

*Conference Paper*

# **Career transition experience of two trainee-cooks: exploring structure and agency in Singapore**

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## Introduction

Labour is an important means of production to power economic growth and wealth creation. In order to strive in the highly competitive globalised economy, governments employ skills strategy in an attempt to achieve the most desired outcomes (Wolf, 2002). In the same vein, the Singapore government coordinates the skills supply through its education and training systems for resident workforce and augments the supply with foreign labour (Low, 2000). The government works with businesses and education-training providers to ensure a steady supply of qualified local workers filling the job vacancies before the vacancies are opened to foreign labour. In Singapore, the Food and Beverage industry, in particular the culinary trade is constantly facing acute labour shortages due to massive business expansions over the last decade. Culinary employment is thus deemed as one with good long-term career prospects; it supposedly allows workers to acquire deep skills sets and move up the ranks. With the aim to shift human resources into the culinary career, the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA) provides course fee subsidies and monthly stipends to attract and train mid-career adults for the culinary trade. Against this backdrop, this study examines micro-level behaviours of individuals navigating their career and learning amidst career change, which is not well known in the literature.

The literature in fact shows that career transition studies are multifaceted (e.g. Walsh & Osipow, 1996). Our study focuses on the career transitions of two mid-career adults who were from the Diploma in Culinary Craft offered by the local Culinary Academy. The two participants undertook the 15-month full time study and the requirement to work as cooks in the sector upon graduation. In order to elucidate the career transition process, we decided to approach the study from a macro-micro and structure-agency perspective. By doing so, we aim to produce a more in-depth understanding of the contextual features of labour in Singapore, the local culinary trade and the role individual choices/actions. Due to space constraints, this paper does not report the study in detail but to address one key research question – *What were the dialectical interplays between macro-micro and objective-subjective conditions that took place during the participants' status passages?*

We start this paper with a brief overview of our analytical model, which is built upon Structuration Theory, through a macro-micro-objective-subjective analytical frame followed by a short presentation of our research method. The findings of the two mid-career adults' experiences would be interpreted before we discuss the practical implications concerning the facilitation of mid-career transitions.

