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# Immigrant and Asylum Seekers Labour Market Integration upon Arrival: NowHereLand

A Biographical Perspective

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Irina Isaakyan • Anna Triandafyllidou  
Simone Baglioni  
Editors

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A Biographical Perspective

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The data presented in this book were collected and analysed during the final year of the project. We would like to thank all our informants, who have given us in-depth biographic interviews and herein generously contributed to our research. We are also very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, which have helped us to revise and finalize this book. We especially acknowledge the role of the European Commission, which funded our overall project through the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research Programme [Grant Agreement 770515 (SIRIUS)].

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# Chapter 1

## Labour Market Integration as an Interactive Process



Anna Triandafyllidou, Irina Isaakyan, and Simone Baglioni

### 1.1 They Are *Here* and *Now*

An undocumented female immigrant in New York has no medical insurance to allow the doctor to visit, shares a shabby apartment with a few other marginalised immigrants, has very limited money for groceries, and jumps between various gig jobs. An iconic case of seemingly failed labour market integration, this woman somehow manages to survive through the support from her migrant solidarity network. A local ethnic shop owner gives her free groceries, while an immigrant taxi driver offers her free rides from job to job. Out of the blue, a stranger hires her for a one-night job in an underground casino, without, however, clarifying her prospective duties. This is how Luciana, the protagonist in the movie *Most Beautiful Island*, engages in a high-risk informal market game of touching venomous insects to entertain rich clients. The final scene shows Luciana as the winner and sole game survivor, who leaves catatonically but with a tangible cash boon in her purse. The parting smile she then gives us is, nevertheless, telling in that she is determined to come back to play again. In fact, this gaming experience has changed her life forever. She has eventually found a way to earn a lot of money in a short time and resolve all her economic problems while also having proved her skill for this difficult job.

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Although this is achieved via the informal market and dehumanisation, she has actually arrived at a particular mode of labour market integration.

Luciana's experience resonates with real-life stories of many migrants around the world and shows that the course of labour market integration may not always run smooth. It can have unexpected twists and be affected by various individual encounters. For Luciana, the casino job was a painful experience of high risk and dehumanisation. At the same time, successfully accomplishing a difficult gaming task opened the door to positive changes in her bifurcating life. While existing policies and laws continuously impede immigrants' access to the job market, individual encounters may create opportunities for their integration – although sometimes in liminal ways.

It is within this context of everyday uncertainty, institutional bureaucracy, and overall political ambivalence that we seek to capture the interpretive-biographic, or agentic, aspect of labour-market integration. We want to look deeply into vulnerable and, at the same time, empowering lives of migrants and into the meanings they assign to their lived experience of (not) being integrated in their host societies labour markets. Our book captures them making sense of their own lives and of 'being alive' to this new world *Here and Now*, in this *NowHereLand* that is meant to become their home. To be more precise, **we aim to understand how specific, often unnoticed, events may change migrants' lives and attitudes to labour-market integration.**

There have been many studies on various forms, or proxies, of labour-market integration (Bal, 2014; Berntsen, 2016; De Beer & Schills, 2009a). Among scholars and policymakers, there is consensus on the economically integrated migrant as a well-paid professional who works in the area of their specialisation and rapidly progresses in their career (Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019). A significantly under-studied element is what is actually happening en route and how it may be understood by the migrants themselves. It is not clear how migrating people navigate the context around their labour-market integration and reflect upon their own experiences.

In this connection, we ask: what events change the trajectories and self-positioning of migrants? What consequences do these events have for migrants' labour-market integration? How do migrants work out or adapt to such changes? What are their reflections on these changes?

It is important to remember that integration is 'liquid' by nature. In the 'fluid' milieu of the overall societal 'ambivalence' (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 2000), labour market integration is, in fact, expected to have a variety of patterns and individual characteristics, the complexity of which cannot always be captured through traditional methods. This 'liquidity' means that labour-market integration is a very dynamic process with temporal characteristics.

Another important point is that while integration is a specific outcome of migrant agency, or 'navigation of social relations' by the migrant, it is also a dynamic, multi-dimensional process bringing together an interplay of individual characteristics and structural forces such as gender, class, and ethnicity (Triandafyllidou, 2018). Our main starting point is, therefore, the 'integration-agency' nexus which implicates the processual and interactive nature of migrant agency in its work toward achieving labour market integration.

As further noted by social anthropologists, a particular phenomenon's processual character, or fluidity, is best understood through the interpretive-biographic lens (Bauman, 2000; Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2001; Denzin, 2011; Giddens, 2000). That is why we use the concepts of 'integration', 'agency', and 'interpretive biography' (or 'biographical journey') as the main heuristic devices to investigate the dynamics of labour market integration. Our work is grounded in a very distinct and novel analytical framework that uses a combination of theoretical and methodological concepts. This framework allows us to explore how specific crucial events ('turning points') affect the work of migrants' agency (embedded in their decision-making passages of identity crisis, or 'epiphanic passages') and leads toward a new understanding of their own integration (reflected in their 'epiphanies').

Through the prism of interpretive-biographic research, our book looks at migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees who have arrived from 2014 to 2019 in six European countries (notably the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Switzerland, the UK) and Canada – all countries that have experienced significant recent (post-2014) flows but which have very different immigration experiences and backgrounds. The book investigates the initial labour market integration experiences of these migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers who are characterised by different biographies and migration/asylum trajectories, through an inter-subjective lens. The adopted interpretive-biographic approach enables us to trace and better understand how migrants develop their aspirations and capability to move, what resources they mobilise, and how these elements condition their progression toward the moving target of the host country labour market.

Our work gives voice to the migrants themselves and seeks to highlight their own experiences and understandings of the labour market integration process in the first years of immigration. Each chapter brings migrants' intersubjective experiences into dialogue with relevant policies and practices – as well as with relevant stakeholders, whether local government, national services, civil society, or migrant organisations.

## 1.2 The Notion of Labour Market Integration

Various studies show that for the migrant, success of labour market integration is generally associated with employment in decent working conditions (Bal, 2014; Berntsen, 2016; De Beer & Schills, 2009a). The parameters of decent work and, consequently, of labour market integration include: adequate/qualified employment (v. under-qualification), adequate payment (v. underpayment), social mobility [e.g.: professional development, career promotion, skill acquisition] (v. social immobility), social protection against injustice on the workplace (v. abuse of human rights), social benefits [e.g.: health benefits, childcare, retirement benefits], and equal treatment or equality of opportunity compared to other workers who are both local and foreign (Anxo et al., 2010; Berntsen, 2016; Gallie, 2007a, b, c). The equality of opportunity on the workplace is actually the main principle of labour market integration, which underpins the other aspects of decent work (Gallie, 2007a, b, c; ILO, 2022).

In this connection, labour market integration is de facto tailored to the notion of formal and legally protected employment, or state-protected employment in the formal labour market (De Beer & Schills, 2009a, b; Eichhorst et al., 2009). It is mostly within the formal-job-market context that member state laws and regulations have the power to protect the third-country national who is looking for and/or taking a job (ibid; Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019).

Although labour market integration resonates with economic integration, these two concepts are not exactly the same. The spatiality of economic integration, which is mostly associated with income and payment, is actually wider than labour market integration, which is associated with formal, decent and state-protected work (Berntsen, 2016; De Beer & Schills, 2009a). In fact, foreign nationals may be well off or just living not badly on a steady income even outside the space of formal employment (Calamai, 2009; Isaakyan, 2015). For example, a foreign national in Europe can be a retired American woman living well on her US pension (ibid; King et al., 2017) or a relatively well-set domestic worker employed in the informal market (Calamai, 2009; Marchetti, 2014a, b).

The informal market may indeed offer a variety of employment opportunities to third-country nationals, although with a varied degree of human rights- and employment rights- protection (Isaakyan, 2015). It is the extreme instability of decent work as a pre-requisite of labour market integration that makes the sphere of informal work a very fragile space of labour market integration (Anxo et al., 2010; Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019; Calamai, 2009; Costa-I-Font, 2010). Scholars often view informal job as a very marginal segment of labour market integration (Anxo et al., 2010; Marchetti, 2014a, b), which sometimes allows the migrant to somehow stay in the country and accumulate some money before establishing oneself as a decent professional in the formal job market (ibid; Isaakyan, 2022). While the degree of quality of life and human rights protection fluctuates significantly from case to case (ibid). Some migrants, who work in the informal job market continuously complain on the abuse of their basic human rights by the employer (Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019; Costa-I-Font, 2010; Marchetti, 2014a, b), while others may seem quite satisfied with their economic and overall living conditions (Isaakyan, 2015). In any case, these two spaces of labour market integration are interconnected as often embedded in common networks (Isaakyan, 2022). And the road toward the formal decent work in a foreign country is often paved through the informal market (Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019; Isaakyan, 2015, 2022). That is why, its thin ice keeps enticing ambitious migrants like Luciana and many others, who search for a better life and a more decent job overseas.

### 1.3 Migrant Agency

Studies further show that a successful case of the migrant's decent work – which is based on legal protection, equality of opportunity, qualified employment and adequate payment – is an outcome of their agency because prolific conditions of employment at destination are usually achieved by migrants through difficult

decisions and various hardships rather than given to them gratis (Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019; Bal, 2014; Berntsen, 2016). Migrants' integration should be understood as an outcome of their agency.

In this connection, migrants' agency can be understood as their decision-making about relocation and settlement (Squire, 2017), which is an interactive process of exploring social relations while 'navigating' toward or away from integration (Triandafyllidou, 2018). The multi-dimensional (social, spatial, and temporal) nature of migrants' agency becomes especially apparent in their navigation toward labour market integration, which often develops in non-linear ways (Katz, 2004; Triandafyllidou, 2018). Triandafyllidou (2018) argues that it is a 'fragmented' itinerary with different 'stops and intermediate milestones', where the journey can change its nature and direction and where there can be returns and new departures. Searching for work, migrants navigate complex administrative requirements, adapt to a new cultural context, and identify job opportunities through formal or informal channels (ibid.).

During these phases of navigating the new country environment, there is an interplay between the migrant's initial hopes and expectations, actual conditions that s/he is faced with, and ways in which the migrant develops their agency and seeks to turn these conditions in their favour (Triandafyllidou, 2017, 2018). This process also involves an intense interaction between individual migrants, their families, and various structural and relational forces that shape migrants' trajectories and perceptions of integration (Carling & Schewel, 2017; Van Hear et al., 2017).

The interactive nature of migrant agency resonates with the fundamental argument of Anthony Giddens (2000) about the 'agency-structure' nexus, which implies a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment. Migration scholars note that migrants not only develop new personality traits and make new decisions under the impact of various circumstances of their migration but also create new opportunities for themselves through these dynamics (King et al., 2017; Squire, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2018).

It is through the interpretive biographical approach, with its specific emphasis on epiphanic moments and passages, that an in-depth understanding of the interaction between individual agency of migrants and wider contexts of their labour market integration can be achieved.

## **1.4 Interpretive-Biographic Framework: Agency Under the Microscope**

### ***1.4.1 Biographic Milestones of Agency***

The interpretive-biographic method that informs the case studies presented in this book allows for a deeper insight into the details and dynamics of migrants' decision-making on their own integration. This method allows us to see labour market integration as a highly reflexive and interactive process.



In our work, we ally the theoretical resources of ‘agency’ and ‘integration’ (borrowed from Migration Studies) with the methodological resources of ‘interpretive biography’ (borrowed from existing biographical methodologies). This new framework brings together the concepts of ‘migrant agency’ and ‘migrant reflexive biography as an integration journey’.

In epistemological terms, we do not only look into particular episodes that are known in biographical research as ‘turning points’. We explore the nexus between the critical event, the identity crisis it causes, and the epiphanic moment at which the person finalises their biographical journey. We delve into the epiphanic triangle connecting the turning point, the crisis passage, and the epiphany alongside the life course of the migrant. In other words, the migrant’s labour market integration goes through several such turning points or ‘epiphanic passages’.

Below we elaborate in more detail on the interpretive-biographic framework in general and on its applications to studies of integration in particular.

Migrant integration research that adopts a biographic methodological approach needs to acknowledge the notion of ‘liquid times’ as analysed by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Bauman sees the era of late modernity (or post-modernity) as extremely liquid or fluid. He observes that the post-modern life is full of phenomena that have unpredictable, flexible, and ambivalent forms (*ibid.*). Along these lines, Engbersen (2018) conceptualises migration as ‘liquid’, or consisting of various intersecting forms and streams. It is within this overall framework of ‘fluidity’ that scholars advocate the biographic approach, which enables them to study dynamics of ‘liquid’ – or polymorphic and changing – phenomena (such as integration) as well as nuances of an interactional process (such as migrant agency) (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 2011). The biographic approach allows to explore in-depth the relationship between the individual and the social, which plays out if the person experiences life-changing events and new lifestyles and reflects upon them (*ibid.*).

The biographic methodology investigates events, lifestyle changes, and reflections that challenge and disrupt the notion of the life-course (*ibid.*; Glaser & Strauss, 1971).<sup>1</sup> They may give new meanings to institutional norms and other standardised events (*ibid.*). The biographic method shows how the person has reached their mode of living and self-positioning and what this experience means to them (Creswell, 2013). It shows the ‘meaning of being alive’ (Campbell, 1991: 6). This experience of ‘being alive’ may shape either in resonance or in dissonance with the social dictates of the societal norm (*ibid.*; Glaser & Strauss, 1971). However, this is exactly the unique experience of ‘being alive’, of living your own life the way it is and of dealing with all its challenges (Campbell, 1991: 6).

