# COUNTERPRODUCTIVE FORCES AT WORK: CHALLENGES FACED BY SKILLED MIGRANT JOB-SEEKERS

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent research indicates that people from ethnic minority groups are particularly vulnerable to workplace bullying, suggesting important, negative implications for individuals, groups and broader societies. In order to examine this phenomenon further, information about the circumstances of skilled migrants in Australia is presented. Theoretical frameworks are used to examine potential difficulties from the perspectives of migrants and their workplaces. Results of a pilot study based on a work preparation program for unemployed skilled migrants are presented, followed by conclusions about the vulnerability of skilled migrants and recommendations for future research.

**Keywords**: skilled migrants, job-seekers, workplace bullying, counterproductive behaviours

This paper aims to explore recent research findings that suggest that people from ethnic minority groups are vulnerable to counterproductive workplace behaviours (CWBs), specifically bullying (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Lewis & Gunn, 2007). The implications of such findings are far-reaching because individuals and organisations can be negatively affected, as can the broader social and economic aspirations of the country. In order to further illuminate these issues, this analysis focuses on the skilled immigrant group within the Australian context, using research data and theoretical frameworks to highlight difficulties that may ultimately lead to negative workplace experiences. Results of a pilot study are presented, along with recommendations for future research.

## MIGRANT EMPLOYMENT

The Australian economy has a great dependence on skilled migrants and, by implication, a high need to develop and maintain a productive, diverse workforce. Australia is known as one of the three classic immigration countries (along with Canada and the USA; van Tubergen & Maas, 2004) whose skill shortages in a broad range of sectors are linked with requirements for greater numbers of well-educated and skilled workers (Mirchandani, 2004). These skill requirements largely drive immigration policy and simultaneously lead to discouragement of other categories (e.g. through more rigourous English language test requirements for family stream applicants). Moreover, the actual pool of skilled immigrants available is dependent upon the immigration policies of other "competing" countries such as Canada and the assessments made by those with "marketable skills" about "Australia's relative attractiveness as a destination" (Cobb-Clark & Connelly, 1997, p. 671).

Almost one quarter of Australia's resident population (4.8 million people or 24%) were born overseas (ABS, 2005). While there is an overall trend of increasing immigration levels, there is also a change in the composition of immigrant groups. Prior to 1971, the UK, Ireland and

parts of Europe, such as Italy and Greece predominated (Miller & Neo, 2003). The 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in immigrants from oriental nations, such as Vietnam, Hong Kong, China and Japan. Recently, African and Middle Eastern countries have been increasingly represented. Federal immigration policy is generally concerned with firstly, the appropriate level of immigration and secondly, the criteria by which potential immigrants are selected (Cobb-Clark, 2000). Currently, there are four major categories applied to potential new permanent residents (Barker & Rugimbana, 2005). These include the skilled immigrant category (the largest at approximately 43% of the total); the family stream (approximately 27%); the humanitarian program (approximately 11%) and the non-program immigrants (mostly New Zealand citizens; approximately 18%) (Year Book Australia 2007).

For economic and social reasons, finding employment is usually a fundamentally important part of the acculturation process (Valtonen, 2001), and can also essentially represent success or otherwise in the new country (Thomas & Rappak, 1998). However, employment comes in many guises. For instance, immigrants receive lower wages overall than long-term residents (Thomas & Rappak, 1998) and their jobs may not meet the objective and subjective criteria of "good jobs". In objective terms, Junankar and Mahuteau (2005) define a good job as one that appropriately reflects the immigrant's educational qualifications and their previous occupational rank. Subjectively, a good job is defined in terms of satisfaction and a lack of desire to change jobs. Interestingly, since 1997, immigrants to Australia have been more likely to find work, but less likely to secure "good jobs" (Junankar & Mahuteau, 2005). Similarly, immigrants to Canada appear to find jobs as quickly as locals. However, these jobs offer less stability, meaning that immigrants have a higher risk of unemployment and, Thomas and Rappak (1998) argue, a lower capacity to recover from unemployment. While they found that skilled immigrants achieve adjustment in terms of stable employment more quickly than their less skilled counterparts over the longer term (Thomas and Rappak, 1998), they note that overall there is a "relatively larger pool of long term unemployed among the migrant population", especially for males (Thomas & Rappak, 1998, p. 41).