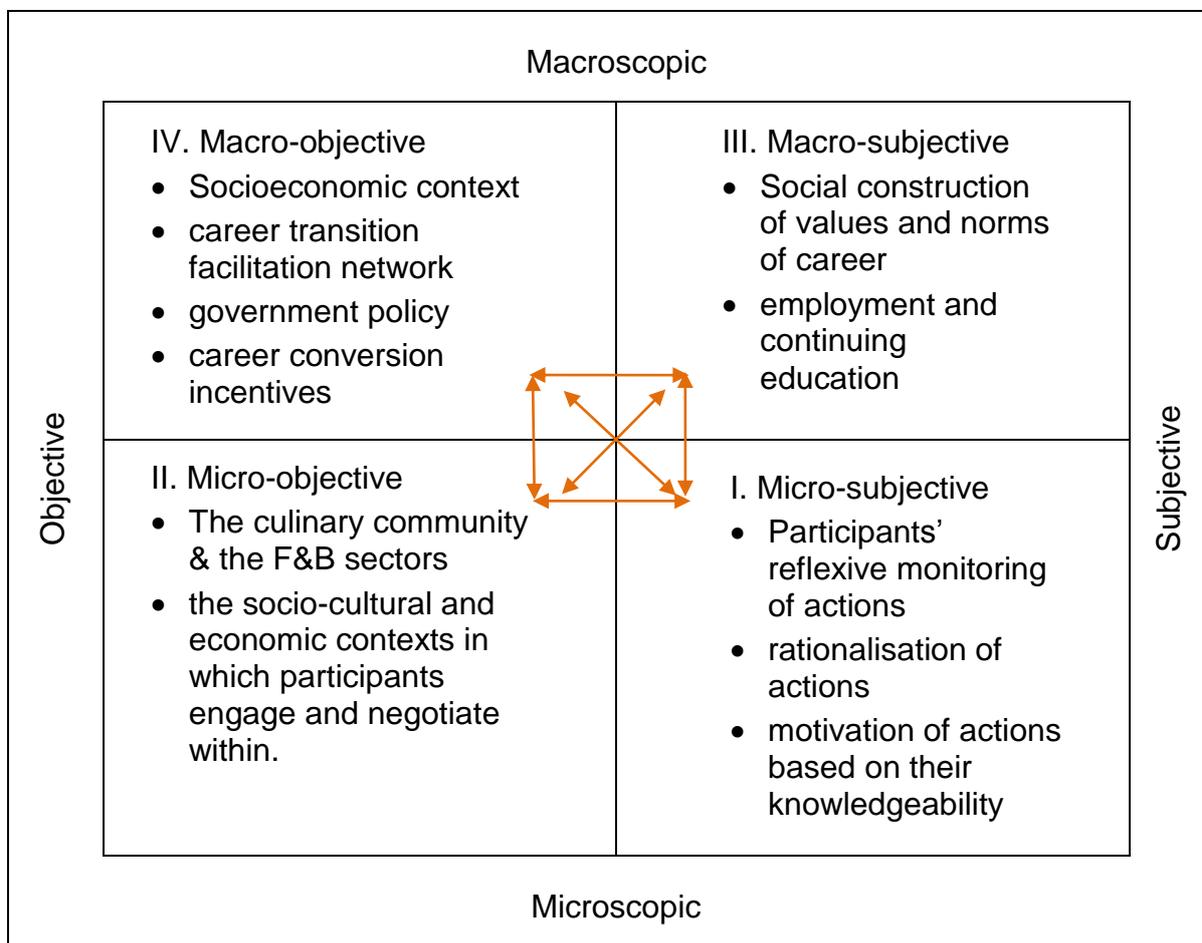
## The Analytical Model

Structure-agency (Giddens, 1984) is a suitable model to understand the career transition experience of the two mid-career switchers (Barley, 1989). Barley posits that Structuration theory is the sensitising device to showcase the reciprocal relationship of an individual's career choice and structure. It points to the study of social practices at the intersection of individual actions and social structures. As the biographies of people are shaped by the prevailing structures and cultural conditions, people are knowledgeable (i.e. knowledgability) about their environment and interactions across time-space (i.e. contextuality). They acquire this knowledge through the constant interaction in life with the structures in different social contexts (in time-space). Reflexive monitoring skills are inherent in people because of the need to cope with the environment as they attempt to make sense of the social world (natural world included) and create their self-identity (i.e. ontological security). With their best knowledge (i.e. bounded rationality) people attempt to make the best decision in social interactions just as their ability to act (i.e. agency) is achieved by access to and application of rules and resources (i.e. structural properties). However, their knowledge, decisions, and actions are influenced by perceived enablement and constraints in the environment. Whatever the case, it is through people's recursive social activities (i.e. making and remaking) that the social structure and cultural conditions are sustained. This also includes people's ability in making change to the social structure, albeit in an intended or unintended manner. The central argument of Structuration Theory is duality – the reciprocal relationship of action and structure. Duality signifies that social structures are represented in the choices people make during social practice, while at the same time shaping and reshaping social structures (Giddens, 1984).

In order to sharpen the use of Structuration theory for the purpose of studying career transitions, we adapt Ritzer's (2008, p. 377) multi-level social analytic schema to represent Structuration theory. Ritzer's model was shaped by the work of Abraham Edel (1959) and George Gurvitch (1964). Originally, it was developed as a basis for analysing the various sociological theories that was later applied in *Expressing America: A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society* (1995). Here, he demonstrated the relationship between micro-level personal troubles with macro-level public issues created by credit cards. Similar to the kinds of sociological analysis espoused by Giddens, Ritzer emphasised the importance for social researchers to deal with the interrelationship among levels and avoid breaking up the wholeness of analysis, as depicted by the six two-sided arrows situating in the middle of the schema (Ritzer, 2008, p. A16). The synthesis of Ritzer's schema and Giddens' structuration theory presents a possible clear path for analysing career transition phenomenon at the fine-grained level.