In fact, lives in emigration are never fully predictable (Engbersen, 2018). What actually happens to migrants is that in their decision-making they navigate through

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<sup>1</sup>The biographic approach is not the same as the life-course approach, although they may be sometimes confused (Creswell, 2013; Czarniawska, 2004). The life-course approach is grounded in the logic of deduction. From the deductive angle, it looks at normalised events and established ‘status passages’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1971), which become the socio-biological markers of a life-course (*ibid.*; Creswell, 2013).

unknown waters and often toward unclear goals (Triandafyllidou, 2018). The clarification may appear en route and become dependent on specific, unique encounters that act as the signposts of this navigation (ibid.). In this clarification of trajectories and goals, the past interweaves with the present in unpredictable combinations which are, nevertheless, socially structured although in unanticipated ways (Denzin, 2011).

## 1.5 Interpretive Biography: An Unfinished Breakthrough

When we speak about the biographic approach, it is important to remember that it embraces three distinct methodologies: biographic method, narrative-biographic inquiry, and interpretive biography. While having much in common and definitely intersecting in their logistics, they are not, however, entirely synonymous. The biographic method is a more generic approach to qualitative data that collects and analyses people's life stories narrated by themselves in the written or oral form (Czarniawska, 2004; Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 1989).<sup>2</sup> All scholars agree that the basic feature of biographic analysis is its focus on life-changing events known as 'turning points' (Coffey, 2018; Denzin, 1989, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), across which biographic data should be grouped thematically (Creswell, 2013).

In terms of data analysis and presentation, biographic writing is subdivided into autobiography, narrative biography, and interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989, 2011). In this reference, it is important to remember that interpretive biography is a distinct method that differs from both narrative biography and autobiography. Autobiography is a person's life story narrated (analysed and presented) by the person themselves (ibid.; Merrill, 2019; Merrill & Altheit, 2004; Merrill & West, 2009). The outcome of the autobiographic analysis is how the person/narrator sees their own life (ibid.). Narrative biography, or narrative-biographic inquiry, is a collection and analysis of someone else's life story by the researcher, who gives it their own scientific interpretation (Kohler-Riessman, 1993). While the method of interpretive biography (interpretive-biographic inquiry) is a collaborative analysis of the informant's life-story by the researcher (who takes the analytical and interpretive lead) and the informant (who clarifies, adds, and reflects more in-depth under the researcher's guidance) (Denzin, 1989, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2001, 2017).

Its focus is creation of a life story that would be interpreted together by the narrator and the researcher within the framework of 'duo-ethnography' (Denzin,

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<sup>2</sup>Also known as the 'life history approach', the biographic method deals with a variety of 'documents of life' such as individual diaries, written memoirs, or reflexive journals and interviews (ibid.). Within this wide approach to qualitative data, there is such a data collection method as the biographic interview (vis-à-vis the memoir writing), or the storytelling, which collects biographic data specifically through oral interviews that take place now and here (ibid.; Czarniawska, 2004).

2011).<sup>3</sup> The principle of ‘collaborative writing and interpretation’ is based on their constant interaction and rapport (*ibid.*). The main feature of this approach is that the interpretive biographer does not merely collect meanings (informants’ perceptions) but challenges them together with the informant. This feature of interpretive biography becomes especially meaningful in Migration Studies, which frequently deals with sensitive issues such as undocumented migrants, illegal status, sexual abuse, or domestic violence in a foreign country.

The interpretive biographic method, with its focus on reflexivity about a meaningful biographic experience, can be understood as seeking to say a lot about a tiny, almost invisible thing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001, 2017; Denzin, 2011, 2014; Poulos, 2012; Tamas, 2011; Ulmer, 1989). Its message is an unexpected story developed by both informant and researcher – a story grounded in a more creative approach to turning points (Denzin, 2011). The main feature of such a story is analysis of epiphanies and all complex relations they convey. This method implies that people whose lives the researcher studies invariably interact with each other, and that this interaction should be symbolically reflected in their turning points and epiphanies (*ibid.*). Migration scholarship, in fact, brings forward many painful experiences of vulnerable migrants, who may be ageing abroad (Benson, 2009; King et al., 2017) or giving birth during their detention in hotspots or in other cross-border spaces (Grotti et al., 2019). However, the interactional dynamics around such painful experiences is not shown to the fullest. As a result, the most provocative meanings that migrants may find in their own lived experiences may be left buried deep inside their minds and souls, remaining, therefore, invisible to the researcher.

Although the biographical method was in use already in the twentieth century, interpretive biography was initiated by Denzin only in 1989. Since then, biographic studies have been marked by more reflexivity and attention to informants’ symbolic statements and epiphanic theories about the meaning of life (Clifford & Markus, 1986; Conquergood, 1981; Geertz, 1988; Van Maanen, 2011). As a solid paradigm, the interpretive biographic method, however, remained under-developed for a long time and still needs further elaboration as well as new substantive theories to be illuminated by new empirical cases.

Responding to this problem area, our book goes farther than just telling migrants’ stories of relocation. Our aim is to illuminate the lived and self-reflexive experiences of labour market integration and also enrich the epistemological framework around the interpretive biographic method.

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<sup>3</sup>The autobiographic method thus emphasises your own life experience, whereas the narrative-biographic method stresses the importance of its scientific interpretation by an outsider expert. The narrative-biographer, or the researcher, does not mechanically collect or record a story of another person but pays attention to the meanings that the informant assigns to their own experience (Creswell, 2013).

## 1.6 A Tribute to ‘Global Methodologies’

The elaborated here interpretive biographic method belongs not only to advanced qualitative methodologies in the general sense. In its application to Migration Studies, the interpretive biographic method belongs to the new epistemological direction in the scholarship on migration, international relations and global studies, which is known as ‘Methodological Globalism’. As part of the ‘global methodological’ epistemology, the interpretive biographic method is meant to uncover nuances and new spaces of people’s lives and to challenge the previously traditional ‘methodological nationalism’. We can ask here what makes the interpretive biographic method one of the best angles to approach integration. The answer lies in the resonance that the rhetoric of integration has with the rationale of methodological globalism.

Methodological globalists recognize interconnectivity and interdependence within the global community, including transnational networks between people living in different countries, the networks and relations by which the migrant can benefit, while not being restricted by the laws and traditions of his/her country of origin (Dumitru, 2021; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Koos & Keulman, 2019; Liu, 2012). In this connection, methodological globalism stresses the ‘relativity of national sovereignty’, meaning that homeland still matters for and influences the migrant but not entirely (Cherilo, 2011; Faist, 2012; Koos & Keulman, 2019). Thus Luciana is still a woman from Latin America, but she is now different from that kind of woman that she used to be: she is now a Latina woman who lives in New York – she is a New Yorker with the Hispanic heritage who now knows how to pave her way toward the host labour market.

The relativity of the homeland impact is what is primarily stressed by methodological globalists (Faist, 2012; Koos & Keulman, 2019; Liu, 2012) – the relative impact of national events such as national trauma and war upon the migrant’s life (which we further illuminated by individually experienced turning points). What is emphasized by methodological globalists as supremacy is the ‘universal values’, shared by all members of the herein shaping new community (Koos & Keulman, 2019), to which Luciana now belongs – the values of persevering, believing in a better future and supporting fellow migrants. An illuminative detail is that, why competing with other migrant women for the prize and emerging through the extreme game contest, Luciana nevertheless comes to the rescue of her female competitor. Witnessing her competitor’s fear and shivering, Luciana actually volunteers to take an additional task of dealing with a venomous spider, thus putting her own life at risk but saving the other migrant-woman. This is not anymore a banal survival by any means: for the new Luciana, this act of global solidarity becomes an act of global communalism, which characterizes her a becoming member of a new female migrant community, which is entirely different from the her pre-emigration community of abused women in her country of origin. While preserving Luciana’s national memory as part of new identity, the methodological globalism approach to her case thus stresses what Liu (2012: 9) notes as the ‘governance function of

non-state actors'. Their list includes the informal market criminal networks that seemingly trap Luciana but also her new and expanding network of transnational female solidarity that bridges the casino network with that of the sanctuary New York City.

The transnational reciprocity in values and responses, the migrant's ability for change while also in coupe with self-preservation, the pivotal role of and investment in universal values, and the role of various alterative actors – all these factors of the migrant's personal growth make the main features in the portrait of his/her integration in general and in the labour market in particular (Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019; Penninx, 2018). They are the key parameters of integration, and their investigation in reference to labour market and through the interpretive biographic lens is an important contribution to the school of methodological globalism, which extends beyond the boundaries of the traditional methodological nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.7 Turning Points: The Lighthouses of Migrant Agency

Like any biographical method, interpretive biography seeks to bring forward to the audience 'a meaningful biographic experience' of a real person (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001, 2017; Denzin, 2011, Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Pelias, 2011; Poulos, 2012; Tamas, 2011; Ulmer, 1989). In this connection, Denzin (2011) notes that it is specifically through 'turning point interactional episodes' that 'human lives are shaped and human character is revealed'. That is why attention to turning points – or critical events – has been the rule of thumb for many years in biographic research that is used in social sciences, especially in sociology and social anthropology. And thinking specifically about such cases as ours, Denzin views turning points as the 'signposts for migrant agency and integration' (ibid.: 205).

A 'turning point' is an event that causes a significant change in the identity of a person (American Heritage Dictionary, 2022)<sup>5</sup> and 'leaves a permanent mark' on their personality (Denzin, 1989). It is 'a life event that leads to changes in a life trajectory' (Teruya & Hser, 2010: 3). Its capacity to change the life of a person is

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<sup>4</sup>Emphasizing the 'national center' notion, the school of methodological nationalism is generally characterized by its 'explanatory reductionism' in restricting its analysis of global phenomena to the clear-cut divisions between domestic and international or between self and other (Cherilo, 2011). For more critique on methodological nationalism, see the works of Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) and Liu (2012). On the contrary, the school of 'methodological globalism', or the school of 'global methodologies', challenges the supremacy of nation-state and recognizes the role of non-state actors and transnational values in its approach to international relations and migration processes. For more on global methodologies, see: Koos and Keulman (2019). To better understand the interconnectivity of the globalizing world and to overcome the 'nation-state' dogma, global methodologists invest in life stories and narrative accounts of migrants (Barglowski, 2019). As interpretive biographers, we position ourselves within this school of thought.

<sup>5</sup>See: *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2022), available at: <https://www.ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=turning+point&submit.x=0&submit.y=0>

what makes the turning point distinct from an historical or social event in general (Ronka et al., 2003). An interesting fact is that, in line with the widely criticized methodological nationalism, the majority of discourses on the current ‘refugee crisis’ still continuously present refugees as migrants who should experience war in the same way, thus assuming that such historical events as war or military conflict must affect the lives of all people in the same way (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019).

On the contrary, interpretive biographers agree with methodological globalists on the attitudinal relativity of national event and argue (which we will show in our book) that the same events can be perceived and reflected upon by different migrants differently. The context that forms their agency will thus also differ. And given the underestimation by scholars of diversity of turning points, we would like now to briefly discuss their typology.

The scholarly literature has developed a complex typology of turning points depending on the direction of their impact (positive or negative); the root of the turning point (institutional or personal); the time of the impact (abrupt or incremental); and the strength of the impact (major or minor).

Perhaps the most important distinction is between positive (generative) and negative (withdrawing) turning points. Positive turning points are those that cause positive changes in a person’s life and lead to generative thinking and positive self-perception (Teruya & Hser, 2010; Gottlib & Wheaton, 1997). They foster people to generate new ideas and engage in new self-energizing practices that open up future opportunities (ibid.; Glaser & Strauss, 1971). Negative turning points may disrupt a comfortable way of living, cause chaos in a person’s life, block agency, and make the deadlock effect of shutting down opportunities (Elder et al., 1991; Rutter, 1996; Gottlib & Wheaton, 1997). Such events can provoke the whole range of ‘withdrawing’ or ‘backsliding’ or behaviours and attitudes such as ‘misalignment, chagrin, anxiety and tension’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1971: 96). They make the ‘shattering’ and traumatic impact upon the person who experiences them, especially if the turning point is associated with betrayal and limited control or limited choice or both (ibid.). All these behaviours have been observed among migrants (Grotti et al., 2019; Marchetti, 2014a, b; Merrill, 2019).

Second, we can summarise turning points as divided into institutional and personified. The former embrace events that often happen on the macro- and meso- levels as part of wider institutional or national frameworks. They are related to the functioning of institutions such as family, army, higher education, marriage, asylum system, or refugee detention. Calling them ‘institutional’ stresses their omnipresent nature. As illuminated by Glaser and Strauss (1971), the list of such events that can drastically change a person’s life includes war, matriculation, graduation, military conscription, and job application, among many others. Such events are usually experienced by other members of a social group to which the person belongs, although to different degrees of intensity: they do not function as turning points to all group members who are affected by the same institutions (ibid.; Teruya & Hser, 2010). As noted by Glaser and Strauss (1971), these turning points are ‘in close connection with formal organisations’ and institutions such as the institution of marriage, employment, or law enforcement. The power of these

institutions is often used on a daily basis as an instrument to impact upon people's lives, thus such turning points can also be called 'instrumental'. The emphasis is here on people's frequent inability to overthrow their effect. Thus institutional, or instrumental, events such as war, abuse in detention, or anti-gay political campaigns at home turn people into refugees, illegal migrants, or victims of trafficking and smuggling. They can also strengthen migrants' decisions to return or not return home and to settle or not at destination (Achilli, 2019; Achilli & Sanchez, 2021; Grotti et al., 2019; Merrill, 2019).

