

Precarious employment amidst global crises: career shocks, resources and migrants' employability

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Abstract

Purpose – The authors conducted 22 in-depth longitudinal interviews with 11 Hungarian migrant workers in the Dutch logistics sector, before and during the COVID-19 crisis, using thematic analysis and visual life diagrams to interpret them.

Design/methodology/approach – This study aims to contribute to conservation of resources theory, by exploring how global crises influence the perceived employability of migrant workers in low-wage, precarious work.

Findings – The authors find that resources are key in how migrants experience the valence of global crises in their careers and perceive their employability. When unforeseen consequences of the COVID-19 crisis coincided with migrants' resource gain spirals, this instigated a positively valenced career shock, leading to positive perceptions of employability. Coincidence with loss spirals led to negative perceptions.

Research limitations/implications – The authors contribute to careers literature by showing that resources do not only help migrants cope with the impact of career shocks but also directly influence the valence of global crises in their perceived employability and careers.

Originality/value – Interestingly, when the COVID-19 crisis did not co-occur with migrants' resource gain and loss spirals, migrants experienced resource stress (psychological strain induced by the threat or actual loss of resources) and no significant change in their perceptions of employability.

Keywords Migrant workers, Resources, Global crisis, COVID-19, Perceived employability, Career shocks

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants often face precarious employment in Western Europe (Hassan *et al.*, 2023). Precarious employment is “unstable and insecure in the continuity and quantity of work, restricts the power of workers to advocate for change, and does not provide protections from workplace abuses and unsafe working conditions” (Allan *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). Since CEE migrants [1] generally move to Western Europe to find employment, exploring their employability is crucial for understanding how their aspirations manifest after entering the host country labor market (Croucher *et al.*, 2018).

Employability refers to the ability to find and retain employment over time (Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014). Perceived employability refers to “the individual’s perception of his or her possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment” (Vanhercke *et al.*, 2014, p. 593). Research showed that personal characteristics such as career identity (who individuals perceive to be in relation to their careers), adaptability (readiness to pursue career opportunities), human capital (education) and social capital (professional network membership) foster perceived employability (De Vos *et al.*, 2011). Personal characteristics however cannot fully explain CEE migrants’ perceived employability as their (perceived) opportunities to find (less precarious) employment are shaped by context and time. For instance, the quality of labor regulation and social protection in host countries determine the prevalence of flexible working arrangements (Wagner and Hassel, 2016). In less regulated contexts, CEE migrant workers are often restricted to flexible, low-wage, temporary employment (Been and de Beer, 2022).

The time period CEE migrant workers spend in the host country may have significant impact as well. Individuals who spent more time in the host country are more likely to have developed a broader professional network and gained specific work experience, which enhances their prospects of securing higher-quality employment (Manolchev and Ivan, 2022). CEE migrants’ perceived employability is also likely to be affected by global events outside their direct control, such as global crises (Siegmann *et al.*, 2022).

This paper explores the perceived employability of CEE migrant workers during global crises—defined as “events or developments widely perceived by members of relevant communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structure” (Boin *et al.*, 2008, p. 83–84). In the 2020s, we experience an escalation in the number and intensity of global crises, such as human-induced ecological crises (fires, droughts), crises tied to increased global connectivity (social, political, financial and economic crises), as well as crises brought on by infectious diseases.

The global crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus had an adverse impact on the careers of workers in precarious employment (Kantamneni, 2020). Many workers in sectors most affected by the COVID-19 crisis had already been in a precarious employment prior to the pandemic. During the COVID-19 crisis, CEE migrants experienced deteriorating quality of working conditions (Siegmann *et al.*, 2022). For example, social distancing regulations were not adhered to in transportation, housing or at the workplace (Siegmann *et al.*, 2022); access to COVID-19 testing, vaccination and healthcare was problematic (Siegmann *et al.*, 2022); mobility bans and quarantine measures restricted migrant workers’ mobility to and from their home countries (Martin and Bergmann, 2021). Such worsening working conditions may have materialized as multiple interrelated career shocks, which may have affected migrant workers’ perceptions of finding and sustaining employment (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018).