This schematic presentation of Structuration theory enhances the original schema presented in Giddens' original work (1984, p.29, Figure 2). In it, Giddens attempted to explain the three forms of institution, the various dimension of social interactions and the modality that facilitates the duality of structure and actions. In the 2x2 model, the relationship of individual agency and structure is situated on the two continua macro-micro (ordinate or "y-axis") and objective-subjective (abscissa or "x-axis"). The temporal separation of agent-and-structures allows us to conduct the fine-grained analysis while not losing grip on the interrelatedness of the two. This we argue overcomes the critics of duality who have accused Giddens of rejecting analytic dualism (e.g. Willmott, 1999). Giddens' notion of duality is now presented using the six two-sided arrows, which provide the dynamism in exploring the complexity of how the quadrants interact with each other. This schema is now contextualised for the study of career transitions, which we will explain below (Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1: Analysis of career transition experience**



The Micro-subjective level (Figure 1.1 quadrant I) is concerned with the participants' mental process by which they construct their social reality. Here, the focus of analysis is on their constant evaluation of their interactions with rules/resources (what's available?), their rationalisation of actions (how should I act?), and their motivation of actions (what's best for me?) during career transition. For example, the two participants in the study were constantly scanning the employment and work opportunities and making judgment on their next step of actions. The Micro-objective level (quadrant II) involves small-scale patterns of action and interaction carried out by the mid-career adults during their culinary learning. Here, the focus of analysis is on the participants' interactions at the vocational institution, and at the internship kitchens, etc. The Macro-subjective level (quadrant III) encompasses large-scale cultural structures such as societal norms and values. In this case, the analysis will review the norms and values surrounding employment, learning and cultural-historical norm of culinary practice in Singapore as exemplified through the behaviour of the two participants. The Macro-objective level (quadrant IV) involves large-scale material realities such as the socioeconomic structure and workforce development policies. The analysis here involves the tracking of economic strategies and related national workforce development policies and the educational systems that coincide with the participants' career transitions. The six two-sided-arrows crisscrossing the quadrants signify duality, and are critical to the analysis of the socioeconomic structures and cultural conditions as reflected in the choices, which the two mid-career switchers made during their career transition journey. In reality, social world is not divided into levels, hence, we use the "temporal separation and freeze-pane" approach to handle the investigation of the interdependency of their agency and the structures in a more comprehensive manner. Freeze-pane refers to the analysis of a significant episode during each of their career transition experiences.

## Research Method

We adopted a qualitative interview-based approach for examining the career transition experiences of mid-career switchers. This is ideal in understanding the meaning of experiences in the participants' own words (Polkinghorne, 2005). It is most relevant when investigating contemporary phenomenon when there is no room for manipulating either the phenomenon or context, and when issues are complex (Yin, 2003). In this study, we aim to be relevantly reflexive by adopting a critical perspective to uncover the hidden assumptions about how life-narratives of the participants are constructed (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). We conducted five interviews with each participant over their 15-month full-time study period, which include twelve-months of apprenticeship at commercial kitchens; and one final interview each three months into their new career. We adopted loosely structured interviews to gain access to their interpretations of experiences and social setting (Mason, 2002). The interviews focused on how they individually made sense of their experiences – Denzin (1989, p.22) calls this "reflection on the world as it is known". Documentary analysis was carried out on WDA's workforce development policies and chef conversion programme.

During the recruitment of participants, only two single-males volunteered to participate in the study. Hence, this study provides a limited and contextual perspective on career transition. Further study involving diverse and larger group of participants, and expansion across different professional groups would certainly provide greater insight into interplay between structure and agency during career transition.

## Findings and Discussion

In this section, we provide a brief contextual detail about the participants before discussing their career transition experiences.