On the contrary, what Ellis and Triandafyllidou (in this volume) define as 'personified turning points' refer to much more personal and individually experienced encounters related to more intimate relations. Such encounters can be illuminated by the loss of significant others (ibid.) or a friend's betrayal (Glaser & Strauss, 1971). Studies on retired migration illuminate that older women often become migrants as a result of widowhood or divorce (Benson, 2009; Fokkema & Naderi, 2013; King et al., 2017).

Third, turning points can be understood in terms of causing 'abrupt' versus 'incremental changes' (Elder et al., 1991; Pickles & Rutter, 1991; Rutter, 1996; Gottlib & Wheaton, 1997). We can respectively refer to them as 'visible' (or overt) versus 'hidden' (or covert) turning points. As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2001), the latter turning points often pass as 'unremarkable, barely felt, taken for granted and non-problematic' when they happen. Their impact draws attention only with time and in the light of other critical events (ibid.), implicating their cumulative effect. Discovering this cumulative effect becomes part of the interaction between the informant and the researcher, or a distinct feature of interpretive biography (ibid.). In fact, informants often find it hard to talk and even think about certain experiences before they discover their true meaning together with the interpretive biographer (ibid.). This is highlighted by interviews with sensitive groups (Czarniawska, 2004) such as pregnant migrant-women, undocumented migrants who are victims of international trafficking and sexual abuse, or migrants who are racial or sexual minorities (Danisi et al., 2021; Grotti et al., 2019; Merrill, 2019).

Fourth, Denzin (1989) also points out that some critical events can be 'major', causing significant changes while others can be 'minor' or 'illuminative' of the former, which implies the existence of turning point clusters. In this book, we will therefore also distinguish between 'single' major turning points and 'clustered' turning points.

Regardless of its cause and directionality, the turning point is always highly emotional because it leads the person to drastically change their life. Whether caused by an institutional force or by an intimate relationship with a specific person, the turning point is invariably perceived as emotional by someone who experiences it. Its effect is always deeply emotional (Denzin, 1989) – that is, reflected in the individual's 'need to try out the new self, to explore and validate the new and either exciting or fearful conceptions' (Glaser & Strauss, 1971: 100).

In this connection, Koenig-Kellas et al. (2008) view the turning point as 'a relational event that captures a critical moment' in a person's life, thus stressing its relational and individual character. As further noted by Kallen (1950: 26), 'turning



points are critical incidents that force a person to recognize that s/he is not the same as s/he used to be'. When turning points happen, they lead the person to understand that the previous life plan has been disrupted and that the person must improvise (ibid.). Acting as 'signposts of human agency', turning points imply that the person should learn how to go with the flow, how to make new decisions, and how to navigate new social relations (Denzin, 2011, 2014). For example, we can see impoverished women from Eastern Europe and Africa who take precarious gig jobs in the Italian and Dutch domestic work sector (Marchetti, 2014a, b), desperate Mexican peasants who cross the US border illegally and trail dangerous pathways toward their American dream (Achilli, 2019; Achilli & Sanchez, 2021), or pregnant young women from the Middle East who, being either naïve or completely reckless, engage in a dangerous boat trip to Europe without understanding precisely where they are going and how they are going to survive there (Grotti et al., 2019).

Thinking about such people, Glaser and Strauss (1971: 92) further note that turning points lead to an 'irreversible transformation of perception: once having changed, there is no going back'. The irreversibility of time is another feature that makes the turning point distinct from any other remarkable event (ibid.). This may perhaps explain why these determined pregnant women who cross the EU border illegally and about whom Vanessa Grotti and colleagues write (Grotti et al., 2019) prefer to undergo various hardships but never return home. Nor did there ever exist any backward opportunity for Luciana, in *Most Beautiful Island*, who would rather continue working in the dangerous casino than repatriate and reunite with her abusive partner.

## 1.8 Epiphany – A Window into the Migrant's Soul

A distinct feature of interpretive biographic inquiry, when compared with other qualitative methods, is its grounds in interpretive interactionalism. It is through the prism of interpretive interactionalism that interpretive biographers make a meaningful lived experience under study highly 'visible to the reader' (Denzin, 2011). In other words, interpretive biography aims to illuminate and analyse how turning points (or specific critical events) may 'radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their lives' (ibid.). And such in-depth meanings can be captured and synthesised into a comprehensive interpretive theory only through people's epiphanies or through their inner self-enlightening thoughts about their own life and the irreversible changes that affect it.

This irreversibility of life perception is then articulated in epiphanies, or people's 'mini-theories about self and society' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2001: 5). Challenging the methodological nationalism, migrants' epiphanies throw light on how different people of the same nationality can be (Amelina, 2013; Barglowski, 2019). Such reflections may include inner thoughts of being a gay migrant in America, a pregnant migrant woman in a Greek detention centre, or a lonely teenager (an unaccompanied minor) disempowered by a smuggling network. How many of these voices will



remain unheard or not understood to the fullest – just because they have never been part of the interpretive biographic research? They will forever remain a closed window through which we shall never be able to see the migrant's soul – the epiphanic window that will remain locked for us by traditional methodologies.

Epiphany is thus another angle to think about how biographic meanings may crystallise. Denzin's (1989) theory of interpretive biography emphasises the pivotal role of epiphany as a state of deep, insightful reflection upon your own life and the phenomenon under study. Interpretive biographic scholars see epiphany as a narrative of self-enlightenment and critical revelation that reflects the transformation of the basic structure of the informant's life (*ibid.*), gives accountability to their turning points (O'Sullivan, 1999), and 'illuminates personal character' (Gottzén, 2019: 22).

Summing up the work of Denzin (1989) and O'Sullivan (1999), there are the four basic features of an interpretive biographic epiphany. First, all epiphanies that informants develop are emotional and ground-breaking for their agency and identities, although to different degrees of immediacy for different people. In most cases, epiphanies are 'relived' more than once (Denzin, 1989) – or 'retold' – especially during the interview (O'Sullivan, 1999), which is their second feature. We can recognise this experience of 'reliving' in the traumatic stories of border-crossing pregnant women (Grotti et al., 2019), Ukrainian domestic workers in Italy (Marchetti, 2014b), or Russian women who become sex workers in Germany (Rosenthal & Bogner, 2009). They often admit that they are not the same as they were (*ibid.*). Does this mean that the reported change was not taking place during the interview?

O'Sullivan (1999: 27) further argues that 'a retold epiphany is actually the turning point paradigm shift and evidence that substantiates the reborn person'. Joseph Campbell (2008[1949]) calls such a moment an 'identity boon'. In fact, in many cases, people understand how they change not immediately but with time and through many interactions, including their interaction with the interpretive biographer. Even if someone feels an immediate change, this is mostly likely the beginning of an epiphanic passage rather than the finalising epiphanic moment itself. In this reference, we should note that in biographic research all epiphanies are retold because the researcher was not present with the informant at the moment of the actual turning point and therefore did not witness it. The interpretive biographer thus analyses all epiphanies in their narrated, or retold, form only.

## 1.9 Epiphanic Moment – Confused Temporality

The method of interpretive biography thus pays close attention to both critical events that change people's life course and their own understanding of these changes. In his highly influential work, Norman Denzin (1989) synthesises these two foci into one single concept of 'epiphanic moment' – or an interactional moment that leaves a mark on the person's life and during which the person develops an epiphany.

However, Denzin's (*ibid.*) seminal book was just one of the very first attempts to understand the biographic method's complexities and his theory has remained

unfinished. It is true that in interpretive biography the concept of 'epiphany' has been central since then. However, its structure and, consequently, the precise dimensions of its analysis remain under-studied. This problem has not been resolved even although Denzin himself tried to systematise his 'epiphanic approach' in a number of his later works. A starting point in interpretive-biographic research, the 'epiphanic moment' concept, nevertheless, continues to confuse scholars in their understanding of epiphanies, turning points, and – what is the most important – the temporal and spatial relations between these two categories of analysis.

While grasping the meaning of interpretive biography, the concept of 'epiphanic moment' still depicts the suggested research paradigm in a kind of dogmatic way. Indeed, it equalises the concepts of 'turning point' and 'epiphany' without illuminating rather complex relations between them. These two quite distinct concepts are thus misleadingly used, in his earlier works, synonymously, overlooking the vast diversity of their temporal characteristics. The 'epiphanic moment' concept makes an impression that all critical events and their traces in human life should take place simultaneously and that the person should develop an epiphany immediately after experiencing a specific crucial event.

The initial definition by Denzin (1989), which is grounded in James Joyce's main principle of the stream-of-consciousness technique in writing, defines epiphany as both the intellectual (reflexive) capacity of the person and the event that fosters this reflexivity as if they had both occurred simultaneously. This definition is inaccurately based on the uniformity of the temporal synchrony between an event and its understanding. In fact, such synchrony does work very well in fiction for James Joyce's characters. They live in a fictional – artificial – world created by the author himself and the author (as the creator of this world) has the power to be present there with the character at the moment of the encounter (Bakhtin, 1975, 1981). In this reference, Mikhail Bakhtin (1975, 1981) and Paul Ricoeur (1984) argue that fictional time is different from real time in its speed and processing. Fictional time flows faster than normal time in reality, allowing the protagonist to process the experienced encounter in their mind much sooner so that both the encounter and its reflection take place almost simultaneously (*ibid.*). However, in real life there are many experiences that pass unnoticed until a certain moment and become understood by the person after their identity becomes more mature (*ibid.*; Bakhtin, 1975; Giddens, 2000), while the researcher witnesses the informant's reflexivity only at the moment of the interview (*ibid.*; O'Sullivan, 1999). The epiphanic moment is actually the moment of the interview, which is separated by time from the real-life experience. What happens during this time is often left outside the focus of research.

For example, in the movie '*Spanglish*', Flor (an undocumented Mexican domestic worker in the US) demands that her rapidly integrating adolescent daughter Cristina should behave like a Mexican girl from their hometown. Cristina strenuously objects to this argument. Then we suddenly hear the adult Cristina in a voiceover admitting that she has finally come to self-identify as her mother's daughter. This is an epiphany of integration change for Cristina. However, we cannot know how fast and under which circumstances this identity change has occurred because Cristina's epiphanic moment has been decontextualised.

The reality, in fact, proves to be much more complex than the cinematographic portrayal of Cristina's self-identification or Joyce's world of fiction. The aforementioned work of Glaser and Strauss (1971) is devoted specifically to temporal passages that separate crucial historical and personal events from the personal or public understanding of their impact upon a person or society. In their theory of 'status passages', Glaser and Strauss (*ibid.*) analyse various trajectories of how people's social statuses and moral conditions may change after they experience historically or institutionally important events such as conscription, graduation, marriage, or war. The herein illuminated notion of time conveys a complex structure of such critical events, in which identity change, associated with the epiphany, occurs gradually.

Although the biographic approaches of Denzin (1989) and Glaser and Strauss (1971) may seemingly complement each other, the missing epistemological element is the synergy between critical moment and dynamics of identity change. While Denzin (1989) simplifies the temporality of epiphanic relations, Glaser and Strauss (1971) do not vividly illuminate the difference between historical changes and very personal impacts. This approach may seemingly resonate with methodological nationalism, leaving the impression that all people should experience the same historical event or traditional institutional passage in the same manner.

In this connection, both Denzin (1989, 2011) and Glaser and Strauss (1971) further argue that their theoretical ideas should be taken only as a starting point for developing more substantive theories of meaningful biographic experience. When translated into the rhetoric of migration studies, this implies theories that should challenge the methodological nationalism and lead to the further evolution of global methodologies.

## 1.10 Epiphanic Triangle

Scholars who work with the interpretive biographic method continue to look for ways to re-conceptualise the relationship between turning points and epiphanies and to better understand the temporal characteristics of epiphanies. Migration scholars continue to puzzle over the temporal characteristics of labour market integration (Penninx, 2018). They strive to understand why the migrant who felt integrated a week ago no longer does today (*ibid.*). Within these lines, we would like to stress the following three distinct features of interpretive biographic research, or the three interconnected angles to view how people give meanings to their life experiences: the turning point, the epiphany, and the passage of time between them that enables the turning point to become the epiphany. This interim period is important for our understanding of the epiphanic moment, which has been illuminated in Cultural Studies and Cinema Studies by Joseph Campbell's 'cultural monomyth' theory (1991, 2008[1949]).