Career shocks may result in a negatively-valenced thought process but can also induce positive cognitive responses, for instance when a crisis makes an individual decide to take a valued change in their career that they did not dare to take before (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018). The (positive or negative) cognitive appraisal of opportunities in one’s career can set in

motion (positive or negative) thought processes that help or hinder individuals to take action in pursuing a valued career path.

Global crises do not affect individual careers uniformly (Kantamneni, 2020). Those with abundant personal resources are better able to successfully navigate their careers following career shocks than individuals with limited access to resources (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Akkermans *et al.*, 2020). However, our understanding of perceived employability for individuals in contexts characterized by resource scarcity is still limited (cf. Vanhercke *et al.*, 2015). Access to resources may likely affect perceived employability, particularly amid global crises. Yet, research on the interplay of career shocks as a consequence of global crises and perceived employability is scant (Ren *et al.*, 2023).

To address this gap, we explore how global crises influence the perceived employability of migrant workers in low-wage, precarious employment. Our research question is: *How do resources in times of crises affect the thought processes and actions of migrant workers considering their careers and perceived employability?* More particularly, we examine the experiences of CEE migrant workers in low-wage essential industries such as logistics and food production during the COVID-19 crises.

The importance of resources in navigating the impact of career shocks

Individuals experience diverse ranges of career shocks throughout their working lives. We understand career shocks as “disruptive and extraordinary events that are, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual’s control and that trigger a deliberate thought process concerning one’s career” (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018, p. 4).

Career shocks often have clearly defined sources: while a divorce is intertwined with an individual’s personal setting, a promotion links to the organizational context (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018). However, global crises trigger shifts in multiple spheres of life, resulting in simultaneous shocks to one’s career from multiple sources. To illustrate, during the COVID-19 crisis, social distancing practices hindered migrant workers in interacting with colleagues at the workplace, a potential career shock embedded in the organizational context (Siegmann *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the crisis posed limitations to migrants’ mobility, restricting options to return to their country of origin. When becoming ill, migrant workers needed to quarantine, resulting in loss of income and social isolation (Siegmann *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, host country populations perceived migrant workers as a potential health hazard, fostering an adverse social climate (Paul, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis altered the context in such way that individuals simultaneously needed to mitigate the impact of multiple types of career shocks (Akkermans *et al.*, 2020).

The direction of the impact of a career shock on careers is referred to as its valence, which can be positive or negative (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018). The valence of career shocks is inherently subjective: while some may experience loss of employment as a negatively valenced career shock by many, others experience this as a positively valenced event (Wordsworth and Nilakant, 2021). While previous research posits that the valence of career shocks is inherent to the event itself (e.g. Akkermans *et al.*, 2018), we argue that individual characteristics, context and particularly *resources* play an important role in whether migrant workers experience a career shock as positively or negatively valenced (cf. Wordsworth and Nilakant, 2021).

Resources, “those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies” (COR theory, Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516), can help individuals overcoming the impact of career shocks (Wordsworth and Nilakant, 2021). Conservation of resources (COR) theory traditionally classified individual resources according to their intended or actual use (e.g. energy resources enable the acquisition of

further resources, [Hobfoll, 1989](#)). Recently, research in the migration context suggests to move beyond Hobfoll's categorization to allow identifying how conceptually distinct groups of resources contribute to migrant workers' resource accumulation and mobilization ([Hall et al., 2022](#); [Shirmohammadi et al., 2023](#)). We follow the resource framework of [Ryan et al. \(2008\)](#), who distinguish between personal (health, resilience), material (money, car) and social resources (stable family life, supervisory support).

