly more help with childcare, household responsibilities and cleaning, all at much more affordable prices than in Western countries, also clearly comes at a price. As commented by a local citizen:

For the families here that care about education, we can never leave the kids with the nannies for too long. They [the kids] will not become creative if we do that. The nannies do not nurture their [the kids'] minds much.

In a different vein, a European-heritage US-citizen professional migrant expatriate noted:

Here besides the household help every day, I also have the private banking. It took me a while to get used to that. In the beginning, I always stayed 'downstairs' even when the bank greeter would look at my ID and card and direct me upstairs. Finally, I started going upstairs [to private banking]. It does make things easier.

Another Western-heritage professional migrant expatriate commented:

I have been in Saud; I have been in Kuwait, I have been in Dubai. It has been over 20 years of my life now. I have been here mostly alone, with my family still in [Western country]. I think there comes a time, after a certain number of years, where that string connecting you back to the home country has just become stretched too tight and then it breaks, leaving you realizing what you have lost by being an expat [expatriate migrant] for so long.

At the point that he returned, his marriage was over and his daughter grown.

The family connections and responsibilities in the region can work both ways. It can motivate people to remain in the region, for instance, in cases of migrants able to get a family visa to bring an elderly relative and then having much more widely available and affordable care for that relative. It can also motivate people to leave, for instance as recounted specifically by a S2S, then W2E then finally Western migrant who took several iterations to depart the GCC:

I have spent over a decade here. I started with myself, my wife, one child and I had recently completed my degree. I began in an entry-level [professional] position and worked my way up over those years. We went from one child to four. I also had become a citizen of [Western country] shortly after beginning my work abroad, as I am originally not from [Western country] but I did all my degrees in English. Since I have been a citizen of [Western country] and as my kids have become older, I have felt more and more strongly that I need to leave. I need to make sure all my kids and my wife will also be citizens of [Western country]. I need to make sure my kids are respected, not just viewed as expat kids in a country not their own, and that they have the best educational advantages and access to the best higher education. I do not want my kids growing up in a country where they are the 'foreigners.' I want them growing up in a country where they are 'citizens' and where it is okay to have come from another place. I know it will be extremely difficult for me to duplicate my level of position. But my wife and I have been saving money. We have saved up enough to buy a property in [Western country].

This individual left with his family, purchased property in the Western country location, began a job search there and, as was also recounted by other expatriates, was temporarily lured back—by himself but with his family then settled in the West—due to the job search difficulties in the West and by an even higher-paying position offered to him in the GCC. The being lured back or the returning for financial or related reasons was a recurring theme, sometimes requiring several attempts at separation from the region before the final departure. Two years later he left for good.

The challenging cycle of migrating, departing, returning, and then migrating again was broken by the opportunity to have a position, even a lower-paying one in a Western country where citizenship had already been obtained and where the migration could then be permanent. Absent the opportunities for such East-to-West permanent relocation, the lures in the GCC could continue to be very strong. As commented by another professional expatriate migrant:

Here I can shop; I can have designer everything; I can have a nanny, vacations and fun [all on what would be a middle-class salary in the EU or US]. Away from here, I could not. I know that makes it hard to leave. I know that. My husband and I both know that and are trying to figure out what to do.

There were repeated observations along the lines of "*the three permissible vices here are eating too much, shopping too much, and (for some) driving too fast*." Another frequently made observation was that "*people earn more money here, but they also spend more money here, and it is not clear who is coming out ahead*." Many expatriate migrants mentioned saving enough to buy a house in the home country—an important back-up after migration into a region where no retirement is possible—or for specific financial goals such as paying for a child's medical, dental, or other graduate school (particularly for professional migrants from the US); helping to support elderly or extended family members, without their own resources (typically more common for S2S than W2E professional migrants); or paying off one's own student loans, mortgage or personal debt (also more common for professional migrants from the US).[[4]](#endnote-4) Another respondent recounted saving diligently for himself and his wife, helping their adult children, splurging for all the family on a "$40,000 vacation before I retired," retiring, and then coming out of retirement and returning, when offered a new position in the GCC, because the kids still needed more.