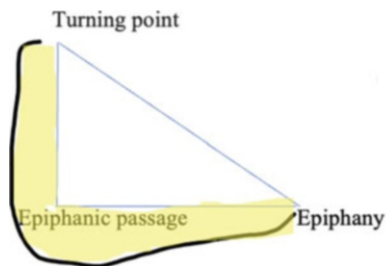
In this connection, Gottzén (2019) argues that every turning point has a 'script' or scenario that 'reflects and influences how changes and decisive moments of life are

perceived and narrated'. This 'turning point script' is the space, or the socio-cultural distance, that stands between the turning point and the consequent epiphany. This is a period during which the person comes to understand the shaping biographic meaning – a period of time rich in social relations and agency work. Such scripts intersect with the processes that Glaser and Strauss (1971) view as 'status passages' – or periods of socio-economic progression and growth when the person moves from one social status to another as dictated by societal norms. However, turning points do not always follow institutional rules (ibid.). They are of a more individualised nature. Glaser and Strauss (ibid.) note that some status passages actually coincide with periods of personal crisis and contain turning points, while others simply indicate institutional progression with little to null impact upon identity.

We can therefore conceptualise the turning point script as a 'crisis passage' or 'epiphanic passage' during which the person finds themselves in the conditions of identity crisis as a result of the turning point and develops an epiphany. Campbell (1991, 2008[1949]) notes that a critical event brings forward the basic existential question: 'What is the meaning of being alive?'. What we understand as epiphany, however, leads us to the answer and constitutes the triumph of our identity work. He also stresses that the process of self-discovery, or a search of the biographical meaning, has a very complex, although rather conventional, structure. Cole (2008) refers to this process as an 'enactment of epiphanies': their 'spatial aspect' is illuminated by identity transformations that follow the turning point. Such transformations show how epiphanies are shaped. In order to understand how turning points enable epiphanies, 'it is important to look at the period preceding or following the turning point and at the people who are challenging the person' (Glaser & Strauss, 1971: 97). For example, Luciana's entrance to the casino had been enabled by a chain of preceding events. She had been initially jeopardised by her abusive partner and his criminal network back home so that she knew she had crossed the point of no return. Later, disenchanted with US immigration law, she felt restricted in her documented employment. With her life structured by the past experience of domestic violence and the current restrictive policies, in this array of institutionally-personified factors she felt ready to take the casino challenge as the only opportunity to enable her safe stay in the country.

In other words, that gig job was more than an isolated event of luck for Luciana. Her unexpected casino job was part of a complex symbolic and relational script that Luciana had started to enact long before her settlement in New York. In the terminology of Norman Denzin (2011), the casino event had a specific 'turning point structure' without boundaries, bypassing the Bronx casino walls and intersecting with the space of Luciana's past as well as with wider spaces of power.

Her epiphanic passage can be compared with what Joseph Campbell (1991, 2008[1949]) calls the 'hero's journey' through existing social relations toward the 'golden fleece' of self-discovery. For Luciana, the golden fleece was her self-discovery as a fierce fighter and a stronger migrant-woman who felt capable of supporting herself economically. Synonymous with our 'epiphanic passage', Campbell's (2008[1949]) 'journey' metaphor points to the person's progression

**Fig. 1.1** Epiphanic triangle

from a critical event to a moment of self-revelation and illuminates the triangular relationship between the turning point, the epiphany, and the bridge between them.

This interpretive biographic framework echoes the Pythagorean theorem, according to which the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the legs. This implies rather complex spatial relations with the Pythagorean triangle, as shown in Fig. 1.1.

The hypotenuse is more than just a linear distance: it is a derivative from complex operations with the legs. Therefore, the appropriate value of the hypotenuse can only be found after we carefully explore the legs. On analogy, we can compare the relationship between the turning point and the epiphany with the hypotenuse (diagonal), while the legs of the triangle can symbolise the progression from one turning point to another and accumulation of reflexivity during the crisis passage. We cannot understand how a particular turning point affects the epiphanic moment unless we carefully explore what is happening during the epiphanic passage (shaded) because many things may happen between a critical event and its reflection.

The epiphanic passage is what scholars in humanities and social sciences define as the ‘hero’s journey’ (Campbell, 2008[1949]) and ‘work of agency’, or ‘social navigation’ (Triandafyllidou, 2018) toward the ‘golden fleece’ or the biographic ‘boon’ (Salla, 2002). The work of agency during the epiphanic passage can be summarised as social navigation that is initiated by the turning point (or the ‘call of adventure’ (Campbell, 2008[1949]) and directed toward the epiphanic moment of discovering your identity boon, or your self-positioning, toward a specific phenomenon. The found or lost identity boon is thus about who you are and what your own ‘meaning of being alive’ (ibid.).

### **1.11 Ordinary ‘Heroes’: Third-Country Nationals on the EU Labour Market**

Showing the lives of ordinary people, our book is based on 98 biographic interviews conducted in seven countries, namely: 10 in Italy; 11 in Switzerland, Finland, and the UK each; 14 in the Czech Republic and Canada each; and 27 in Denmark.

The choice of the countries (Canada, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the UK, and Switzerland) was determined by their political-institutional

approaches towards welfare services, immigration, and labour market structure. For example, Denmark and Canada are countries with strong welfare systems, which, nonetheless, have implemented a variety of flexicurity measures. Southern European countries, meanwhile, have continued to rely upon more rigid labour market policies and have provided fewer social provisions from the welfare state (Eichhorst et al., 2009; Giugni, 2010; Simonazzi & Villa, 2010; Van Aerscht & Daenzer, 2016). Furthermore, very little is known about integration schemes established in new destination countries in central and eastern Europe. These countries seem to create policy as situations arise and often with little knowledge of their refugee population (Burnett, 2015). However, countries such as the Czech Republic more systematically tend to adopt ad-hoc EU grant-driven schemes than other EU central-eastern Member States (Drbohlav & Valenta, 2014; Kušniráková, 2014).

The selected countries thus vary considerably in terms of their political-institutional approaches towards unemployment, the welfare state, and Europeanisation. On the one hand, these countries have some ‘contingent convergence’ of instruments, goals, and outcomes in labour market regulations (Eichhorst & Konle-Seidl, 2008). Their employment and social policies are marked with the common principle ‘work-first approach’ (Triandafyllidou, 2017). On the other hand, substantial differences in their policymaking dynamics and policy implementation have led to the establishment of diverse employment policy regimes (Anxo et al., 2010; De Beer & Schills, 2009a, b; Gallie, 2007a, b, c; Rosenthal & Bogner, 2009).

Apart from this, the selected countries differ in other relevant institutional dimensions that may affect the dynamics within the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Several studies have supported the idea that participatory and decentralised political contexts produce more responsive and redistributive policymaking (Simon, 1989; Calamai, 2009; Costa-I-Font, 2010), which sets the scene for a broader range of ‘integration-related’ policies. Countries also differ in terms of political institutional opportunities offered to public and private actors to deal with integration. For example, Switzerland, Canada, and to a certain extent the United Kingdom, have an institutional design that supports subsidiarity as well as decentralisation and multi-level governance. At the same time, countries such as the Czech Republic maintain strong centralisation and a weak culture of governance. Hence, integration patterns may evolve differently depending on the political-institutional context.

Thus, following a ‘most different system design’ (Przeworski & Teune, 1970), we have chosen the countries that might provoke both similarities and differences in migrants’ biographies and their narratives of labour market integration.

Thinking about the crossroads of integration, migrant agency, and meaningful biographic experience, we seek to find events that change migrants’ trajectories and self-positioning. We then examine consequences that these events have for migrants’ labour market integration or the dynamics of their progression in their employment. We also explore migrants’ reflections on these changes (including their perceptions of gender, class, and race/ethnicity).

The conducted interviews were semi-structured, each lasting between 2 and 3 hours, and included the following specific questions to the informants:

- How did it happen that you are now here in this country? Tell me a little about yourself.
- How did you manage to get this job (if the person has one at the moment)? Or:
- Did you have any career in your home country? What was your educational and professional experience there?
- What prevents you from getting a (better) job now?
- Think about an event here in this country that has made you change your attitude to employment, justice, or life in general?
- Has anything like this happened to you back home?
- What expectations/aspirations did you have when you were moving to this country? How have those changed over time?
- What has been the most unpleasant event that has happened to you here?
- Have you ever felt that people here may treat you or think about you not the way you would like to be treated? Why do you think it happens? How do you try to cope with this?
- What are your professional plans/aspirations for the future? What are you trying to do to realise them? Why do you think it does (not) work?
- To what extent have your family members/local people/other migrants/colleagues been supportive or disruptive of your plans?

## 1.12 When Epiphany Meets Agency: The Structure of the Book

Each chapter included in the book has an empirical and methodological value. While analysing a specific country-case of labour market integration, each chapter illuminates specific nuances of the interpretive biographic method in its application to integration studies.

To what extent do material benefits remain important and to what extent can migrants be resilient when facing their loss? The chapter about **Switzerland** explores the relationship between the material and non-material (or humanistic) in labour market integration. It invites to think about what is more important for the informants: to conquer the world in economic terms and get back to career or to revive fragile human relations. The chapter specifically examines conflicting epiphanies that the interviewed female migrants develop about the meaningfulness of achieving professional status abroad versus remaining good parents and good people. The chapter examines the epiphanic conflict between economic incentives for and moral benefits from migration that migrants re-evaluate when dealing with such critical events as divorce, separation from children, or imprisonment. The ambivalent nature of such complex identity boons is illuminated by the trajectories and epiphanic moments of migrant women who are mothers seeking to restore their relationship with children and looking for positive meanings in the experienced traumatic events. Maria Mexi shows how such women deal with new personified or

institutionally-personified or both turning points that are steered by their ‘mentors’ from their new ethnic- and gender-solidarity networks either in prison or in a migrant support centre.

The intersecting phenomena of epiphanic ambivalence and personification of turning points are further addressed in the chapter about **Denmark**. Illuminating the gendered nature of the epiphanic conflict, Katrine Sofie Bruun Bennetzen and Michelle Pace examine the integration trajectories of highly educated women who are family migrants. The chapter explores their agentic strategies that are activated through personified turning points within various contexts of gender relations. The multi-directionality and dynamics of herein emerging epiphanic passages manifests itself in the women’s progression from aspirational failure at destination and consequent frustration toward hope for expected decision on asylum applications or obtaining a relatively good job. The chapter also illuminates how ambivalent epiphanies may be grounded in gendered clusters of turning points (such as divorce at origin or legal status at destination, on the one hand, and events related to female solidarity groups, on the other).

The migrants’ management of their own epiphanic conflicts is further addressed in detail in the chapter about **Canada**. The authors assess contradictory epiphanies and epiphanic passages within the institutional context of Canadian Immigration law that enables migrants’ access to a desired legal status. This is illuminated by migrants’ accumulation of the ‘Canadian experience’ and waiting for the ‘permanent resident’ status, the latter becoming a credential for secure employment. Claire Ellis and Anna Triandafyllidou carefully explore the role of the state and the global pandemic crisis in the creation of such ‘waiting’ epiphanic passages.

Developing the ‘epiphanic passage’ theme further, the chapter about **Finland** brings forward its specific type – the ‘toad pool’, which becomes a socio-anthropological metaphor for a down-scaled, tedious, long-term, and eventually unrewarding job in a foreign country. Quivine Ndomo and Nathan Lillie note that such ‘toad pool’ stories are normally hidden from the public eye despite their highly dynamic nature. Through the heuristic tool of ‘disaggregated agency’ [adapted from Emirbayer & Mische, 1998 and Katz, 2004], Ndomo and Lillie show the interpretive dynamics within the ‘toad pool’ epiphanic passage: from high-stake aspirations to despair and civic death – the death of the hero that happens as a cumulative effect in their failed migrant agency.

The chapter about the **Czech Republic** further illuminates the illusory nature of the cumulative effect, which often takes place in epiphanic passages. The authors thus unravel the cumulative effect of a major international event such as war and show how it is operationalised through a series of very specific critical encounters, which may have different meanings for different migrants. To what extent can the war affect biographies and epiphanies? When the whole world goes upside down (war), does it mean that your own small world is being ruined in response? Not always, as Olga Gheorghiev and Dino Numerato argue. They show how the cumulative effect of the war becomes intensified by impeded educational rights and career opportunities for skilled women from Syria and Ukraine. The chapter analyses in more depth the relationship between parallel critical events within a turning point



cluster and looks specifically into the relationship between institutional and personified turning points. Gheorghiev and Numerato further show the emergence of overlapping epiphanic triangles and unfinished epiphanies or such migrant's self-positioning when their identity boon has not yet been found.

The cumulative effect specifically in the management of epiphanic triangles is studied in-depth in the chapter about the **UK** and is conceptualised by Francesca Caló and Simone Baglioni as the 'management of time'. Exploring the lives of high-skill migrants, Caló and Baglioni unveil nuances of migrants' precarious temporality of 'being lost nowhere'.

The cumulative epiphanic effect is further addressed in the Italian chapter. Mattia Collini illuminates the role of 'turning point clusters' in labour market integration. He explores the dynamics of various turning points that affect a migrant and notes their inter-connectivity.

In the concluding chapter of the book, Irina Isaakyan, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Simone Baglioni reinterpret the findings from the previous chapters in the light of the 'cultural monomyth' theory elaborated by Joseph Campbell (2008[1949]). The authors use the heuristic device of the 'cultural monomyth' in reference to a recognised socio-cultural script around an epiphanic passage to explore in-depth relations within the informants' epiphanic triangles and finalise the interpretive theory of labour market integration – a theory that is meant to enrich existing global methodologies.