Migrants are particularly prone to resource loss postmigration. First, they leave their country-of-origin social network behind (social resources, [Ryan et al., 2008](#)). Second, they need to secure employment and housing upon arrival to the host country (material resources, e.g. [Cook et al., 2012](#)) and third—in precarious employment—they often meet physical and mental health hazards (personal resources, [Virgă and Iliescu, 2017](#)). Individuals with limited access to resources, likely experience a gradual loss of further resources, forming a loss spiral ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)). Previous research in the UK shows that seasonal migrant workers with low education and limited language skills often experience homelessness upon job loss ([Fitzpatrick et al., 2012](#)). In contrast, individuals with ample resources are prone to cumulative gain resources, referred to as a gain spiral ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)). For instance, migrants work experience in the host country can help them obtain further skills (language), fostering their ability to find and sustain better employment ([Parutis, 2014](#)). Resource loss and gain spirals may influence the direction in which career shocks affect individual's careers.

We propose that dynamic patterns of CEE migrant workers' resource gain and resource loss spirals following global crises shape the valence of career shocks, in turn affect the perceived employability of migrants. To understand the valence of career shocks evolving from global crises, we need to understand migrant workers' resource mobilization patterns both within and beyond the work environment over time. In the following section, we further explain our longitudinal research design.

Methods

Study context

We did a longitudinal qualitative study with an phenomenological approach, conducting in-depth interviews with migrant workers before and during the COVID-19 crisis. This design allowed us to examine how individuals' careers and perceived employability change over time. We focused on CEE migrant workers in the Dutch logistics sector, since there is limited knowledge on how migrants navigate their careers in the precarious logistics sector ([Barnes and Ali, 2022](#); [Zanoni and Miszczyński, 2023](#)). Furthermore, the logistics sector accounts for 44% of migrant workers employed through temporary work agencies in the Netherlands ([ABU & NBBU, 2020](#)). Migrant workers face precarious working conditions in this sector, including low wages, long working hours and a general climate of insecurity regarding their employment and their housing ([Kerti and Kroon, 2020](#)).

We focus on particular CEE migrants from Hungary. Despite the large national diversity of the CEE migrant workers in Western Europe, most studies on the careers of CEE migrants in precarious employment focus on the more dominant (in numbers and resources in the host country) Polish workforce (e.g. [Parutis, 2014](#)). By researching Hungarian migrant workers, we aim to gain insight into the career outcomes of a minority CEE migrant group, which due to its size could potentially have less structural access to personal and social resources in the host country ([Kerti and Kroon, 2020](#)).

Sample and procedure

We conducted 22 interviews with 11 Hungarian migrant workers in the spring of 2019 (T1, before the COVID-19 crisis) and the summer and fall of 2020 (T2, during the COVID-19 crisis).

As part of our phenomenological approach, we combined life-history interviews with in-depth inquiry about career shocks, perceived employability and resource mobilization (Seidman, 2006). Our interview questions built on theoretical conceptualizations of perceived employability (Croucher *et al.*, 2018), career shocks (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018) and resources (Hobfoll, 2001). While the interviews encompass career shocks throughout migrants' entire life history, our analysis specifically focused on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants' career in this study.

We gained access to the hard-to-reach population of Hungarian migrant workers through an open call via a social media platform. In phenomenological research, the sample size is determined during data collection (Wertz, 2005). We interviewed all migrants that reacted in Spring 2019 till saturation was reached, which we established through continuous, iterative comparisons between the coding and the data. During the COVID-19 crisis, in 2020, we invited all participants for a second interview. This resulted in the final longitudinal sample of 22 interviews with 11 respondents. To ensure the anonymity of participants, we assigned pseudonyms to their accounts.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and were conducted by the first author in Hungarian. The first author was able to build rapport with the respondents due to their shared national identity, cultural background, language and experience in precarious work. While all first-round interviews were conducted in person, we had to turn to online interviewing for some of the interviews of the second round due to COVID-19 restrictions and participants' geographical distance.