Moreover, Junankar, Paul and Yasmeen (2004) have conducted longitudinal comparisons of Australian unemployment rates for Asian ("people of colour" from countries including India, China, Korea, Vietnam and the Middle East) with non-Asian immigrants. The latter group comprised Europeans from non-English speaking backgrounds (including Poland, Russian Federation and Ukraine) and English Speaking backgrounds (including UK, Ireland, and North and South America). The unemployment rates among Asian born immigrants proved to be higher at three points in time (47% compared with 29% six months after arrival; 28% compared with 15.3% eighteen months after arrival; and 18.3% compared with 10.4% thirty months after arrival). They investigated these differences further by explicitly controlling for human capital skills, English language ability and demographic variables and found that unemployment rates were still significantly greater for male and female Asian immigrants in the first year, remaining significantly higher for Asian males in the following years (Junankar et al., 2004). Junankar et al (2004, p. 19) suggest that these apparent difficulties are due to discrimination (e.g. on the basis of appearance or an unwillingness by employers to adequately recognise qualifications within this group) and Thomas and Rappak (1998) argue that disadvantages for migrants can be associated with decreased access to labour market information, suitable connections and social support networks, and can be at least partly explained in terms of "visible minority status" (Thomas and Rappak, 1998, p. 41).

## ETHNIC MINORITY STATUS AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOURS (CWBs)

In addition to accessing appropriate employment, recent research also indicates that employed people from ethnic minority groups may be particular targets of CWBs; "volitional acts that harm or intend to harm organisations and their stakeholders" (e.g. aggression, sabotage, absence, purposely doing work incorrectly) (Spector and Fox, 2005, p. 151). CWBs include a range of behaviours also covered by terms such as bullying, mobbing, incivility and aggression. Neuman and Baron (2005, p. 23) note that "mobbing, bullying, psychological terror, and emotional abuse are, to a large extent (if not completely), persistent acts of aggression most often directed against weaker targets who are unable to defend themselves readily". Notably, CWBs are not always easy to identify and can be subtle and covert. For example, Fox and Stallworth, (2005, p. 438) state that bullying "can range form the most subtle, even unconscious incivilities to the most blatant, intentional emotional abuse". Salin (2003) in her study of a military organisation found that female officers could be subtly undermined so that their power would be reduced.

While a large range of minor uncivil or counterproductive behaviours occur at work, a number of authors have discussed the potential for these behaviours to escalate (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999) into direct bullying attacks or to group mobbing behaviours undertaken with intent to deliberately force those targeted out of their employment (see for example, Davenport, Distler-Schwartz, & Pursell-Elliott, 1999; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). In the absence of a legislative framework that might clarify the definitions and circumstances surrounding workplace abuse, the term 'bullying' is used to encompass a broad range of intimidatory and abusive tactics from the covert, discrete, indirect forms of abuse, described by some researchers as 'mobbing' at one end of the spectrum, and direct, overt, and physically aggressive forms of bullying the other (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005, p. 243). Correspondingly, a bullying scenario typically discusses the power imbalance between perpetrators and targets in terms of formally recognised hierarchical authority, whereas mobbing is more usually related to perpetrator access to informal yet influential networks (Hockley, 2002).

Stereotypically, bullying refers to those situations where more senior managers target more junior members of staff using direct and confrontational behaviours including yelling and physical aggression (Jordan & Sheehan, 2000; Rayner, 2002). In contrast, 'mobbing' refers to collective behaviours of 'ganging up' against co-workers at any level, including managers as well as subordinates, using covert behaviours with malicious intent to cause harm (Davenport et al., 1999; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996). The outcome of mobbing is most often the target's 'expulsion' from the workplace, causing psychological and physical injuries as well as financial distress (Einarsen et al., 2003). Some targets have committed suicide and the symptoms of those targeted are often similar to those of post traumatic stress disorder (see for example, Groeblinghoff & Becker, 1996; Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005).