Although we did not hear personal accounts of extreme financial distress—more of what could be termed "moderate" financial distress around student loans, tuitions, mortgages, and the needs of extended or more immediate family members—there were numerous stories circulating of expats not being allowed to leave because they had accumulated too much debt inside the migration destination and were literally stopped at the airport and not allowed to fly out because the banks would signal into the national travel system to put a hold on departures. Also new reporting and disclosure agreements between GCC and EU, UK, US and Canadian banks curtailed attempts to avoid debt by leaving the country. Severe sanctions existed around trying to sidestep bank accounts by carrying high levels of cash outside the country, although the earlier quote about visiting gold in Switzerland illustrates the power and desirability of tangible assets. The restrictions against financially-indebted expatriate departures were a response to the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis when professional expatriates particularly in Dubai, in the words of more than one recounter, "*walked out of their apartments with just a suitcase, drove their leased BMWs to the airport, left them in long-term parking, and took the nearest flight out*." The drawback to this solution even at the time would be the extreme difficulty to impossibility of ever returning to the region.

The situations in some of the preceding paragraph indicate what can become a pattern of serial migration, leaving, returning, leaving, and then returning again, unless that cycle becomes disrupted by actions prohibiting return—as in the precipitous departures in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis—or, as indicated by a culminating selection of quotes, the departure is truly final. As noted by long-term S2S and W2E professional level migrants in the GCC: "*Every 10 years here is like a year or more off your life [expectancy].*" As commented in autumn 2020 to a member of the research team "*Do you remember WS [age 40s]? He is another one of our colleagues with health problems and he is right now on a ventilator from COVID-19 in very serious condition*." As further summarized by another S2S professional migrant:

We have lost over 10 colleagues [out of about 30 people] in our department and on our floor in the past nine years. Heart attacks, colon cancer, pancreatic cancer, car accidents, strokes, these things happen but it seems they are happening here [ages 32-65] at a higher rate than I hear people discuss for the loss of their immediate professional colleagues in [Western countries]."

The illnesses and demises were all unanticipated and traumatic medical or accident events. No one in the above instances passed away of what could be termed old age. These accounts further illustrate the rigors of the high-status migrant lives and the ultimate departures from the region.

# Discussion

From the many varieties of migration—such as high-status or highly-skilled into Western contexts (Legrand, Al Ariss, & Bozionelos, 2019; O’Connor & Crowley-Henry, 2020; van den Broek, Harvey, & Groutsis, 2016); high-skilled and status-discrepant through gender or ethnic affiliations but also still entering into Western contexts (Al Ariss, Vassilopoulou, Özbilgin, & Game, 2013; Sang, Al-Dajani, & Özbilgin, 2013; Zhou, Xu, & Shenasi, 2016); or the less-examined lower-skilled migrants into emerging markets (Gamburd, 2008; Rath & Shaw, 2007; Ruhs & Martin, 2008)—we have focused on high human capital, S2S or W2E migrants entering into ascribed-status societies. These migrants comprise a distinctive set of characteristics \that cluster together but have not yet been examined as a pattern. We have examined how S2S and W2E high-human capital professionals experience migration into a highly stratified social and economic system with limited mobility prospects. Further, given the evidence of immobility-related experiences of pain, we explored the difficulties of leaving the migrant situation and why such migration. Having peered into the comparative experiences of citizen and non-citizen- populations within previously economically ascendant nations in a region abundantly endowed with fossil fuels, we also consider implications of the high-status, status-incongruent migrant situation in the GCC given changing local and worldwide macroeconomic and social conditions.

In exploring what it means to take up a position in another country where professional qualifications are valued and recognized but where ultimately merit matters less than ascribed characteristics, we broaden our understanding of migration from a global perspective while also enabling key insights at the individual and organization levels on the context and coping mechanisms of the migrants. In examining these questions, we draw on previous research into coping mechanisms in less privileged contexts such as “banana time” (Roy, 1960), “managed hearts” (Hochschild, 1983) and “worlds of pain” (Rubin, 1977) to look at how more highly skilled professionals encounter and manage—or do not manage—similar dilemmas and situations of inequity (Adams, 1963) and marginalization (Park, 1928), with roots in classic literature of the past century, but relevance in contemporary migratory settings. In addition, the circumstances of the migrants we study are not only difficult to manage individually in the GCC, but are also more broadly problematic with respect to the economic consequences of encounters between emerging and emerged markets (Li, 2019) and even more emphatically where distressing individual occurrences and violations of safety infelicitously dovetail with increased organizational performance (Whiteman & Cooper, 2016).