Analysis

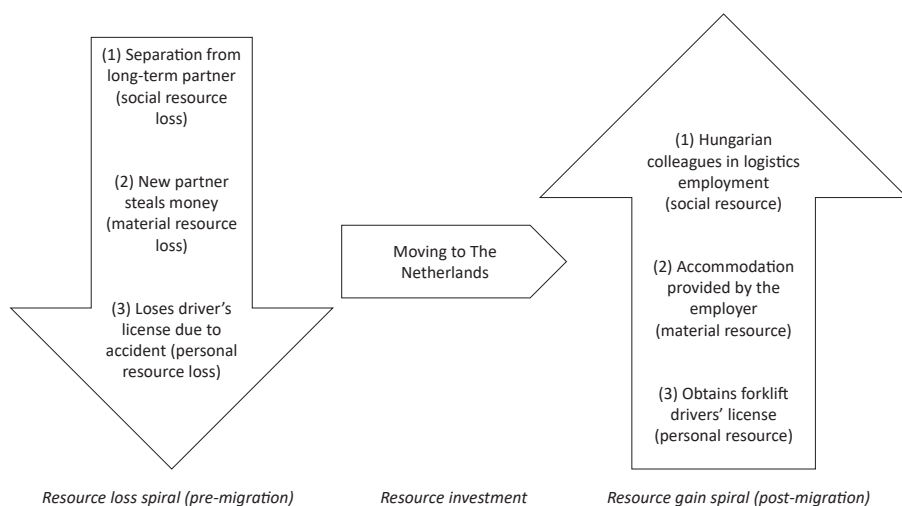
The richness of the data makes analyzing longitudinal qualitative samples a challenge. We combined thematic analysis with visual interpretations of life diagrams (constructed by the authors postdata collection) to make sense of our data (Söderström, 2020). We used three guiding concepts for the thematic analysis: COVID-19 as a career shock, resources and perceived employability. Successively, we coded the interviews for the valence of career shocks (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018), types of resources (personal, material, social; Ryan *et al.*, 2008), resource mobilization patterns (resource loss, resource gain, resource investment, resource stress; Hobfoll, 2001) and migrants' perceptions of employability before and during COVID-19 (Croucher *et al.*, 2018). Two independent coders analyzed the interviews and reached agreements on conflicting interpretations to ensure interrater reliability. This counterbalanced potential bias derived from the insider researcher status of the first author. To identify resource loss and resource gain spirals over time, we constructed life diagrams. We interpreted migrants' perceived employability, by making constant comparisons between the life diagrams, how COVID-19 manifested as a career shock, migrants' resource loss and gain spirals and perceived employability outcomes. Figure 1 and Table 1 provide excerpt of a life diagram and thematic analysis table.

In the following section, we first outline the resources which are central to migrants' ability to successfully navigate their careers postmigration, and how these form resource loss and gain spirals. Second, we examine how the interplay between COVID-19 as a career shock and resource loss and gain spirals affect perceived employability.

Findings

Migrants' resource mobilization patterns

We found that migrant workers actively mobilized their personal, material and social resources to navigate their careers in the postmigration context. Personal resources of our respondents were for instance maintaining good mental and physical health, a sense of



Source(s): Authors work

Figure 1.
Excerpt from life
diagram visualizing
resource loss and
resource gain spirals
(Participant 4, Bence)

agency (i.e. perceived control over career decisions), and career adaptability (i.e. being able to keep up with the changing work environment). In addition to these more general personal resources, host-country-specific language skills (i.e. Dutch or English), time for personal and professional development and context-specific education were important for migrants to build careers in Dutch logistics. Regarding material resources, financial stability (money, stable employment), access to accommodation (housing independent of employers or temporary work agencies) and modes of transportation (car, bicycle) support migrants in navigating their career. Lastly, social network ties and social support (colleagues, family, friends, fellow migrants in the host country) were essential for migrants careers in Dutch logistics.

Based on a visual analysis of migrants' life diagrams, we found that the loss and gain of these resources can trigger resource loss and gain spirals. Lili, a logistics administration employee with a direct employment contract, shared that context-specific education and learning the host country language support her ability build a career in the Dutch logistics, resulting in a resource gain spiral:

[Before the pandemic], I studied logistics which let me choose, look for a better job here, and the other one that is important is the language; it was very important that I learnt Dutch and I improved my English, and that is why I am where I am now. (Lili, T2).