Research continues to indicate that there are a range of seriously problematic behaviours occurring within workplaces. Lewis and Gunn (2007) found that 20% of respondents (n=247 public sector employees in South Wales) reported that they had been bullied at work. Notably, 35% of ethnic respondents indicated that they had been bullied, compared with 9% of white respondents. Likewise, using an adapted version of the NAQ (Negative Acts Questionnaire), they found that "almost the complete range of negative behaviours are

frequently being experienced more often by ethnic respondents compared to white respondents" (Lewis and Gunn, 2007, p. 654). These negative behaviours emanated from both line managers and colleagues of equal grade. For example, 20.9% of ethnic respondents, compared with 1.5% of white respondents, had been ignored or excluded by their line manager whilst at work (on a monthly or more frequent basis). Likewise, 30.9% of ethnic respondents, compared with 8.0% of white respondents, had been ignored or excluded by colleagues of equal grade (on a monthly or more frequent basis). Similarly, Fox and Stallworth's (2004) email survey of 262 full-time employees in the US found that over 15% of participants reported having experienced "quite often" or "extremely often" several of the bullying items. Notably, all three of the represented racial/ethnic minority groups reported higher levels of racial/ethnic bullying than the white respondents.

Fox and Stallworth (2005) also reported on emotional and behavioural responses to bullying, which revealed stress reactions, serious thoughts of quitting and work avoidance. In addition, when compared to non-targets of general and racial/ethnic bullying, targets indicated lower confidence in internal organisational conflict management systems, particularly in relation to dealing with bullying from supervisors (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Moreover, perceived discrimination based on ethnicity and foreign accent can act as an important stressor with negative outcomes for job satisfaction and commitment that can impact on individual well-being as well as on the organisation (Wated & Sanchez, 2006). Furthermore, Wagner and Childs (2006, p.60) analysed the narratives of skilled immigrants and deduced that immigrants may feel excluded because of the localised nature of Australian speech, which may contain "powerful dialogues of exclusion" (e.g. immigrants are fortunate to be living in "the lucky country", and should therefore be grateful regardless of the reality of their circumstances). Thus, although Australia's immigration program largely rests on a good working knowledge of English and the possession of required job skills that are transferable to the local work environment, immigrants are very likely to have culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, which are dissimilar to mainstream Australian Anglo-Celtic culture, and can contribute to inclusion and adjustment problems. Thus, there are a range of cross-cultural adjustment issues to consider.

While immigration policies continue to be influenced by ongoing skills shortages, it appears that significant numbers of migrants can experience difficulties in firstly obtaining suitable employment and secondly in participating in an appropriate work environment. Nonetheless, as commonly highlighted in the literature, there is great value in achieving productive diversity (Cope & Kalantzis, 1997) which involves maximising the benefits of the diverse backgrounds of staff, including their socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Despite these ideals, there are a number of relevant theoretical frameworks that can give insight into both cross-cultural adjustment and employment related difficulties for migrants.

**Cross-cultural adjustment**
Cross-culturally, the experience of migration has been examined from several different perspectives. One perspective draws on the classic work of Lazarus (1989) through its focus on the psychosocial functioning of the individual in terms of their emotions, cognitions, behaviours and interpersonal relationships. Although centrally important, the psychosocial perspective is essentially a micro-perspective and as such does not tend to provide in-depth understanding of the reciprocal impacts of the broader social context, including the formal work organisation (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). A "person-in-environment" or ecological perspective has greater potential to generate a more complete understanding of the

immigrant's experiences through its focus on how "individuals affect and are affected by their external environments" (Segal & Mayadas, 2005, p. 574). Such a perspective may be captured in cross-cultural adjustment models that consider psycho-social functioning within particular environments, along with the processes and outcomes that occur over the longer term (e.g. Anderson, 1990).

Thus, the migration experience as a whole will likely be associated with a wide range of emotions, cognitions and behaviours related to their experiences of and interactions with their environment and may ultimately become linked with development of cultural competence (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Although there may be many positive experiences and outcomes, immigrants will very likely experience "acculturative stress" during their transition to the new country (Hovey & Magana, 2000). These stressors can result in feelings of loss, frustration and anxiety, and lead to a reduction in personal coping resources. According to Hovey and Magana (2000), common stressors include a disconnection from family and friends, lack of emotional connection with the new country, language difficulties, discrimination by host country nationals, as well as unemployment and/or low income. Thus, migrants appear to be vulnerable to various social stressors that may undermine their potential ability to secure and succeed in appropriate employment.