The high-status migrant coping mechanisms particularly resemble those of “banana time” (Roy, 1960). Instead of counting minutes, the migrants we have studied are counting dollars (KD, pounds, euros, rupee, yuan and other currencies converted from their salaries) and hours until the next getaway opportunity. In addition, the active emotion management (Hochschild, 1983)—suppressing one’s own needs and interests in favor of those to be served—and active recognition of levels of pain (Rubin, 1977) apply as well. Among the range of clock-watching, emotion-managing and pain-assuaging explanations lies the potential for gaining additional insights into the commodification of knowledge workers overseas, the fungibility of these workers, and ways in which their experiences can parallel the blue-collar assembly worker “blues” with the overlay of status inconsistencies (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Mundell, 1993). The socialization avenues toward assimilation (Rajani, Ng, & Groutsis, 2018) that can help to ease professional migrant transitions in Western contexts (Rajendran, Ng, Sears, & Ayub, 2019), are not available in the same way in the highly stratified, ascribed-status societies of the GCC. Our findings around sustained pain levels and the need for ongoing coping mechanisms inspire reflection on how employers can motivate individuals to perform and achieve in these status-incongruent, commodification migratory situations that some have argued are intrinsic to the experiences of labor at varying skills levels within capitalism (Braverman & Sweezy, 1974) but that are otherwise discrepant with Western or developed nation approaches toward valuing multiculturalism (Ng & Metz, 2015) and developing rather than suppressing human talent. The high-skilled status-incongruent S2S or W2E migration into the GCC illuminates larger issues in counter-normative migratory experiences in these and other emerging markets of the world.

# Implications

While much of the focus on elite migration has been into Western economies (Groutsis & Arnold, 2012), meaning migration toward the aspiration of participation in the meritocracy or as a search for meaningful employment and emancipation from social injustice in the country of origination (Groutsis, Vassilopoulou, Kyriakidou, & Özbilgin, 2019), the experiences of the migrants we study remain more about survival than transcendence and can resemble more the coping mechanisms of lower-skilled workers than of elite professionals. We touch on implications of this status- and experiential incongruency for the success of GCC citizens and businesses, as well for the prospects and need for economic diversification in the region against the backdrop of competing economic theories on the value of migration for native workers.

The plentiful elite migrant expertise as well as the widespread domestic and lower-skilled laborforce support in the GCC helped to ensure the rapid corporate internationalization and national economic success in the region from about the 1930s through the 2010s. Unencumbered by the more mundane household and lifestyle maintenance tasks, with businesses enhanced by elite migrant management and professional input, and personal wealth bolstered by lavish government stipends, Gulf region citizens—citizenship, as previously mentioned, being an exclusively patriarchal and highly coveted status—obtained elite English language instruction, international travel, and global educational experiences. The biculturalism of the Gulf business leaders—promoted by governmental and family financial resources, alongside a high emphasis on technological innovation and internationalization undergirded by the variations in indentured servitude—enabled Gulf region firms to enter global markets as effective competitors. An asymmetric multiculturalism—Arabian Gulf business leaders are typically much more conversant with US norms than vice versa—and a highly stratified citizenship-vs-non-citizenship structure have contributed to providing firms with risk reduction and a global competitive advantage. The sustainability of the high-status migrant experiences has implications for the durability of the GCC citizenry advantages in an economic landscape of purported declining dependency on fossil fuels/ extractive energy resources and increasing awareness of global corporate social responsibility and human and worker rights.

As declining oil prices have heightened risks and diminished profits in the primary national oil industry, economic diversification has increased in importance, massive sovereign wealth fund reserves notwithstanding. Economic diversification has already begun to occur in the form of non-oil, publicly-traded firms or family/ investor-owned businesses specializing in industries ranging from logistics, food and beverages, fashion, alternative energy to tourism and high technology. Entrepreneurship has also become part of the momentum toward economic diversification, with increasing levels of interest particularly in technology-driven product and process innovation. The high level of penetration of consumer and corporate technologies into the daily lives of Arabian Gulf inhabitants forms an intriguing and perhaps *un*sustainable juxtaposition of modern technological prowess alongside almost feudal or caste system limitations on the mobility and permanency opportunities for high-status migrants. In essence, the Gulf economies may to thrive if the prospects for migrants are continually stifled. This line of thinking brings us into consideration of extant and competing economic theories on how migrants at various skill levels benefit the destination (receiving) countries.