Emma, an order picker in a large warehouse sorting health and beauty products, followed her partner to the Netherlands, who secured employment within his profession upon their move. She went through a resource loss spiral because of the decision to migrate. Due to a lack of language skills, limited social network ties, and overqualification for low-wage employment (she received tertiary education, she was unemployed for one year:

I experienced it as difficult, because I did not even really want to come and learning languages was never really my strength (. . .) Also, we had a quite big social life back home which like disappeared all of the sudden. We realized that there is practically no one here. (. . .) I thought a lot about this, if I should deny everything in my CV and show up there with an empty CV and then, with that they might hire me to be a cleaner. (. . .) That one year at home, that was very stressful. (Emma, T1)

Participant	Age	Gender	Education	Resource mobilization post-migration	COVID-19 crisis	Perceived employability outcome
Participant 1: <i>Levente</i>	50s	Male	Bachelor tertiary education	Resource gain spiral (relocation, social network ties, stable accommodation, secure employment)	Positively valenced career shock	Positive employability
Participant 2: <i>Lili</i>	20s	Female	Secondary vocational education	Threat of resource loss (health decline due to emotionally demanding job) and resource gain (new 'perfect' job)	Source of resource stress	Resource stress
Participant 3: <i>Emma</i>	20s	Female	Master tertiary education	Resource loss spiral (loosing employment, period of unemployment)	Negatively valenced career shock	Negative employability
Participant 4: <i>Bence</i>	40s	Male	Primary education	Resource loss (loosing valued colleague) and threat of resource loss (connecting with family members)	Source of resource stress	Resource stress
Participant 5: <i>Greta</i>	20s	Female	Secondary vocational education	Resource loss spiral (separation from partner, loosing accommodation and employment)	Negatively valenced career shock	Negative employability
Participant 6: <i>Fanni</i>	40s	Female	Master tertiary education	Resource gain cycle (relocation, regained social network, finding job in field of profession)	Positively valenced career shock	Positive employability
Participant 7: <i>Dorka</i>	30s	Female	Secondary education	Resource gain cycle (relocation, finding perceivably higher quality employment)	Positively valenced career shock	Positive employability
Participant 8: <i>Dominik</i>	20s	Male	Secondary vocational education	Resource gain cycle (giving up employment, moving home, working together with family members)	Positively valenced career shock	Positive employability
Participant 9: <i>Botond</i>	20s	Male	Primary education	Resource loss cycle (deteriorating health due to low quality of work, loosing employment, promised new employment does not materialize)	Negatively valenced career shock	Negative employability
Participant 10: <i>Rebeka</i>	40s	Female	Secondary education	Threat of resource loss (deteriorating health due to low quality of work)	Source of resource stress	Resource stress
Participant 11: <i>Aron</i>	30s	Male	Secondary vocational education	Resource gain cycle (finding better quality employment, relocating to better accommodation)	Positively valenced career shock	Positive employability
Source(s): Authors work						

Table 1.
Migrant workers' demographic characteristics, resource mobilization patterns post-migration, valence of COVID-19 crises and perceived employability outcomes

We found that resource loss and resource gain spirals influence career outcomes in particular when they occur simultaneously with a career shock. We elaborate on these findings below.