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# Chapter 2

## Female Migrants' Experiences of Labour Market 'Integration' in Denmark



Michelle Pace and Katrine Sofie Bruun Bennetzen

### 2.1 Introduction

Denmark's Aliens Act, passed by the Danish Parliament (Folketinget) in 1983, was regarded as one of Europe's most liberal. This was at a time when Denmark experienced an influx of refugees from Turkey and Pakistan as well as former Yugoslavia due to ongoing wars and civil conflict. Family reunification had been introduced a decade earlier, in a context where Denmark was considered one of the most ethnically homogeneous societies in the world (Gundelach, 2001).

However, the Aliens Act has been continuously amended. From June 2015 to June 2019, when Inger Støjberg was Minister of Immigration, Integration and Housing, it was modified more than 100 times (Bendixen, 2019a). A key factor in the number of restrictions introduced to this Act since the 1980s has been the influence of the Progress Party<sup>1</sup> (Fremskridtspartiet) and, subsequently, the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), which have dominated political narratives and public debates on 'integration problems' in Danish society, particularly with regard to 'non-Western immigrants'. In his opening address to Parliament on 6 October 2015, then-prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen announced a new integration

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<sup>1</sup>The Progress Party first entered Parliament after the 1973 'Landslide Election'. It immediately emerged as the second largest party in Denmark. But the party gradually lost voter support and eventually also its representation in Parliament after some of its leading members left to establish the Danish People's Party in 1995.

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policy wherein the focus would be on ensuring that refugees found employment immediately after being granted asylum in Denmark.

Characterising the high levels of unemployment among ‘non-Western immigrants’ as indicative of the failure of existing integration policies, Rasmussen declared this new policy focus to be aimed at refugees arriving in Denmark in the wake of the European ‘refugee crisis’. The underlying assumption was that it was through employment that refugees would be socially, culturally, and economically integrated into Danish society. Female migrants were specifically targeted as in need of labour market integration: ‘It is absolutely crucial that we get more non-Western women working. Employment amongst refugees and immigrants is improving in general, but women are still some way behind – including those that have been in the country for many years’, Inger Støjberg (Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration, 2018) iterated: ‘That means that many of those women are without work and knowledge of the norms and values of Danish society, and are in practice isolated from Danish society’.

This ‘work first’ strategy and ensuing political narratives generally contributed to a polarised environment in public debates. In light of these developments, this chapter focuses on female migrants’ efforts at integrating into the Danish labour market. Numerous studies have demonstrated how the experience of integration is gendered and often to the detriment of women (Canning, 2016; Freedman, 2008; Spijkerboer, 2018). Recent reports by the Danish Refugee Council (2019, 2020a, b) similarly suggest that female refugees are particularly disadvantaged within the Danish integration regime; they generally experience limited legal rights, limited access to paid employment, pressure to undertake unpaid care work, obstacles to learning the Danish language and to building a social network, as well as poverty due to the limited ‘integration benefit’ (*integrationsydelse*).

We therefore seek to investigate whether the experiences of female migrants reveal the foundational nature and logics of Denmark’s integration regime and to explore the coping strategies of these same refugees in their encounter with said regime. Empirically, the chapter focuses on the biographical accounts of eight female migrants in Denmark and their experiences of labour market integration (LMI). In the migrant-integration regime nexus, two types of navigation strategies emerge based on (prior) experiences, motivations, and resources. We will elaborate on these through personal narratives that reveal how female migrants strive to transform their host society and make it habitable. While these narratives refer to both fragmentation and a lack of presence, they are also stories of hope, resilience, and perseverance.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first section provides a background of recently arrived immigrants in Denmark. It also serves as a profile review of these recent arrivals and which barriers they faced to enter the Danish labour market. We then explain how a biographical perspective helps us delve deeper into the experiences of eight female migrants and how it allows us to nuance their gendered experience of the Danish labour market. Then, in the methodology section, we provide details of how these biographical interviews were conducted and analysed. The next section serves to outline the themes that emerge from these eight



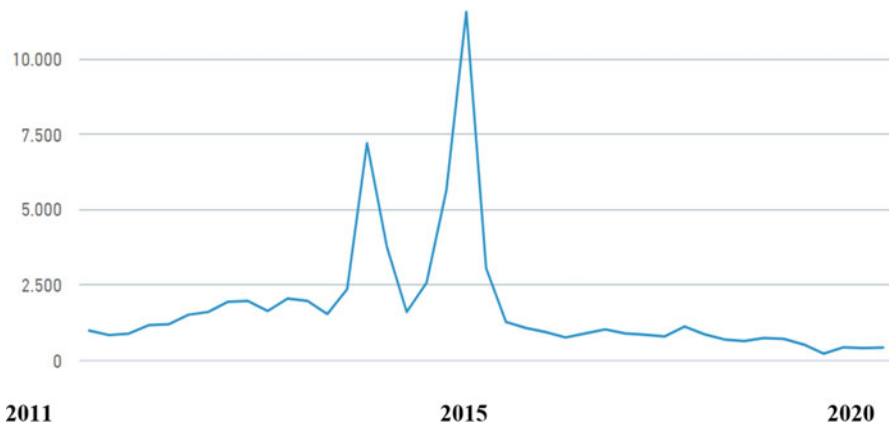
biographical accounts, which draw upon both instrumental and emotional factors shaping the 'integration' (re)routes of our female narrators as well as associated generative or withdrawing epiphanies provoked by turning points. We thus seek to highlight turning points in the integration (re)routes of our female narrators while outlining the epiphanic moments presented in their narrations – whether generative or withdrawing realisations. The fifth section offers a typology of the actors and factors that trigger epiphanic moments in the life trajectories of our interviewees. We conclude with a summary of our key findings.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2 Contemporary Patterns of Migration in Denmark

This section provides a background of contemporary patterns of migration to Denmark to foreground eight biographical narratives of migrant women's experiences. The aim is to highlight their compounded stories of hope and resilience in the wake of their resettlement and what added value such an approach gives to the extant debates.

### 2.2.1 *The Scope of Migration to Denmark*

As visualised in Fig. 2.1 (showing number of asylum applicants per quarter of a year), the number of asylum applicants peaked in 2015 during which more than



**Fig. 2.1** Number of Asylum Applicants. (Source: Danmarks Statistik)

<sup>2</sup>The authors wish to thank former SIRIUS H2020 project Danish team members Liv Bjerre and Somdeep Sen for their work on the project's Work Package 6 and the ensuing report. This present chapter builds on this earlier work.

**Table 2.1** Residency Permits Issued by Category, 2015

Category of Residency	2015	Percentage 2015
Work permits for EU/EEA citizens	37,366	44
Study permits	12,658	15
Family reunification/ spousal visa	12,138	14
Work permits for non-EU/EEA citizens	11,682	14
Asylum Grants	10,849	13
<b>In Total</b>	<b>84,693</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 'Tal og fakta på udlændingeområdet, 2015', *Udlændingestyrelsen* (Figures and facts in the area of foreigners, 2015, The Danish Immigration Service)

21,000 people sought protection in Denmark (Dansk Statistik, 2020). During this period, asylum seekers were mostly Syrians, Iranians, Afghans, Iraqis, or stateless peoples fleeing war, conflict, and persecution, hence with a strong claim for asylum (Bendixen, 2020a).

The number of refugees *granted* asylum also reached a peak in 2015 similar to the overall number of new Danish residency permits. A residency permit is typically granted for a temporary time period and can be renewed; for instance, work or study permits, spousal visas, family reunification, or asylum grants (Table 2.1).

As shown in Table 2.1, most applicants were EU/EEA citizens who were granted a residency permit on the basis of employment. The second largest group in this category were students attending Danish study programmes, followed by people granted residency based on family reunification or a spousal visa, followed by non-European citizens coming to Denmark for a job offer. The smallest group were asylum claimants granted refugee status (Dansk Statistik, 2020).

This order and hierarchy in the distribution of residency permits has been roughly maintained since 2015, with the lowest number of residencies granted to refugees between 2015–2020 (*ibid.*). Since 2016, the numbers of registered asylum-seekers have been decreasing every year and reached a historic low in 2020–2021 (Dansk Statistik, 2020; Bendixen, 2020a). Border closure due to the Covid-19 pandemic brought new arrivals to a near halt in 2020 with a total of 1.515 Danish asylum applications, while the number had risen to 2095 in 2021 (Bendixen, 2020a; UIM, 2022). From January until mid-May 2022, 2,700 asylum applicants have been registered, while 1,983 of them are Ukrainian refugees (Bendixen, 2022; UIM, 2022).

### 2.2.2 Contemporary Asylum Governance

European border externalisation, as well as restricted asylum and immigration policies, were the apparent reasons for the continuing decrease in the number of asylum claimants *and* asylum claimants granted residencies between 2015 and 2019 in Denmark before the COVID-19 pandemic led to an immediate border closure in

2020 (Bendixen, 2020a; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). Although these are general trends within the EU, the Danish case is a particular one with regard to its asylum and immigration governance policies: Denmark has traditionally been known as a liberal frontrunner for refugee protection, while Danish immigration policies have become some of the most restrictive policies in all of the EU within the past five to seven years (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2017). At the height of the 'refugee crisis', Denmark was known amongst refugees as the host country where asylum applications were speedily processed in a matter of six months and where accommodation was provided (Pace, 2017). Once word of mouth started to spread from successful applicants to aspiring ones, namely Syrians, steps were taken by the Danish government to tighten the asylum system (ibid.). In response to the surge in the numbers of those seeking asylum over the summer of 2015, Denmark ran an anti-refugee ad campaign in Arabic-language newspapers warning refugees against going to Denmark (ibid.). These and similar restrictive measures placed Denmark in the international spotlight.

In 2015 then-prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen suggested that international conventions on refugee protection should be adjusted, to control the unprecedented influx of asylum seekers to Europe. The Danish government further announced its intention to investigate the possibility of limiting the influence of the European Court of Human Rights during Denmark's presidency of the Council of Europe in 2017, not least with regard to matters of immigration (ibid.). In 2016, Denmark drew further international attention for allowing the police to search asylum seekers and seize their assets, and for passing a bill restricting refugees' access to family reunification for up to three years (ibid; Pace, 2017). Moreover, debate ensued on how deportation centres are part of the formalised asylum architecture in Denmark. In 2019, Denmark was severely criticised by the Council of Europe's Anti-Torture Committee for alleged 'inhumane' conditions at Danish Immigration Detention Centers – Nykøbing Falster and Ellebæk – as well as for being the first country to take steps to repatriate Syrian nationals by revoking their residency permits, although all cases have undergone legal appeal (Canning, 2019; Bendixen, 2020b; CPT, 2020). That same year, Denmark again drew international media attention for implementing an incentive programme urging refugees, namely Syrians from Damascus, to return (Bojesen, 2019). The Danish Refugee Councils' head of asylum, Eva Singer, said that many refugees found it too difficult to enter the Danish labour market and become established (quoted in Bojesen, 2019). During the first ten months of 2019, 438 refugees and migrants left Denmark based on said incentive programme, which includes a payment from the state and the option for asylum seekers to change their mind within a year. Thus, Danish residencies are not immediately lost upon return to the home country. According to the DRC, this additional clause encouraged people to return home (Bojesen, 2019). Nonetheless, the UNHCR deems returning to Damascus 'unsafe', and there have been reports of deaths and disappearances in the case of returned Syrians (Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, 2020; The New Arab, 2018). Lastly, during the period 2017–2022, Denmark has not been receiving its annual quota of 500 refugees set by the UN resettlement system (Bendixen, 2020a; Bendixen, 2022). Prior to 2017, and since 1978, Denmark had received 500 refugees a year – selected by

the UN – for resettlement (Lauritzen, 2020). The programme is separate from, and in addition to, the EU's efforts to distribute refugees among member states. The former Danish government said its decision to no longer honour its obligation in line with the UN's quota system was the 'burden' of integrating the refugees that had already arrived (Mass, 2017). Denmark also requested a more flexible quota regime, where member states are not obliged to take a certain number of refugees every year (*ibid.*). The same line is followed by the current government, which did begin to take quota refugees in 2020, although nowhere near 500 a year (Lauritzen, 2020; MS Actionaid, 2020). By comparison, and as of 2018, when Denmark did not receive any quota refugees, Sweden received 4900, while Norway received 2719 quota refugees (UNHCR, 2020).