In examining linkages between organizations and migration, flows of various forms of capital—human, financial, social, or knowledge- or technology-based—become salient (e.g. Portes, 1995). Related to human capital, previous research in the US has addressed, for instance, how the entry of low-skilled migrants in a specific situation of burgeoning inflows of immigration had little to no discernible impact on the wages of native workers (e.g. Card, 1990). Two competing perspectives, from the notion of the relatively negligible impact of migration on native worker wages (e.g. Card, 2010) to the idea of more substantial deprivation of and wage decline experienced by native workers (e.g. Borjas, 2014) have been pursued and to varying degrees substantiated. The debate on the impact of migration on the employment opportunities of native US workers and the broader policy implications at a national level continues (Borjas, 1994, 1999; Peri & Sparber, 2009). Compensating wage differentials (Baker, Jensen, & Murphy, 1988; Frum, 2016; McKenzie, Theoharides, & Yang, 2014) cannot completely explain the persistence of the high-human capital, West-to-East, entering-into-non-meritocratic-systems migrants, particularly when the total hours needed to manage all aspects of the new position and relocation are not entirely known. Pay transparency exists (Bamberger & Belogolovsky, 2017) and supplements can sometimes be obtained, but the transparency and supplements entrench rather than alleviate distress, disparities and inequities.

Migrant workers have helped at every level of employment, from construction and domestic labor to scientists, university professors, and senior management executives. The advent of the digital era and the global digital economy—dating approximately from the widespread use of the Internet in the 1990s—has corresponded to the aforementioned increased flows of human, financial and technological capital (Saxenian, 2012). Technological infrastructure and software-based knowledge systems support migrant documentation, employment and monitoring; entrepreneurial funding and expansion; and formally and informally opportunities for workers doing smaller-scale businesses advertised and facilitated through social media and acquiring knowledge-intensive skills toward employment prospects (Kerr, 2018). For instance, in the GCC as the total migrant levels have risen, the proportion of migrants going into “businesses” (visa type 18) rather than “household” domestic labor (visa type 20), has also increased concomitant with the expansion of service businesses and the need for more knowledge-based workers in the digital era (Reinl, 2018). This analysis therefore also has implications for the strategic and technological context of migration (e.g. Foley & Kerr, 2013) centering on emerging markets. In the post-industrial digital revolution, technology has opened new opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation for both migrants and citizens and for cooperation in start-up launches and expansion (Choudhury, 2015). Our research has implications for insights into additional technology, innovation and entrepreneurship-driven opportunities for migrants, and that these opportunities can serve as an additional outlet of coping mechanism given the highly stratified nature of the social structure within the region. The question then arises as to whether technology, innovation and increased migration in conjunction have strengthened or weakened traditional separations and differences within a caste-like system.

Our research setting and analysis also involve family business and dynastic wealth. For instance, in third-generation family businesses transitioning from private to shareholder ownership toward the goal of increasing the firm’s international presence, the need for high-status professional migrant managers has sharply risen, as the family businesses have grown. The Arabian Gulf has historically one of the highest global concentrations of dynastic citizen wealth. The traditionally closed family business structures have been increasingly intermixing non-citizen professional management expertise to the documented benefit of the firms. In sum, the experiences of the high-status, status-incongruent migrants into the GCC are worth examining for reasons of (a) rather than being part of a universal set of circumstances, West-to-East migrants face distinctive conditions and experiences; (b) the unique adversities experienced by these migrants stem from status inconsistency between their higher meritocratic hierarchical placement compared to their lower ascribed hierarchical placement in their new settings; and (c) their modes of coping with these circumstances are dissimilar from those adopted by Western-bound migrants, who can often anticipate more permanence and eventual upward status mobility and more similar to those of the lower-skilled managed hearts, banana time, and worlds of pain.

Note: Tables, figures and appendixes note not included due to space constraints; endnotes are on the final page.

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# Notes

1. The government of the most sizable country in the GCC has perhaps the strictest controls, that is, the non-constitutional monarchy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Although we did have several instances in our sample of Western-migrant women marrying GCC-citizen men—almost never the opposite direction as it is for many reasons, beyond the scope of this article, prohibited—we had only one acknowledged instance of a Western-citizen woman being a simultaneous wife, as according to the husband, she had been abused and abandoned by her previous husband and needed a protector for herself and her small child. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Retirement in the region is usually not an option. An alternative scenario is if a program or business shuts down, then a contract could be immediately end with immediate relocation out of the country then required. If a migrant or visitor comes from one of the about 20 well-developed countries of the world, it is possible to have up to a two-to three-month tourist visa, but afterward a business visa or residency status would be required. For W2E migrants, the temporary tourist visa can sometimes help in situations of transition between employment opportunities in the region. For S2S migrants, most of the countries of origin are ones where entrance into the Gulf countries can only occur with an active work permit. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. There were several accounts of professional migrants into the GCC later having the opportunity to become citizens of a Western country and then returning to the home region to "find a wife." One respondent commented of his brother in this situation, "He has his education, job, house, citizenship all in [Western country] but he is coming back to at least temporarily [home] because he told me he needs to come back to find a wife." [↑](#endnote-ref-4)