COVID-19 as a career shock: perceptions of employability

Based on the analysis, the influence of the COVID-19 crisis on migrant workers' careers depends on dynamic patterns of resource loss and resource gain spirals. We found that COVID-19 influenced migrants' careers in three ways. First, when coinciding with migrants' resource gain spiral, the COVID-19 crisis manifested as a positively valenced career shock (Participants 1, 6, 7, 8, 11). When the COVID-19 crisis was seen as a positively valenced career shock, it triggered positive emotions, leading to positive evaluations of employability (e.g. *[The COVID-19 crisis] was good for me, very refreshing* – Participant 8). Second, when simultaneous to a resource loss spiral, migrants experienced the COVID-19 crisis as a negatively valenced career shock (Participants 3, 5, 9). When experienced as a negatively valenced career shock, the COVID-19 crisis invoked negative emotions, resulting in negative perceptions of employability (e.g. *Now I'm absolutely looking at the whole thing from the perspective that (. . .) if a new wave came, or anything else happened that caused a similar crash, like a virus, then which companies are the ones who can stay on their feet, and which ones would fire me in a second.* – Participant 3). Third, when the COVID-19 crisis was not concurrent to clear resource mobilization patterns, migrants experienced it as a source of resource stress rather than a career shock. Following COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we refer to migrants' resource stress as the psychological strain resulting from being at risk of losing resources or experiencing an actual loss of resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Participants 2, 4, 10; e.g. *The other day I was very angry (. . .) I got sick. (. . .) They [told me that] sadly they cannot give me the day off. (. . .) I did the work, coughing, I was coughing really hard, and I felt cold, and I was shivering from it. (. . .) I really need to find a new job. So somewhere where it's not four degrees.* – Rebeka, T2). This excerpt shows how stress due to the perceived risk of losing a crucial resource, health, ensures the continuity of a migrants' employment.

In the following sections, we illustrate our findings through recounting the career experiences of Levente (Covid-19 as positively valenced career shock), Greta (Covid-19 as negatively valenced career shock) and Bence (Covid-19 as source of resource stress).

COVID-19 crisis as a positively valenced career shock. The account of Levente, who worked via a temporary work agency as order picker in a warehouse distribution center at the time of the first interview, shows how the COVID-19 crisis manifested as a positively valenced career shock. After a period of low-quality employment in the Dutch logistics, Levente succeeded in accumulating enough financial resources to move to New Zealand, where he possessed substantial social network ties. There, he managed to secure stable accommodation, followed by a job in the construction sector facilitated through his social network ties. The COVID-19 crisis coincided with this resource gain spiral, resulting in an eight-week lockdown, when all employees received a weekly minimum wage for not being able to work. Levente experienced this as a positively valenced career shock:

This was a sort of two-months-long vacation (. . .) Honestly, from my point of view, this crisis only had benefits. (Levente, T2).

During lockdown, Levente had time to engage in online courses with the aim of reentering his original profession of software developer engineer. When comparing Levente's evaluations of his employability across the two time points, we can see that his confidence in finding employment in line with his qualifications improved substantially:

So, in the long run, I thought I'd find a job in the IT industry, but I don't know how that would work out (. . .) And I'm over 50 years old, and I'm starting to slide down from this profession or to slip out. (Levente, T1)

I'm now aiming for the top. (...) I bought these (...) online courses to (...) bring my level back up, so when I am home, I am constantly studying, and I want to go back to be a developer engineer. Basically. Not simply to be programmer, but to be a developer, (...) to be a developer engineer, an application developer engineer. (Levente, T2).

Levente's perceptions of employability show that when the COVID-19 crisis coincided with a resource gain spiral in migrants' careers, a positively valenced career shock is experienced, which fuels positive perceptions of employability.

COVID-19 crisis as a negatively valenced career shock. The experiences of Greta, a booking employee at a warehouse specialized in medical appliances at the time of the first interview, illustrate how the COVID-19 crisis materialized as a negatively valenced career shock. Greta moved to The Netherlands with her partner, quickly found employment with her partners' employer, secured a direct employment contract and bought a house. After the first interview, Greta separated from her partner, sold their house and lost her employment. The interaction between this resource loss spiral and the COVID-19 crisis hindered Greta in finding new employment, so she experienced the crisis as a negatively-valenced career shock:

I became unemployed and then it was even harder to find a new job because of the virus (...) I was calling, really, every day 10–15 vacancies, well, we can't because of the Corona-virus, this and that, I always ran into this (...) virus. (Greta, T2).