In addition, workplaces themselves are complex, and have been described as "contested spaces" (Billett, Smith & Barker, 2008). This is where issues of personal and formal power can interact and essentially alienate some people within the workplace. In particular, these processes can work negatively towards ethnic minority groups for several reasons.

## POTENTIAL DISCRIMINATION
In terms of cross-cultural experiences, Heames et al. (2006, p. 350) discuss status inconsistency theory as an explanation for the occurrence of racially based negative behaviours, with status inconsistency "defined as occurring in a given environment when an individual is different (inconsistent) from others in the group on one or more status dimensions (i.e. age, race, religion, educational level)". In their research on the effectiveness of workforce diversity programs, Stephenson and Lewin (1996) conclude that there appears to be a 'human preference for the familiar' reflected in expressions such as 'like seeking like' and 'birds of a feather flock together' (p. 168). Furthermore, based on their analysis, they comment that workplace diversity programs can be obstructed because of an underlying 'fear' of the 'difference of others', which can be an intrinsic part of organisational culture (Stephenson & Lewin, 1996, p. 168). This contention is further discussed by Young (2002) in terms of the 'suppression of difference' through indirect and systemic methods. In support of her argument, she confronts the 'myth of merit' and 'impartiality' as incongruous with practices demonstrating 'fear and loathing' of the 'other' as displayed in group dynamics of 'racism', 'sexism' and 'ageism' (p. 42). This negativity, she argues, occurs to the extent that communities with 'a shared identity' tend to 'expel' those who are different (p. 42). Fear and negative affect towards the other is further explained in the context of moral exclusion where targets are demonised to the extent that they are considered to be deserving of unfair, unjust and harmful treatment (see for example, Davenport et al., 1999; Gerson, Woodside, & Opotow, 2005).

It is suggested that a suppression of difference and a requirement for conformity, coupled with the underlying fear of difference, contribute to a workplace culture where bullying behaviours may be expected. At a practical level, the following advice provided by career

advisors to immigrants seeking employment, is cited by Ferguson (1984) to support her discussion about organisational conformity. One source advises that 'any display of individualism, whether in dress, mannerism, thought, or speech, is discouraged' (p. 185). Another advised women that 'that they, like blacks and Hispanics, must work doubly hard at fitting into the system in order to overcome the initial disadvantage of 'gender and/or colour' (p. 185). The adviser reasoned that it is best to 'keep individualism to a minimum' and not to stray from 'the norm'.

> *'Remember that the more you differ from the norm, for example, if you're a black male in a predominantly white male group, the more you'll have to show that you accept the group values. It's not just winning acceptance that's important but also showing that you're not opposed to group values – that you can live with the things the group believes'* (Ferguson, 1984,  p. 185).

Similarly, it is argued that the requirement to conform extends to the expression of emotion, where people are required to 'rationalize' the most 'personal feelings, moods, attitudes, and stances' and to 'contain' these within the restrictions imposed by the organisational culture that arguably leads to a sense of 'feeling false' and 'mechanical' and 'no longer a whole integrated self' (Ferguson, 1984, p. 54).

The proposition that minority group status is a contributing factor to an individual's susceptibility to bullying is recognised in the establishment of human rights and anti-discrimination legislation in many countries including Australia (see for example, Oppenheimer, 2004; Ronalds, 1979; Ruff, 2005). A fundamental basis of the legislation is acknowledgement that those who are different to the dominant work group, on the basis of personal characteristics including race, gender, age, and impairment or because of their political or religious beliefs, are more likely to experience harassment and discrimination. Although efforts have been made through the introduction of workforce diversity and anti-discrimination programs, research still indicates that it is the legislatively identified groups of people who are likely to be targeted with negative behaviours (see for example, Archer, 1999; Bernstein & Arndt, 2001; Murdoch & Taylor, 2002).