### ***2.2.3 The Main Routes to Europe and the Struggle of Reaching Scandinavia***

For people from states officially recognised as conflict zones, such as Syria, Eritrea, or Afghanistan, it is usually not possible to enter European territory legally. Thus, the majority of people claiming asylum in Denmark must cross borders illegally. This often implies obtaining forged identity papers, and in many cases, travelling with a human smuggler who knows how to get people across national borders (Bendixen, 2020a). Although a large number of migrants continue arriving in Europe via the sea route from Turkey to Greece, most follow the Libyan route (*ibid.*). Travelling through Libya and the Sahara desert is an even more dangerous route, where many lose their lives on the way. Political instability in Libya has led European actors to cooperate with Libyan militias on border control and containment of migrants to prevent them from crossing the Mediterranean (Bendixen, 2020a). This has made the situation for migrants travelling through Libya even more dangerous, thus many seek to travel via less familiar routes, such as from Egypt or Tunisia to Italy (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, the journey is far from over when reaching European borderlands; in Greece or Italy, migrants have a hard time surviving. Fences have been installed, while surveillance and extensive border control units are part of the scene at all national borders within the EU, which makes it extremely difficult to reach Scandinavia (*ibid.*). Thousands of migrants are stuck on the Greek island of Lesbos or in Bosnia, where the conditions of newly-arrived migrants are reportedly inhumane (ReliefWeb, 2020). Meanwhile, a significant number of women are exposed to sexual assault or rape along their journey to reach Europe (WHO, 2016). Interview materials collated by SIRIUS Danish team members (2018–2020) suggest that most migrants who manage to reach Denmark arrive via boat journeys travelling through Lebanon and continuing onward across Turkish, Greek, North Macedonian, and German borders. Many asylum claimants arriving in Denmark aim to use Denmark as a transit country to reach Sweden or Germany as most-desired host societies (Bendixen, 2020a). However, many do not reach their final desired destination and are forced to remain in Denmark if their fingerprints

have been taken during registration (as stipulated by the Dublin regulation). (ibid.). Thus, the journey to receiving societies can cause significant trauma. Findings from our research have been reiterated by the UK charity, Syria Relief, which estimates that approximately 75 percent of Syrians show Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, while international organisations such as the UNHCR, World Health Organisation, Doctors of the World, and the European Psychiatric Association express concern that migrants, namely refugees, are not obtaining the necessary psychological treatment and are commonly suffering from anxiety, depression, and psychotic disorders (Syria Relief, 2021; The Guardian 2016). The UNHCR underlines how mental health disorders can create long-term barriers to integration into host societies and that much of the emotional suffering of resettled migrants is also directly related to stresses of the present and concerns for the future (Bailey, 2016; UNHCR, 2007).

### 2.3 Informants, Methodological Reflections and Trajectories

With the above background in mind, data for this chapter was collected through semi-structured interviews and conversations with eight female migrants: Five from west Asia/Arab region – namely Habiba, Shokouh, Aisha, Aida, and Dana – and three from south Asia – Alina, Shirisha, and Amala. To protect the identity of our interviewees, we use these pseudonyms throughout.<sup>3</sup>

Of these, five arrived before 2014 (Shokouh, Habiba, Dana, Aida, and Amala), while one arrived in 2014 (Aisha) at the height of the so-called refugee crisis, and two arrived after 2014 (Alina and Shirisha).

Habiba came to Denmark in 2008 on a family reunification visa. Following her divorce settlement, she now holds a temporary residency permit since she has children in Denmark.<sup>4</sup> She wishes to apply for permanent residency as soon as she is eligible. Shokouh arrived in Denmark with her four children for the first time in 1998 on a family reunification visa based on her ex-husband's asylum status. In 2004, the family (except for the oldest son) returned to their country of origin. In 2010, she returned to Denmark with her children. Before leaving Denmark (in 2004) she had obtained a Sect. 7.1 refugee convention status and was later granted

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<sup>3</sup>The authors conducted multiple rounds of interviews with Shokouh (Michelle), Habiba (Michelle) and Aisha (Katrine and Michelle), from which we draw direct quotations. However, we also incorporate material collated by Liv Bjerre (former member of the SIRIUS Danish team) to ensure richness in terms of the saturation of our biographic data. In total, we estimate that, collectively, these members of the SIRIUS Danish team spent approximately 30 hours with these informants. This enables us to create a composite biography of our eight informants as the overall narrative framing this chapter.

<sup>4</sup>Residency permits are, in principle, meant to provide temporary protection, with the exception of permanent residency.

permanent residency. Shokouh recently obtained a Danish passport. Aida has temporary protection (Sect. 7.3) refugee status, which is easily revoked, and granted on the basis of the general situation in the country of origin. Aisha has been granted asylum under a Sect. 7.1 refugee convention status which accounts for individual persecution and is difficult to revoke. She too seeks to apply for permanent residency. Dana is family reunified, while Amala and Shirisaha hold spousal visas, since their husbands are employed in Denmark. Alina holds a student visa.

Aisha has secured gainful employment that matches her skills and qualifications and is thus considered a ‘success’ story. The other seven informants have been unable to find full time employment that matches their skills, experience, and qualifications and who, as a result, were compelled to take on unrelated (and often, low-skilled) jobs or adult education. These informants shed light on similar but also varied life conditions and career trajectories, which reflect their lived experiences of integration in the Danish labour market.

Recruitment of our eight interlocutors occurred primarily through personal contacts and ‘snowball sampling’. As is often the case with these recruitment methods, contact was first made via acquaintances – in our case of the Danish team leader (for Habiba, Shokouh, Aisha, Amala, Alina, and Shirisha). Other acquaintances provided the contact information for Aida and Dana. For the purposes of this chapter, these gatekeepers were critical in facilitating recruitment in the field.

Interviews conducted for this chapter were primarily aimed at gaining a better understanding of female migrants’ own perceptions of their LMI needs, the challenges they faced along the way, and any opportunities that enabled them to find a job in Denmark. Interviewees were then asked to share with the interviewer their hopes, expectations, and plans regarding their life in Denmark. During these interviews, respondents were asked to identify critical events, turning points, and epiphanies that shaped their lived experiences of LMI (or lack thereof) in Denmark. A narrative approach to interviewing was adopted, given that the information we were seeking to collate required that our interlocutors felt safe enough to disclose personal information and discuss sensitive topics pertaining to their lived experiences and related feelings and interpretations. Therefore, an open style of interviewing was the key frame, which allowed our interviewees to narrate their life stories (in their preferred language of either Danish or English since the interviewers were versed in neither Arabic nor Pashto nor Dari) in a semi-structured, but relatively open way. Narratives, in this context, are a wealth in terms of acting as carriers of meaning that our interviewees give to their life trajectories – from leaving their homeland to finding a job in Denmark or having to take alternative life paths because they fail to secure a job that reflects their skills and experiences. These narratives thus come from people with strong emotions who are trying to make sense of their new world in the host society and, in the process, create that world. It is this creation that we seek to unfold here through a compounded narrative of our interviewees’ biographies.

Habiba and Shokouh had several conversations with the Danish team lead partner. They were also interviewed later by Liv Bjerre in their respective homes during the Covid-19 lockdown. Interviewees and interviewers followed the distancing guidelines and sat about five meters apart. Since both the Danish lead partner

(originally from Malta) and the former team member (a 'native' Dane) were female interviewers interviewing female migrants, we observe that our interlocutors narrated their biographies in very similar ways to each interviewer. One may therefore ponder, at this stage, as to whether our interviewees may have related their life accounts differently had one of the interviewers been a male colleague. Moreover, the fact that the former team member could be considered as 'an insider of the host community', the interview data gathered was no different from the data collected by the Danish team lead partner who may be considered an outsider to the host community herself, in similar ways as our interviewees (Irgil, 2020). In fact, we may expect that an outsider-outsider dialogue may trigger different responses to our research questions when compared to an insider-outsider conversation – but this was not the case in these instances (*ibid.*).

Supplementary interviews with Aisha were conducted by team member, Katrine Bennetzen – also a female 'native' Dane. Aisha's integration biography relies mostly on information provided during this final interview. Former team member Liv Bjerre interviewed our other five informants.<sup>5</sup> Trust and mutuality were easily established between the interviewer and the interviewee. Hence, we conclude that interviewees felt equally at ease with all team members, and this reflects on the time taken by the interviewers to ensure that the environment and setting of the interviews were the most comfortable for the interviewees.

All eight interviews were recorded after the appropriate consent was received. For Dana, Aida, Amala, Alina, and Shirisha short companion notes were prepared; longer notes were kept for Habiba, Shokouh, and Aisha. Ethically it was deemed appropriate to allow each interviewee to guide the interviewer through her life journey, from the moment she left her homeland, to the point of arrival in Denmark. In each case, the interviewer took note of threshold moments, turning points, and epiphanies in the life trajectory of the interviewee, particularly moments that transformed the particular life path that interviewees intended to follow once they were in Denmark. Note was also taken of specific challenges faced by interviewees as they were narrated by each. Table 2.2 sums up the overall profile of each of our interviewees.

## 2.4 Biographies of Integration: Turning Points and Epiphanies in the Narratives of Female Migrants in Denmark

The narratives presented in this section draw upon the experiences of our eight informants following their arrival in Denmark as refugees, family reunified, or on a spousal or student visa. Their experiences are framed according to turning points in their lives that triggered epiphanies.

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<sup>5</sup>Liv Bjerre took up a position at Aarhus University (AU) and informed the lead partner that she could not co-author this chapter due to her new responsibilities at AU.

**Table 2.2** Profiles of Interviewees

Interviewee pseudonym	Age (decade range: 20–29, 30–39, etc.)	Education level	Area of origin	Years at destination	Profession at origin	Profession at destination
Habiba	30–39	BA from home country. Currently obtaining a BA in Denmark	West Asia/ Arab region	12	Working in her field of competency at origin	Adult education; assistant position; currently studying
Shokouh	50–59	BA from country of origin; 1 year education obtained in Denmark.	West Asia	17 years	Working in her field of competency at origin	Translation and social work (freelance); periods of unemployment; supplementary work in the service sector
Aisha	40–49	MA from country of origin. Screen writing/ creative writing	West Asia/ Arab region	6 years	Journalist	Media adviser
Dana	50–59	MA from country of origin	West Asia	19 years	Experience in the health sector for two years, while studying, and before arriving in Denmark	Currently unemployed; previously short-term positions; studies related to public health.
Aida	50–59	BA from country of origin	West Asia/ Arab region	8 years	30 years experience in her field of competency at origin	Work in the service sector; hopes to become self-employed
Amala	30–39	BA from country of origin	South Asia	8 years	Amala was a student before arriving in Denmark	Adult education; assistant position; low-skilled jobs in service sector
Alina	20–29	BA from country of origin	South Asia	6 years	Experience working in the airline industry at origin	Completing MA in Denmark; part time low-skilled jobs in service sector

(continued)



**Table 2.2** (continued)

Interviewee pseudonym	Age (decade range: 20–29, 30–39, etc.)	Education level	Area of origin	Years at destination	Profession at origin	Profession at destination
Shirisha	20–29	BA from country of origin	South Asia	4 years	Two years of qualified employment/ experience at origin	Low-skilled jobs in service sector

The main challenges common to all interviewees fall under five categories: Discrimination and prejudice based on being Asian women or women from the Arab region; navigating Danish laws and rules, namely requirements for maintaining or obtaining a residency status; learning the Danish language; recognition of skills obtained in country of origin; and gaining qualified employment.

In the next section, we present these women's narratives by framing challenges in terms of turning points and epiphanies, with a particular focus on their compounded experiences. Individual narratives are used as examples.

### 2.4.1 *Turning Points Related to Emotional Triggers*

A commonly experienced emotional trigger mentioned by all interviewees is facing discrimination and xenophobic reactions. In some cases, these experiences resulted in either generative or withdrawing epiphanies, thus altering the interviewees' life pathways and course of events.

Amala describes how she has been subjected to such experiences at her workplace, where her manager always assigned her unpleasant tasks and watched to point out any mistake that she might make. Meanwhile, another colleague harassed her:

He would say: "you people are not good people. Asians are s\*\*\* people" or refer to me as "the monkey from Asia." I was crying, and sometimes he would push me. So, it was really hard on me.

Shirisha similarly notes how she was treated differently because of not being European:

It is not because I am not Danish, it is because I am not European. In the workplace and in other places they treat us differently. They give priority to Europeans, and not to us. And on the bus or the train, they look at us differently.

In most cases, such experiences have led our interviewees to withdraw from these situations as they are left feeling that they do not belong in Denmark. Shirisha's way of coping with such experiences is simply to ignore them: 'We are in a different

country now, so it is better if we just ignore it'. Both Shirisha and Alina explain how their network in Denmark consists mainly of other Asian migrants whom they met at their workplace, through language classes, or at Asian festivals. They also emphasise how they otherwise feel excluded and are unsure how to establish new contacts. Habiba elucidates how she does not take it personally when faced with discrimination since she does not consider herself Danish:

I believe it is more difficult for some of my friends who grew up in Denmark but have parents from elsewhere. The difference is that they consider themselves Danish. Me, I am not Danish and will never be. I have a home country.

She echoes the experiences of other interviewees in terms of being delegated the least desirable tasks at her previous workplace and not being considered an equal member of staff. She also remarks on the feeling of isolation and the initial difficulties of resettlement:

Except for our neighbour, who I would sometimes greet in the hallway, I would not see or talk to anyone except for my husband. . . I used to consider it normal, that I would be isolated and left at home attending to the kids and domestic matters. I had no support network back then. My husband's family was on his side, and I did not have any friends yet. I was all alone.

Such incidents trigger emotional turning points amongst our interviewees who realise that gaining a social support system is of the utmost importance to feel a better sense of belonging in Denmark. Most, if not all, of our interviewees have friends from similar ethnic backgrounds or origins, yet they express a keen interest in establishing closer relations with 'native Danes'. They explain how helpful it has been to encounter other female migrants who have been in Denmark for a longer time, since they know how it is to be considered 'an outsider' and recognise how difficult it can be to navigate rules and norms in a new setting, while they feel that they have become familiarised with local systems. Some interviewees have managed to establish a wider social network that includes 'native Danes'. In these cases, interviewees have formed relations through shared interests and engagements.