Although Greta eventually found new employment in a warehouse distribution center, her perceptions of employability changed considerably across the two interviews. During the first interview, Greta aspired for long-term employment and eventually a promotion at the organization she was working for, but during the second interview she perceived her employment as a "means to an end":

I only want to move forward within my current workplace. (...) Now I have been here for a year and a half and I am still there that I can move ahead by three-four positions. For which you have to work. And of course, every time you get into a new position then it is not boring (Greta, T1).

Well, actually, as long as they have work that needs to be done, I can work there. And if they decide that they don't need me anymore (...) Then I'll go to the UWV [employee insurance agency, to request unemployment benefits]. (Greta, T2).

The analysis indicate that occurrence of the COVID-19 crisis with migrants' resource loss spirals makes them experience negatively valenced career shocks, leading to negative perceptions of employability.

COVID-19 crisis as a source of resource stress. The experiences of Bence show how the COVID-19 crisis was perceived as a source of resource stress. At the time of the first interview, Bence worked via a temporary work agency as orderpicker at a warehouse specialized in sorting glass bottles. Having limited Dutch and English language skills, Bence relied on Hungarian colleagues to translate between him and his supervisors. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, the temporary work agency relocated Bence to a new location, without any other Hungarian workers:

I was recruited to work here because of the virus. And then in the end I was supposed to be back in Rotterdam for a long time now, where the other Hungarian guy is. But they do not want to release me from here. (Bence, T2)

The resource stress of losing the only colleague Bence could communicate with in his native language (resource loss) was coupled with the introduction of COVID-19 measures. The two-week quarantine time, which was required of him upon his return, hindered Bence in visiting his family in Hungary (threat of resource loss). This aggravated the resource stress he experienced:

I was super upset, to tell you the truth, because I wanted to go back to Hungary at the end of April (. . .) Then I said I will stay, I won't be quarantining for 15 days. (Bence, T2)

The analysis indicates that the COVID-19 crisis caused resource stress of migrants when not coupled with resource gain and loss spirals. Resource stress emerged from the loss of resources (losing a colleague) and the risk of losing resources (connecting with family members), although a previous resource gain experienced after migration prevented a resource loss spiral. Our analysis did not indicate a direct link between resource stress and perceived employability: there were no clear patterns in changes in perceived employability between the two time periods for this group of workers. In the following section, we further interpret these findings.

Discussion

Global crises disproportionately affect the careers of workers in precarious employment, such as migrants (Cao and Hamori, 2022). This paper aimed at contributing to COR theory, by exploring how global crises influence the perceived employability of migrant workers in low-wage, precarious employment. Based on the analysis of 22 longitudinal interviews with Hungarian migrant workers, we find that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on migrant workers' careers is resource-dependent, materializing either as a positively valenced or negatively valenced career shock or as a source of resource stress. When the COVID-19 crisis coincided with migrant workers' resource gain spirals, migrants perceived the crisis as a positively valenced career shock, which resulted in positive perceptions of employability, as well as concrete actions to improve one's employability and mental well-being. Coincidence with loss spirals led to negative perceptions. When the COVID-19 crisis was not subsequent to clear resource mobilization patterns, it fueled resource stress due to either the risk of losing or the actual loss of resources. We found no linear link between resource stress and perceived employability outcomes.

Our findings offer a critical perspective on migrant workers' resource accumulation and loss due to career shocks. Prior to the analysis, we expected that migrant workers' patterns of resource accumulation would be underpinned by principles of conservation of resources, including the primacy of loss (individuals are more affected by resource loss than gain) and gain paradox principle (when individuals are deprived of resources, the value of gains becomes more amplified; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Our analysis did not support any of these principles. This can be explained by the basic nature of the resources in migrants' resource gain and loss cycles in our study. When resources constitute basic human needs, such as access to accommodation, financial stability or health, their loss and gain are equally salient in the resource accumulation process.