While a legislative link has been established through human rights legislation identifying race and religion as reasons for unlawful workplace harassment, there has been little empirical research identifying the incidence of more covert and subtle forms of racist and religious intolerance  Consistent with this argument, some researchers have noted that more subtle forms of racism have overtaken the traditionally more overt expressions (Fox & Stallworth, 2005) because of changes in social norms, organisational strategies and expectations. More subtle forms of racism include social isolation, ongoing harassment in the form of ridicule, spreading rumours, withholding information, sabotage, making unfair accusations, and discouraging access to worker's rights including those concerning occupational, health, and safety, all of which would of course be associated with significant stress (Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999). An important consideration is that negative behaviours including bullying are more likely to thrive in situations of poor leadership and organisational cultures that accept and support such behaviours (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland & Hetland, 2007). In addition, there are a range of discriminatory behaviours that may not fit into definitions of CWB but result in certain people having difficulty accessing the workplace at all (e.g. not being offered a job interview because of conscious or subconscious bias or prejudicial thoughts).

**Employment issues for immigrants**
These frameworks provide an insight into the challenges potentially faced by immigrants in seeking and maintaining employment in a work culture that expects conformity and where difference may be resisted with discriminatory and CWBs. Therefore, for immigrants there are several, potentially interrelated, concerns around employment status, including vulnerability to unemployment, reduced access to stable, "good" jobs, and the possibility of being targets of negative behaviours. A concern is that the latter could spiral into serious bullying and mobbing experiences that contribute to ongoing adjustment problems including a lack of employment stability. Thus, while skilled immigrants are more employable, there are serious issues that could impede their employment experiences and could essentially deprive Australia of the skills it has endeavoured to encourage through its skilled immigrant program. Therefore, at least for some immigrants, assistance is required in the development of cultural competence (Segal & Mayadas, 2005), which essentially augments the work skills that the immigrant has already been deemed to possess. Thus it is important to examine further the experiences of skilled immigrants, particularly in terms of the critical person-environment interactions that contribute to their successful adjustment or otherwise. Of particular concern are any major discouragers (such as being a target of negative behaviour) that occur in the job search and employment experiences that could potentially further undermine confidence and contribute to relatively poor adjustment and employment outcomes.

At a practical level these issues have been acknowledged with Government funded programs designed to assist the transition. Importantly, however, Wagner and Childs (2006) express concern that Australia's traditionally wide range of immigrant services designed to "ease transitions into the labour market" are being reduced because the "new type of skilled immigrant is expected to adjust without special assistance" (p. 52). Research is therefore required into the experiences and needs of skilled migrants, particularly those who may be finding difficulty in achieving appropriate employment outcomes.

**Literature review conclusions**
The literature review highlights Australia's reliance on skilled migrants and their profile within employment ranks. There is an indication that skilled migrants may have problems obtaining jobs that adequately reflect their levels of education and experience, and appropriate remuneration. The literature suggests that skilled migrants are likely to experience cross-cultural adjustment issues that can contribute to vulnerability in accessing appropriate employment and achieving a permanent position within the Australian workforce. Issues of power and leadership, along with discriminatory attitudes, may contribute to the aforementioned reported higher levels of bullying towards migrants than locals. Thus, further research in this area is warranted.

**RESEARCH PROGRAM**
In response to the foregoing discussion, we conducted a pilot interview study with participants involved in a program for skilled, unemployed migrants who had registered for a government funded employment program specifically geared to increase their employability. Bridgeworks Personnel, a community based, not-for-profit organisation situated in Spring Hill, Brisbane, was responsible for the employment program. The organisation offers extensive services for skilled migrants including recruitment, job placement and training programs designed to cater for different levels of need. The present paper reports on this pilot interview study, that had a focus on evaluation of the Bridgeworks program, and give details of the proposed in-depth study.

**Pilot study**
This interview study was carried out with 23 participants (years in Australia ranged from .75 to 9 years, average of 2.5 years) who attended the week long program at Bridgeworks (see appendix 1). The interviews were semi-structured and indepth, with an interview guide ensuring that interviews covered similar ground. However, there was enough flexibility to follow particular responses in greater depth if appropriate (Flick, 2002). In-depth interviewing allows access to understanding the experiences of others within a supportive environment. There is a focus on participants, which communicates value by the researcher (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995) and if more likely to capture the "the nuances of experience", which could ultimately contribute to greater understanding of workplace behaviours.