### **Wee Meng and Anand**

Wee Meng and Anand (both pseudonyms) were two common-folks who were born and raised in Singapore. Both completed their basic education in Singapore, did their mandatory military service, and then began their employment explorations in multiple fields and sectors before trying out the culinary trade in the F&B sector. During their journey of continuous digression of exploration, they constantly upgraded themselves through part-time studies. Wee Meng bagged a diploma, an advanced diploma and a degree within a period of 15 years while he was working. Anand took up Infocomm certification courses and attempted bio-medical study. Their endeavours in education and employment mirror the societal belief in self-efficacy which is translated into “continuous skills upgrading and in search of better job”. They were constantly monitoring the sign-posts put up by the structures, evaluating opportunities and options, making the “best” decision within their bounded knowledge while in a job. Their most recent exploration of culinary career led them to quit culinary employment for entrepreneurial career option. Their interactions within the culinary community resulted in their dis-identification with the culinary employment. We will discuss each of their experiences using the analytical framework.

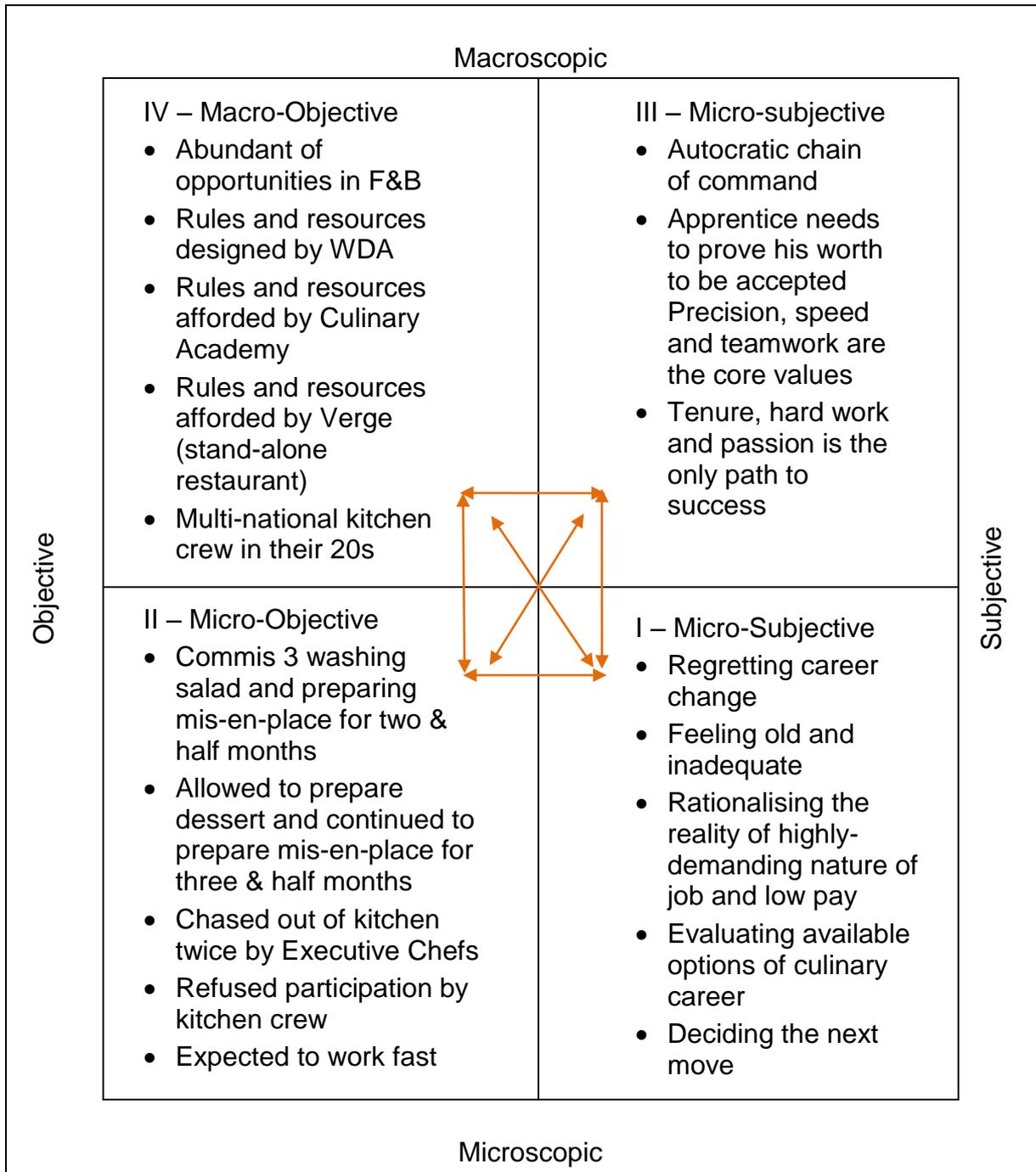
### **Actions and Interactions during Status Passages**