Aida feels that she is well integrated despite her lack of Danish language skills. She describes how she is involved in a range of activities, several of which she has initiated herself, including a migrant community at her local church, communal dining, an organisation for women that hosts monthly activities, and a catering firm that brings migrant women together to cook. Through these activities she has been able to meet several Danes and appreciate the history of volunteering in Denmark. Dana similarly describes her wedding in a local church in 2007 as a crucial turning point, where she and her husband finally found a network and started to improve their Danish, through their increasing interactions with native Danes at the church.

One interviewee is single, three are married; the other four have undergone difficult divorces with husbands who, in some instances, have been described as 'abusive'. Such experiences of abuse commonly result in a sense of isolation, exhaustion, and low self-esteem – or, as Habiba describes it: 'Due to the lack of support from your partner, you always feel like you are falling behind. . . And when you are falling behind, you don't feel that you are good enough'. Establishing a new

life in a new setting while undergoing such emotional turmoil is not an easy task. Shokouh recounts similar emotional turmoil following her divorce, and explains the sense of hope following the divorce settlement as an emotional turning point triggered by the generative epiphany that she was now 'free':

I fled from my ex-husband. When you flee from a violent person, you have a lot of fear in your body and in your thoughts. When I finished my divorce papers in 2010, I could finally relax a bit. And I was looking forward to the future when I arrived in Denmark. . . I was really happy. It was like I was flying. It was like I thought – after all the problems I had, and anxiety – that now everything was going to get better and I had a lot of hope.

As suggested by our interviews with Habiba and Shokouh, such epiphanies can co-exist in the psychological aftermath of enduring and surviving social control and domestic abuse.

As elaborated by our female interviewees' narrations, having a social support system is crucial for gaining a sense of belonging in a new-found setting. As such, turning points presented in this section either relate to finding a community or to feelings of exclusion and isolation. All interviewees underline how experiences of exclusion lead to withdrawing epiphanies of 'not belonging', or being unable to establish a new life in their state of resettlement, as well as feelings of hopelessness. Although the emotional turning points that have been described thus far pose many challenges, and naturally influence the instrumental turning points (and vice versa), it is the turning points related to instrumental factors that appear to introduce the biggest hurdles in the lives of our interviewees. They all recount struggles related to their employment and residency status as main concerns. It is to these factors that we now turn.

#### ***2.4.2 Turning Points Related to Instrumental Factors***

***Employment and Language-Learning*** For our female interviewees, employment is crucial in their efforts to integrate in their Danish host society. Qualified work often proves the shortest route for migrants to become familiarised with the native language and culture, build a social network, improve mental health, earn trust and respect, and secure the right to apply for permanent residency. A systematised way of ensuring that the previously obtained skills and experience of migrants can be transferred to the Danish labour market would require a skills recognition system at the municipal level as well as specialised LMI programmes aimed at 'bridging the gap' between previously obtained skills and how to apply them in a new-found setting (Pace & Bennetzen, 2020, 2021). In the current environment, 'non-Western' migrants (particularly female refugees) rarely hold work positions that reflect their qualifications and skills – even if their education is obtained in Denmark (Bjerre, 2020; Danish Refugee Council, 2019). This tendency arguably indicates a form of structural racism that builds on preconceived notions of 'non-Western' people and their skills and abilities (Bjerre, 2020; Davis, 1997; DRC Center for Vulnerable Refugees, 2019; Spijkerboer et al., 2000).

Only one of the eight interviewees currently holds a job within her field of competency; the other seven are either unemployed, working in low-wage jobs, performing unskilled labour, or obtaining adult education. A common Danish political narrative is that non-Western migrant women do not want to work or are prevented from working due to cultural constraints (Bjerre, 2020; DRC Center for Vulnerable Refugees, 2019; Olwig, 2011). Our encounters with our eight informants suggest otherwise: They are keen to earn a living, form part of the Danish employment market, and have their skills and experiences recognised and utilised. Many have done several unpaid internships within their respective fields, but are continuously faced with the predicament that even if they perform well, employers commonly prefer to hire ‘native’ Danish graduates for paid positions.

We observed a number of withdrawing epiphanies associated with the lack of opportunities for employment in line with our interviewees’ respective competencies and experience; Amala explains that before moving to Denmark she had expected to find a job that matches her qualifications, but after many unsuccessful applications, she now has a changed view of the Danish labour market:

In [my home country] if you have an education and good grades, people will hire you based on your diploma, but here it is only possible to get a job if you get a recommendation. Network is everything.

Shokouh similarly recounts:

Since 2018, I have sent hundreds of applications, but I have not gotten a job. So, I have lost hope. . . I think they should consider my skills, and my education. . . I have been disappointed many times.

Learning the Danish language is also considered a key challenge. Aisha explains how it was a struggle for her to complete the mandatory Danish language courses, which is a requirement for applying for permanent residency. Likewise, Habiba expounds on how writing in Danish is a significant barrier in her ongoing studies. Shokouh confides that she believes that her Danish is not considered good enough and may be the key reason why she has not managed to secure a job that reflects her skills and qualifications. Aida, Alina, and Shirisha also describe how difficult it can be to find the time to learn Danish while working and similarly underline the difficulty of obtaining qualified employment without being fluent in Danish.

Amala plans to finish her Danish education: ‘It is really important because if I am doing something later to improve myself, I must start with the Danish language. This is the thing I lack the most – being able to speak Danish’. To increase her chances of being hired after finishing her studies, Alina started taking Danish language classes in February 2020; a month later everything was closed due to the Covid-19 lockdown. She is looking forward to language school reopening, noting the difficulty of finding the time and money for the course.

Turning points triggered by similar instrumental factors – as these emerged in the narratives of our female interviewees – mostly stem from the problem of finding qualified employment. While some of our interviewees experienced generative epiphanies, when they recognised that they need to keep struggling to achieve their goals, most are rather discouraged and have had withdrawing epiphanies,

since their skills are not recognised and they fail to gain qualified employment. While most of our interviewees expected to find a job related to their education, they have had to take on unskilled or low-paid jobs to make a living.

Amala realised early on that it would be difficult for her to obtain a job related to her education: 'After a time I understood that it is not so easy to continue with something related to my education'. Instead, she took on a low-wage job in the service and hospitality sector. She was employed there for 2 years, until the COVID-19 lockdown, when she was fired overnight. Alina first applied for jobs in her field of competency but without luck. Today she is working part-time in a low-skilled labour job. She is satisfied with her job but clearly discouraged about career prospects in Denmark: 'I can't get a good job here'. She explains that all her fellow (international) students work as cleaners and dishwashers. She therefore does not include her fellow students as potential contacts that can lead her to a future job in Denmark.

Shirisha too was hoping to work in her field of competency but has only been employed in low-skilled jobs in Denmark. When asked about what she could improve that will enable her to get a job that matches her skills, she replies: 'Language'. Although Aida has more than 30 years of work experience within her field, she is currently working in a low-wage job. Due to her lack of Danish language skills, she is not expecting to obtain qualified employment in the future. Thus, Aida and other interviewees have realised that learning the Danish language is crucial for obtaining qualified employment; without mastering the Danish language most find themselves performing unskilled labour in low-wage positions despite their qualifications and experience. For Aida, this turning point led to the withdrawing epiphany that it is too late for her to gain qualified employment within her field of competency, since time is against her in terms of mastering the Danish language. For Amala, Alina, and Shirisha it became a withdrawing epiphany, that even when knowing the Danish language, it is rather difficult to obtain a job within their respective fields without a solid network in Denmark – particularly among 'native' Danes.

***Encounters with Meso-Level Actors*** Encounters with meso-level actors such as municipal caseworkers, teachers, counsellors, civil society actors, or professional contacts appear to have been of crucial importance, either encouraging or discouraging interviewees from pursuing certain options in their pathways to LMI in Denmark. Facing discrimination or discouragement from meso-level actors are shared experiences amongst our interviewees and have had a fundamental impact on their hopes and aspirations. In some cases, such encounters have led to withdrawing epiphanies, with our interviewees concluding that there was no reason to aspire to attaining their goals. Encouraging encounters with meso-level actors have however also led to generative epiphanies – and even paved the way for more positive labour market experiences amongst our interviewees.

In some cases, our interviewees also experienced a discouraging encounter followed by an encouraging one, as in the case of Habiba:

Last summer [the summer of 2019], I decided to talk to a student counsellor, since I wanted to study...The counsellor was really not nice to me. It was so strange. After he had been speaking for two minutes, he said, you haven't taken any notes, can you remember all the

information I gave you? I told him no, I thought you were going to help me apply. He responded: If you are not even taking notes now, you will definitely not be able to manage the educational programme.

The counsellor also told Habiba that she did not meet the requirements and did not have enough experience to apply for the educational programme: ‘At the end, he was the reason I waited six months before applying. I was left crying and discouraged, thinking I cannot do this’. At the time, Habiba already had a BA in the same field of study as well as work experience in this field of competency from her country of origin.

Habiba’s encounter with the student counsellor is a good example of a discouraging encounter that led her to a withdrawing epiphany: feeling that she might as well give up on her aspirations of, once again, being educated as a teacher. Fortunately, a chance encounter with another student counsellor provided her with the encouragement she needed; a counsellor at the adult education center (*Voksen Uddannelses Center*, VUC) helped her apply and qualify in the required subjects. This, in turn, enabled her to be eligible to apply for her education: ‘If I had not received this support, I would not have finished my studies’, she remarks.

Aisha similarly notes that she would have been in an entirely different situation if it was not for the ‘great people’ she was fortunate enough to meet. At the time of the interview, she was working in her field of competence, something which she says would not have been possible without the support of her municipal contact person as well as a specific LMI programme for refugees hosted by ‘DJ’, *Dansk Journalistforbund* (the Danish Journalists Association). Their assistance helped her understand the workings of the Danish labour market, while she made contact with her current employer through the DJ LMI programme specifically for journalists with a refugee background.

By contrast to our other interviewees, Aisha was positively surprised by her contact person at the municipal job center who thought ‘outside the box’. She insisted that her municipality contact person facilitated her enrollment onto an English course, since it would be useful for obtaining employment. She was then granted access to a private English course specialised in media communications that later proved to be a significant advantage in securing her current job. These instrumental turning points paved the way for Aisha soon after her arrival in Denmark. Although she has an outstanding résumé and a keen motivation to work in journalism, she is acutely aware of the importance of such encounters, as a key turning point in her work-life path: ‘It is not because I am a heroine. I have had a lot of help. I met the right people at the right time’.

Aisha’s integration narrative is unfortunately a rare one. Most of our interviewees describe discouraging encounters, especially with municipal caseworkers. Shokouh, for instance, felt pressured by the municipality when her job ended and she had to look for another:

I think my case worker was tough on me. . . She pushed me to work in a nursing home. But I said “I can’t.” I’ve tried working in an elderly home before [back in 2002] and it was not good for me. . . They [case workers] cannot understand us. When you have experienced war, blood, and problems, you cannot look at a person who is ill or weak. It [working at an elderly

home] was hard on me and made me revisit my bad memories. I have seen so much blood and death with my own eyes. . . They [case workers] should pay attention to people and what they have experienced. But she [the case worker] pushed me.

To avoid the constant pressure from the municipality, Shokouh decided to borrow money from friends, enroll in a one-year education in the beauty sector, and become self-employed. This turning point in her life, triggered by instrumental factors, was based on an epiphanic moment when she realised that she was not able to provide for her family and pursue her professional aspirations in line with her education; she had to choose a different path in order to become financially stable and ensure the well-being of her children.

This refers to another shared experience amongst our interviewees; pointing at withdrawal epiphanies when the municipality ended up not being the right place to seek support and guidance. Rather, they quickly realised that they had to rely on friends, professional contacts, and in some cases civil society actors or counsellors. Amala, for instance, was positively surprised when she found help at an NGO after giving birth to her daughter: 'I got help from them. Mentally, and for finding a job'. Amala was told about this initiative by a healthcare provider (*sundhedsplejerske*) who made house visits for new mothers: 'If you want, you can go there, spend some time with your baby. And if you have questions, they can provide you with some answers'. The same NGO helped her practice her Danish. She concludes: 'I am really happy to be able to mention this because they helped me [unlike the municipality, which did not]'.

***Time Aspects Related to Resettlement, Residency Status, and Legal Requirements*** Some timely aspects related to the resettling process are considered extremely stressful by our female interviewees (as well as other refugees and migrants we have interviewed in the past). All migrants face ticking clocks, which regulate key aspects of their (migration and) integration process. For most of our interviewees, time plays a crucial role in how they balance their role as mothers, on the one hand, and their personal aspirations for getting integrated into Denmark's labour market, on the other. For instance, Amala explains how she and her husband would like to have another child, but do not want to risk 'the delay'; she can only extend her visa so many times, and if she has not managed to obtain a permanent residency within 10 years, she will have to return to her home country. This stresses her a lot, and it affects their family life: 'If I have a child now, I will be delayed for two years' in meeting the requirements for a permanent residency, where one has to have been employed for 3.5 out of 4 years prior to the processing of the application.

Equally important is the time our interviewees spent 'waiting for a decision' – a decision to have their educational certificates from their countries of origin certified in Denmark or a decision to be granted permanent residency status. The lives of some of our interviewees were placed on hold, because they were deemed to be unskilled, or as not having the required economic resources to invest in their host society. This, in turn, makes it extremely difficult to meet the requirements for permanent residency – specifically in terms of employment and language skills.