The influence of the COVID-19 crisis on migrant workers' careers resonates the Matthew effect, implying that in the wake of career shocks "the rich get richer and the poor poorer" (Fugate *et al.*, 2021). Those experiencing a depletion of resources because of resource loss spirals need to focus on securing new resources to sustain themselves before considering how a career shock potentially affects their future career. Migrants' reflections on career shocks and how these affect their perceptions of finding new employment is contingent on having the necessary resources. This implies, that career shocks, rather than actively influencing migrants' career thinking, are just another form of adversity to tackle in precarious contexts.

We contribute to career literature in three ways. First, we explicitly address how a specific configuration of contextual and individual characteristics, circumstances, and resources influence career outcomes by focusing on COVID-19 crisis as a career shock on Hungarian migrant workers' perceived employability. Second, we empirically show that the COVID-19 crisis did not manifest as a negatively valenced career shock for all migrant workers but was

perceived as a positive event when coinciding with resource gain spirals (cf. [Spurk and Straub, 2020](#)). Third, adding to previous literature that claims that resources support dealing with the impact of career shocks, we find that resources play an even more crucial role, and determine whether migrant workers consider a career shock as a positive or negative event ([Akkermans et al., 2020](#)). Our findings hold implications for practitioners. Facilitating migrants' access to resources is a shared responsibility of policy makers, temporary work agencies, client organizations and migrants themselves. The resources identified in this study as conducive to migrants' ability to navigate their careers can serve as a framework for policy reform (improved social safety net, regulation of interdependent employment contracts, developmental opportunities and house rental agreements), human resource management practices (language courses, inclusion at work) and individuals' career self-management (improving social networks, safeguarding physical and mental health).

This study also has limitations, which present avenues for future research. We adopted a broad definition of personal, material, and social resources, but did not consider how external factors influence migrant workers' perceived employability. Further exploring migrants' perceptions about labor market conditions (labor shortages) and about the cultural environment (cultural similarity) can contextualize the role of resources and career shocks in migrants' perceived employability.

Despite the strengths of our longitudinal qualitative research design, we detected recall bias of our respondents between time periods, where they reported different emotions regarding the same event. This suggests that migrant workers' access to resources directs recall bias: they evaluated events more positively when followed by resource gain spirals and more negatively when followed by resource loss spirals. Their further resource mobilization patterns altered their recollection over time (cf. [Cassar, 2007](#)). Conducting a diary study following the onset of global crises would probably eliminate recall bias and allow for a more in-depth exploration of the psychological processes through which career shocks impact migrant workers' perceived employability.

While our study offers insight into the experiences of migrant workers in a specific context, it does not consider the inter-group dynamics between minority and majority migrant worker groups, and how these affect individuals' access to resources. We call for comparative longitudinal qualitative research to explore differential access to resources between different migrant worker groups in essential industries.

Last, we regarded the group of Hungarian migrant workers as internally homogenous, not considering their intersecting identities. We strongly believe that the careers literature would benefit from studies focusing on how gender, age, social class, ethnicity, educational and migration background influence individuals' access to resources, ability to deal with the impact of career shocks and eventually career outcomes.

Ultimately, expanding research on global crises as career shocks calls for context sensitivity, especially for resources beyond the control of individuals. In an adverse context, such as low-wage sectors characterized by precarious employment, resources are crucial for migrant workers' ability to deal with the impact of global crises. It is the shared responsibility of policy makers, temporary work agencies, client organizations and migrants themselves to actively work together on facilitating access to resources and creating a conducive environment in which migrants can thrive.

Note

1. Following the official communication of the Dutch national government, we use the term "migrant workers" to refer to workers from CEE countries, later specifically from Hungary, who chose to find employment in a member state of the European Union other than their country of origin, later specifically in the Netherlands. We opted for this term, as it emphasizes the role of employment and job opportunities in the migration trajectory, encompasses various types of mobility within the

European Union, does not necessarily implicate a permanent change of residence and includes temporary or seasonal workers, but also those who seek long-term residence in the host country (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2023).

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