Their career transitions were situated within the culturally-rich culinary practice in Singapore. We will elaborate on each of their experiences using the conceptual framework.

### **Wee Meng apprenticing at Verge**

Here we will discuss Wee Meng’s experience at Verge (fine-dining French restaurant), which was his final apprenticeship kitchen. It was at Verge where Wee Meng’s learning was richest and his emotions underwent many rounds of downhill rides, where the cumulated learning eventually contributed to his decision against culinary employment (See Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2 Wee Meng's situation at Verge**



At the late age of 38, Wee Meng quit his job as Technology Consultant to be trained full time as chef. For the next 15 months, he received a stipend of US\$810 (S\$1000) to be among young apprentices learning the culinary trade. Through his classmates and seniors at the Culinary Academy, Wee Meng had learned the working conditions of the various restaurants and kitchens in Singapore. It was through such dialogues that Wee Meng learned about the various affordances at the respective kitchens and the master-chefs who helmed the place. This information formed his knowledgeability which in turn shaped his decision on the final leg of learning in the diploma programme. Wee Meng's decision to join Verge came because he felt that his experiences at his first apprenticeship kitchen was "too relax" as compared to his peers who were "roughing out...being treated like a full time staff...actually cooking", he felt that he was losing out in terms of learning opportunities. Hence he requested for Verge even though he had heard that it would be a tough place and that he might not have the chance to cook at all. Wee Meng rationalised that he could potentially maximise his learning in a renowned French restaurant kitchen.