With their permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data was initially content coded on the basis of relevant concepts by a researcher external to the interview process. The coding scheme was considered by the researchers involved and excerpts coded and counted, with an appropriate level of inter-rater matching achieved. The data was then investigated for themes that related to participants' experiences in Australia and within the Bridgeworks program. Several themes emerged, as shown with example quotes:

(a) **Australian culture and communication style**
Participants indicated that they needed to specifically learn how to communicate in Australian culture, suggesting that they needed insight into their own behaviour and their new environment. For example: "In China I was more shy but I learned that you need to be more open with people so you can meet more people"; "I also learnt how to approach colleagues and supervisors – how to communicate with them."; "I learned how to communicate and also I understand how and why things are done differently here.";

(b) **Job-seeking skills**
Participants noted the importance of gaining job search skills. For example: "I also learnt new interview skills, I didn't know how to act before this – I also got new ideas on how to network."; "It really helped me – the ways to find work from different sources.";

(c) **Social skills and confidence**
A need to understand the subtleties of interactions was expressed. For example: "Learning that Australians like a bit of frills before you cut to the chase. In Singapore being direct and to the point is appreciated because everyone is in a rush…"; "….can refuse something without too many problems now."; "It was a life-changing experience."; "It really helped with my confidence."; "I've found myself more adaptable as I better understand the dynamics that underpin social interaction, whether at the workplace or in a social environment";

(d) **Practice**
The value of the program was outlined, along with a desire for more practice. For example: "[I need] more practice…point out what I should do…"; "The practice was helpful."; "Easier for me to say hello to new people than it was before"); "[would like to have] more role plays [in the program]";

(e) **Adjustment issues**
The relevance of adjustment issues was raised, with issues of discrimination raised. For example:

"This is different from home – I don't understand how it works."; "Some people don't understand me and I find it hard to express my feelings in an appropriate way. I think I am often misunderstood."; "I still have trouble seeking help, it can be very difficult – I'm not brave enough to ask questions if I don't understand what the lecturer is saying. I'm not comfortable enough to stand out and not know the right thing to do."; "…I just need to learn how it is done here."; "[need more information on] how to deal with discrimination – how to behave in this type of situation."; "[program suitable for me] for whom understanding the Australian cultural context was what was needed to make a breakthrough in getting a job."; "Australia is not very receptive to multiculturalism at times."

These pilot study results indicated that the program had covered useful ground for these unemployed, skilled immigrants that could potentially contribute to their employability and subsequent work outcomes. Overall, the themes indicate that skilled migrants are very open to learning more about the complexities of the Australian culture and how they may better approach and participate in employment opportunities. Participants indicated a number of important facets of their experiences in Australia that could impact on their workplace adjustment or otherwise, and their vulnerability, including their communication style and response to discrimination.

In addition, there are indications, as particularly shown in the "adjustment issues" theme, that there is more research needed to investigate the intricacies of these experiences. Indeed, it appears that more opportunities in relation to increasing employability may be warranted. Together the literature review and the outcomes of the preliminary research indicated that the topic area would benefit from further research.

## FUTURE RESEARCH
It is recommended that a further research program be designed to answer the following research questions; 1) What are the experiences and perceptions of migrants as they seek employment?, 2) How do workplace supervisors experience their role of supervising skilled migrants who have experienced employment problems?, and 3) What are the experiences of (these same) skilled migrants participating in work placements? In-depth interviewing methods would be recommended as appropriate. More research is needed to understand the experiences of skilled migrants within the workplace and how this may links with circumstances outlined earlier, such as skilled migrants achieving less than desirable employment outcomes, as noted in the literature review.

## CONCLUSION
In conclusion, the paper has outlined Australian immigration policy, relevant employment data for ethnic minority groups, and adjustment and discrimination issues that may impact significantly in the job search and employment process for a number of skilled immigrants. Aspects of discrimination and CWBs have been discussed in relation to current literature. An example of a program for unemployed, skilled immigrants is briefly described, along with results of a pilot study that was based on in-depth interviews with participants. Future research is briefly discussed.

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