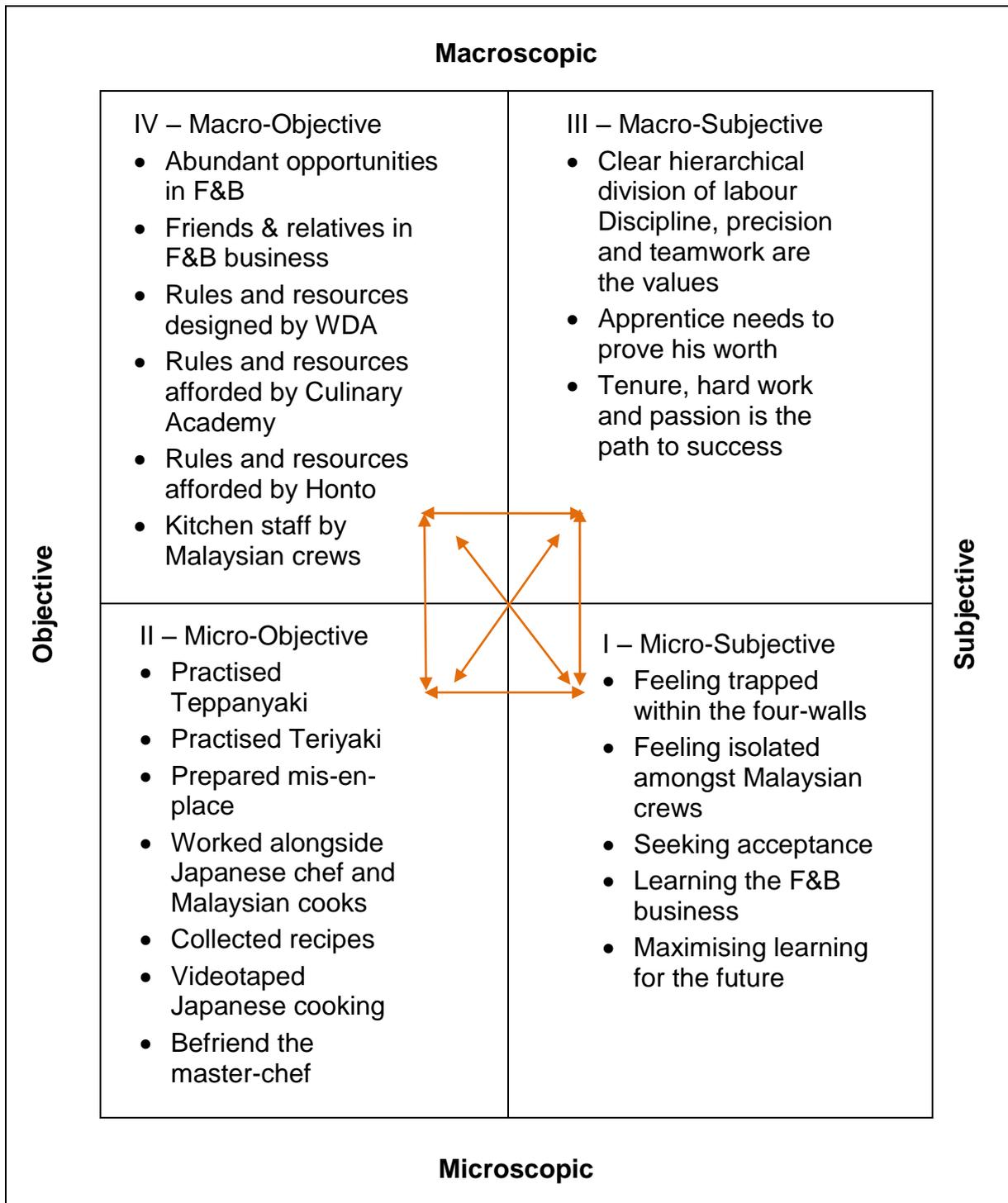
At Verge, Wee Meng worked in an environment where he was a minority (as a Singaporean). As a commis, his job was to wash salad and the chopping and cutting of ingredients; he never got the chance to go near the stove. He felt short-changed but he was not allowed to quit because of the Academy rules and his obligation to complete the conversion programme since he had signed on the dotted line. Working amongst the younger but experienced team, he felt old and inadequate. He found it hard to take instructions and received constant scolding from his 21-year-old Junior Sous Chef and the 34-year-old Executive Chef. "All of them are so young, 20-something...I feel more senior...I find that...this thing deep inside here (pointing to his heart), it's like (laugh) not easy! Not easy!" Wee Meng realised that his age was his biggest disadvantage. Wee Meng perceived that due to his age, he was not "welcome" to the community, as he said, "he (Chef Pierre) prefers younger people because they are energetic and fast...they need it here because the pace is so fast." The hierarchical and autocratic kitchen culture began to take a toll on Wee Meng. "it's so unfair... he just yelled and pushed me out of the kitchen... I cannot explain...Last time, at my company, I can discuss issues with my boss, he would listen." Gradually, Wee Meng formed an impression of the culinary trade: A trade that required long hours of labouring at relatively low starting pay until many years of practice would one earn recognition among the community. The cook to chef transformation was indeed a long journey. The more informed Wee Meng became, the more he began to question his decision to switch career. "I still like cooking... but working in a commercial kitchen is a separate thing... I don't really like working in the kitchen."

Wee Meng's experiences demonstrate the dialectical interplay amongst the two continua along the axes and the four quadrants (Figure 1.2). His interactions (micro-objective) at Verge's kitchen, which was built upon his previous experience in Soho (another restaurant) and at the Culinary Academy, shaped his perceived realities (micro-subjective) of the culinary career and his perceived self-image as a "loser" not able to fit in. However, the need to fulfill his mandatory services period (macro-objective rules) forced him to decide on the next desirable move to try out a hotel kitchen in another attempt to succeed. His participation in activities at Verge, including his acceptance of culinary cultural conditioning therefore perpetuates the cultural practices (Macro-subjective) of the culinary trade. However, his resistance of the practice was subsequently demonstrated through his decision to quit as a commis in a five-star hotel in order to set up his own food stall. This was possible because of the opportunities available to him at the macro-objective level.

### **Anand apprenticing at Honto**

Although Wee Meng and Anand were in the same diploma programme, their unique socio-cultural biographical constructs formulated different social realities. We would soon see how his experience there shaped his future decision in Food and Beverage industry. Anand's experience at Honto (Japanese restaurant) is presented in Figure 1.3

**Figure 1.3 Anand apprenticing at Honto**



Anand was 28 years old when he joined the chef-conversion programme. He was helping in his family's media production business prior to taking up the programme. Since the first interview, Anand was clear that taking up the Diploma in Culinary Craft did not mean that he had to be a chef, "taking this certificate doesn't mean I have to be a chef...it is diverse... I don't know where my potential lies...being a chef is one part but other things (is possible)...you never know". Unlike Wee Meng who was keen to acquire the culinary skills, Anand has always been more interested in the business aspects of food and beverage. Hence, his eventual decision to set up a café with his family was not surprising. This explained Anand's rationalised actions of collecting recipes, observing and then making notes, and using a mobile phone to video the cooking processes. These were his preparation for "other things possible".

Anand's experience at Honto may be described as exposure to multiple foreign cultures. One, Japanese cuisine, which was totally new to him, the names, the ingredients and cooking methods were alien to Anand, to which he also said "not his cup of tea". The biggest challenge which he deemed as more complicated was having to work with a kitchen full of Cantonese-speaking Malaysian kitchen crew. Anand encountered great difficulty communicating with the non-English speaking colleagues. "When come to order, they all speak in their own language (Cantonese) ...many times I didn't even know that they were calling me...I just adapt...I believe I can survive...I just stick to this one guy." This episode illuminates the phenomenon in F&B. Due to the unprecedented growth in the F&B sector; there is an influx of semi-skilled foreign cooks and skilled foreign chefs. They formed the majority of the kitchen crews in Singapore, which in turn "minoritised" the locals who attempt to seek entry into the culinary trade. We observe a similar scenario at Verge. The enclave of Cantonese-speaking Malaysian kitchen crews further alienated Anand's presence in the culinary trade. This is a structural issue that would be difficult to overcome; hence, the chef-conversion programme for non-Chinese speakers faces an uphill task.

Throughout his attachment, Anand was accumulating his knowledge of the F&B business. Anand's acute business sense led him to observe the Honto business. He learned that Honto's business was slow as compared to a more casual dining café next door. High-prices and poor location were his rationale. His subsequent attachment to a high traffic Italian café (Pontani) further convinced him that location is king. At the final interview, he shared his plan of setting up a café in a prime location in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), "have you been to SPIZE at River Valley? ...I tried the food, not fantastic, but the business is very good. You know why? Location!...I am practical, nothing fancy (referring to Honto and Pontani as fancy)" Anand took the opportunities offered through the diploma programme to amass knowledge about F&B businesses which paved the way for his "desired-me". At Honto, Anand experienced his first restaurant operation. He had learnt that culinary trade means long hours of work that covered twelve-hour shifts. Moreover, the pay is low. Gradually Anand concluded, "It is like confinement within four walls (the kitchen)...it's restrictive and stagnant ...I can't move on". At the final interview, Anand called himself the coffee-shop type people. He felt at ease at the coffee-shop environment as compared to Honto and Pontani, where he called it the "fancy" places. His reflexive monitoring convinced him that his "desired-me" would yield him faster and higher returns (in monetary and ego) in familiar environments such as the coffee-shop than laboring in "fancy" restaurant kitchens where he would start only as a commis, which in Anand's opinion, "the lowest life-form", for S\$800 (US\$640) a month and subjected to many kitchen rules. He managed to secure investments from his relatives for his Kuala Lumpur café venture where he would become a part owner who would in turn employ good Penang chefs to cook for him. As he confidently said, "A person mature as he attained certain level of education...I have plan and can manage."

What we observe in the two cases is the clear demonstration of the individuals' ongoing engagement with the rules/resources. The interplay of objective opportunities (employment and business opportunities) at macro-objective level and the sociocultural conditions (meritocracy & economic opportunity) at the macro-subjective level, shaping the aspirations (the informed desired-me) of Wee Meng and Anand during their participation in the career transitions at the micro-objective level. However, both of them demonstrate quite clearly the open-ended manner in which they respond to the structures and cultural conditions (agency). Their actions oppose the rigid structural deterministic social reproduction generation after generation as posited by Bowles and Gintis (1976). They were highly conscious of the rules and resources made available by structures, their reflexive monitoring were ceaselessly evaluating the new knowledge they gained through social interaction, helping them making decisions for the next step. Their thinking and actions have also proved that Jenkins (1992) was wrong to claim that habitus derives from thoughtlessness of habits and that actors act as matters of routine without knowing what they are doing. Both of them took conscious effort in weighing the pros-and-cons of options before taking the next cause of actions.

Their work at Verge and Honto were carried out with constant reflexive monitoring of the environment and deliberate rationalisation of their actions. Their newly acquired knowledge (learning) becomes part of their biographies (knowledgeable self) which also reflect the socio-cultural constructs of culinary community. All their social interactions (physical and mental) are two-way transactions, constructing their identities on the one end and making the structures that surrounded them on the other.

Wee Meng and Anand told their stories underpinned by the social ideology of self-efficacy and meritocracy where everyone has a chance of crafting own career scripts guided by the afforded constraints and enablement. The Singapore state as “economic and skills coordinator” provides opportunities for its people to achieve aspirations, within the bounded rules. To a large extent, their agencies were enhanced by the structural affordances in a relatively wealthy country. By taking part in the economic activities of facilitated career change, Wee Meng and Anand are continuously participating in (re)making of Singapore’s socioeconomic and cultural structures.

## Conclusion

The study shows that the participants were able to exercise agency rather than being passive recipients of the structural affordances. Their stories reveal how they were constantly rationalising the affordances and taking courses of action that satisfied their concerns within the pre-existing conditions set forth by the structures. Both participants were pushed by invisible forces to seek change in their careers in order to bridge the gaps of “now-me” and “desired-me”. The socioeconomic context of Singapore provided both the constraints and enablement in their pursuit of “desired me” state. Their reflexive monitoring and deliberate actions during their culinary training illustrated the remaking of the cultural-historical setting of the culinary trade – people (re-make) their contexts. Their eventual career choices show how they were forced to cobble their biographies on an ongoing basis and to construct their identities when there was no pre-determined path through life. Their stories tell us that vocational education and employment are not just bread-and-butter issues but are also means for establishing self-identity.

The findings further suggest the need for stakeholders to re-conceptualise the concept of career and continuing education and training in Singapore. Their life-stories challenged the tradition notion of career as defined by Wilensky (1961) as a linear upward progression to power, wealth and status. What they have shown us, are status-passages of two persons in search of ways to earn a living and the continuous remaking of their identity. If this was indeed the social phenomenon, then, there is an urgent need to review the assumptions and perspective held by policy-makers today. The key question should be asking would be “Are we preparing workers for both immediate employment and longer term employability?”

This study has allowed us to pilot our macro-micro-objective-subjective integrated analytical framework. The meaningful categorisation of the quadrants allows fine-grained analysis to be carried out via a temporal separation freeze-pane approach without fearing the neglect of interdependency of transactions occurring across the quadrants. The processes of making and remaking the agency and structures have become conspicuous. This has certainly overcome Archer's (1988) and Willmott's (1999) contention that Structuration Theory rejects the notion of "analytic dualism".

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