What our biographical narratives reveal is that the hopes of our female interviewees are often left suspended, while they await a decision and weigh their options. Shokouh, for instance, waited for 8 years to have her previously-obtained educational certificate from her home country recognised by the Danish Ministry of Education. During this waiting period, she had a strong withdrawal epiphany, triggered by the recognition that it was not possible for her to find work in the education sector in Denmark.

It is an established argument among researchers and asylum lawyers, that Danish immigration laws are made intentionally difficult to navigate, with associated requirements made deliberately challenging to meet (Bendixen, 2019b; Canning, 2019). Moreover, Danish asylum and immigration laws are inherently gendered. For instance, when a female refugee arrives with her spouse, her claim for asylum is commonly not treated independently. Rather, she is granted a consequence status as a result of her husband's claim for asylum (Bennetzen, 2020; Bendixen, 2020c). This places the female refugee in a liminal position, since she would have to make an independent plea for asylum in the event of divorce, which increases the risk of repatriation. In cases where the asylum claims of female refugees are treated independently, they are commonly granted a weaker asylum status than their male counterparts, namely a temporary protection status (Sect. 7.3). As such, female refugees often do not have the same rights as male refugees, while the risk of repatriation is significantly higher (Bennetzen, 2020).

Amala explains how she holds a spousal visa and wishes to become more independent from her husband:

‘In Denmark, men and women are equal, but on a spousal visa, you are not [equal]. Until you get permanent residency, you are dependent on your spouse and his willingness to “extend” your stay. If I get divorced, I will have been here for five years doing nothing’ [subtracting the years being pregnant and on leave, since they do not count when applying for permanent residency].

The time she has spent taking on low-skilled jobs has not added to her career prospects: ‘It has only been a means to do “something” and qualify for staying’.

Moreover, requirements for family reunification as well as for obtaining permanent residency have been continuously tightened in recent years (Bendixen, 2015; Bendixen, 2017). Here, applying for permanent residency requires having been in Denmark for the previous 8 years, finishing Danish language classes at a very high level, passing a ‘citizenship test’ (*medborgerskabsprøve*) and having been employed full-time for the previous 4 years as well as having a certain annual income level (The Danish Immigration Law, 2022). These, as well as many other requirements for obtaining permanent residency, pose a significant barrier for most migrants in Denmark, who are desperately seeking to obtain the right to stay permanently.

Habiba is currently far from qualifying for permanent residency, but wants to finish her education as quickly as possible, so she can apply for permanent residency after 4 years of working. She remarks on the difficulties of all the rules and requirements:



I have struggled a lot here. In my home country, there are many other disadvantages: Illness. . .and, the country does not work. In this country, you have so many things offered to you, but at the same time, you are sad. I am sad that things are not working out. . .You are controlled by many things. The rules in the country. . .You need to do this, and this, and this in order to get a permanent residence permit, for example.

She echoes a recurring epiphany that triggered similar turning points amongst our interviewees; the imposition of ever-changing rules in the Danish immigration system that keeps their life suspended. In the next section, we organise the factors that trigger epiphanies in the pathways of our interviewees, in the form of a typology.

## **2.5 Actors and Factors that Trigger Epiphanies and Turning Points in Interviewees' Integration Pathways**

Table 2.3 is a matrix identifying the key actors and factors that triggered turning points/epiphanies in our interviewees' integration narratives. We further elaborate on these actors and factors below.

As shown in Table 2.3, key actors have emerged as both helpful or constraining in the biographies of these women, particularly municipal case workers. Across all eight narratives, friends have figured as playing a pivotal role in these women's lives, particularly those with similar backgrounds or ethnic origin. Each interviewee narrates how friends have helped them expand their network, taught them how to navigate the Danish system and rules – or both. Since four women do not have relatives in Denmark, family – more often than not – does not figure as an enabling factor during their resettlement. Both Habiba and Shokouh report having faced social control or domestic violence in their marriages. Interviewees with refugee status recount worries about family members back in their home countries, and grieving lost loved ones, without having the option of seeing their family. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all women with children find meaning in struggling to secure a safe future for them.

Encounters with meso-level actors such as municipality caseworkers, civil society actors, counsellors, and teachers as well as professional contacts have been of crucial importance in relation to how the life paths of these women have unfolded. Meso-level actors have either provided guidance and support or discouraged them in fundamental ways, which underlines the significance of such actors and their efforts (or lack thereof) in supporting newcomers.

While Shokouh had an unfortunate and discouraging encounter with a municipal caseworker, Aisha felt supported and encouraged by her caseworker, who facilitated her access to an English language course, which has helped her secure her current job. Habiba went to the local municipality on her own initiative, since she initially did not receive any offers to participate in job-related courses or programmes. Her caseworker did however help her secure a position, which initially was an internship.

**Table 2.3** Typology of Key Actors and Factors

	Personal/ Friends/Family (micro)	State policies/ support (macro)	Civil society support (meso)	Educational/ Training institutions (meso)	Professional contacts (meso)
Habiba	Husband (-) / close ethnic community (-)/close friend (+) Personal resil- ience (+) Personal exhaustion* (-)	Danish strict legis- lation (-)/Danish lack of skills profil- ing mechanism (-)		College counsellor (-) Second col- lege coun- sellor (+) Danish lan- guage (-)	
Shokouh	Husband (-) Family (+) Close friends (+) Personal resil- ience (+) Personal exhaustion* (-)	Danish lack of skills profiling mecha- nism (-) Municipal case- worker (-)	NGO (+)		
Aisha	Husband (-) Friends (+) Personal resil- ience (+) Personal exhaustion* (-)	Municipality con- tact person (+)		Danish lan- guage (-)	Danish jour- nalists union (+)
Dana	Husband (+) Personal exhaustion (-)	Municipality con- tact person (-) Danish lack of skills profiling (-)	Local church community (+)		
Aida	Family (+) Personal resil- ience (+)	Municipality con- tact person (+) Danish lack of skills profiling (-)	Local church community (+)	Danish lan- guage (-)	
Amala	Colleagues (-) Husband (+/-) Close ethnic community (+) Personal exhaustion (-)	Danish lack of skills profiling (-) Municipality con- tact person (-)	NGO (+)	Danish lan- guage (-)	
Alina	Close ethnic community (+) Personal resil- ience (+)	Danish lack of skills profiling (-)		Danish lan- guage (-) University studies (+)	

(continued)

**Table 2.3** (continued)

	Personal/ Friends/Family (micro)	State policies/ support (macro)	Civil society support (meso)	Educational/ Training institutions (meso)	Professional contacts (meso)
Shirisha	Husband (+) Close ethnic community (+) Co-workers (+/-) Personal resil- ience (+)	Danish lack of skills profiling (-)		Danish lan- guage (-)	

<sup>a</sup> Personal exhaustion relates to our eight interviewees' struggling for recognition and a sense of worth in their new host society, Denmark. Personal resilience refers to continuous hopes and perseverance despite numerous setbacks

Amala and Shokouh mentioned positive encounters with civil society organisations as enabling factors in a Danish context. Meanwhile, Aisha (in a recent conversation) mentions an encounter with a Danish teacher at the language school as a discouraging experience. He reportedly told her that he did not believe she would be able to finish her courses and pass the exams; she did however prove him wrong. Habiba mentions an educational counsellor who discouraged her from initially applying to the education programme that would allow her, once again, to study within her field of competency. He similarly suggested that she would not be able to undertake the studies and complete her education. It was another counsellor at the VUC who supported her in obtaining the final courses necessary to apply to her preferred educational programme and helped her with her application. As she explains, if it was not for his support, she probably would have given up. For Aisha, it was the union, DJ, and their job-training programme for refugee journalists that helped her secure her current work position. Socially, most of these women established themselves through their ethnic or local (church) communities.

As illustrated through these biographical narratives, meso-level actors have played a crucial role and have often triggered instrumental as well as emotional turning points in the lives of our interviewees that have either led to generative or withdrawing epiphanies. For newcomers who do not have a solid network in the host society and who do not yet know Danish rules or systems, such encounters can shape their life path: In terms of having their previously obtained skills or qualifications recognised, knowing their rights, securing a job or being unemployed, in meeting the requirements to apply for permanent residency, in terms of forming part of society or becoming excluded from it, and ultimately, in terms of remaining hopeful or losing hope. Although rules and laws at the macro-level are of crucial importance, our observations and findings show that meso-level encounters serve as key determinants in migrants' labour market integration in host societies.

The eight interviewees whose biographies are presented in this chapter are resilient women who have continuously struggled during their resettlement process in Denmark. Along the way, they have managed to overcome many obstacles, and it

is our contention that the majority of our interviewees will keep insisting on their individual rights, skills, and aspirations.

## 2.6 Concluding Remarks

Withdrawing epiphanies are most prevalent in the integration narratives of our eight interviewees, while generative epiphanies need to be considered in light of their on-going struggles and the discrimination and xenophobia they describe. Our analysis reveals that when hopes are continuously crushed, expectations are lowered. The degree of gratitude that our interviewees express when being recognised as capable individuals with fundamental rights, bear witness to the discrimination to which these women have continuously been subjected. As their narratives reveal, these are often shared experiences. The most frequent experiences amongst these women are related to the insecurity triggered by being referred to as ‘non-Western’ female migrants in Denmark, specifically in official government discourses and with regard to employment and residency status. Meanwhile, interviewees with a refugee status experience losing family members who are still in their home (war torn) countries, while having to deal with the psychological aftermath that results from past trauma(s).

Meanwhile, this chapter has emphasised how mental health disorders can create long-term barriers to integration into host societies, and that much of the emotional suffering of resettled migrants, is directly related to stresses of the present and concerns for the future. Instrumental factors, such as learning Danish, gaining employment, and having to navigate Danish rules and legislation emerge as shared challenges that cause a great deal of anxiety amongst our interviewees, since these factors fundamentally relate to personal safety and financial security as well as to gaining a sense of identity and belonging in their new setting.

As this chapter has shown, migrant women face gender-specific challenges in navigating daily life at every stage of their migration and (labour market) integration experience in Denmark. Common challenges among our interviewees include: Past traumatic experiences of domestic or invisible violence or imprisonment; challenging relations with their former or current husbands; instances of discrimination (including host society legal barriers and interactions with work colleagues); lack of recognition of educational qualifications from their countries of origin; recognition (or lack thereof) of previously-obtained skills and individual competencies; mastering the host society’s language; isolation and loneliness; lack of a network outside of their close knit communities; unempathetic municipal case workers, counsellors or teachers; lack of access to appropriate information from municipalities and from educational establishments; and a gendered approach to asylum rights and provision of residencies.

Generally, prevalent gender assumptions about women originating from the ‘Arab world’ or Asia intensify female migrants’ lack of presence in their host societies (‘I am not Danish nor will I ever be’) and sense of fragmentation (‘You

need to do this, and this, and this in order to get a permanent residence permit'). More broadly, our findings reflect Denmark's integration strategy regarding the 'burdensome' refugees versus the 'valuable' non-refugee migrants (Bjerre, 2020).

Another key finding from our interview data is the issue of time: From the moment they make the decision to migrate, to the situation they find themselves in when struggling to integrate into the labour market of their host society, migrants face ticking clocks, which regulate key aspects of their migration and integration process. For all of our interviewees, time plays a crucial role in how they structure and balance their lives. For instance, in their role as mothers, on the one hand, and their struggles to become integrated into Denmark's labour markets, on the other. Our interviewees share concerns about 'wasting too much time' on repeating educational programmes, or taking up unskilled work in order to qualify for permanent residency status, which will allow them to stay in Denmark. Equally important is the time our interviewees spent 'waiting for a decision', such as to have their certificates from their country of origin recognised in Denmark, or qualifying for / awaiting a verdict when applying for permanent residency.

The lives of our interviewees have been put on hold for a long period, because they have been deemed as unskilled or as not having the required economic resources to invest in their host society, or not qualified to apply for studies or for permanent residency. These biographical narratives reveal that the hopes of our female interviewees are often left suspended, while they are placed in a liminal position awaiting decisions and weighing their present and future options. We conclude, that our interviewees had two types of navigation strategies in these contexts: one, based on a generative epiphany that led them to sustain their resilience, perseverance, and hope for their futures in Denmark; or, the other, based on a withdrawal epiphany, where our informants lacked presence and felt 'fragmented'. Thus, despite structural barriers, this chapter has simultaneously served to elucidate the agency of our interviewees; their hopes, aspirations, struggles and perseverance in their continuous quest to make their host society habitable. In other words, although their experiences of LMI in Denmark reveal the foundational nature and logics of Denmark's integration regime, our interviewees managed to develop coping mechanisms in their encounters with said regime.

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# Chapter 3

## Examining Non-EU Migrants and Refugees’ Agency When Navigating the British Labour Markets



Francesca Calo and Simone Baglioni

### 3.1 Introduction

The UK context presents a very challenging environment for the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Across the past decades, the legislation has been mainly based on increasing border control and decreasing entitlements to migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in an overtly admitted attempt to discourage immigration towards ‘fortress Britain’. A clear example of this attitude has been the very recent controversial deportation policy to Rwanda. As a consequence of such a policy narrative and legal framework, scant attention has been placed upon strategies of integration and inclusion. The findings of a set of biographical interviews we conducted pre-Covid-19 (the last interviews were conducted online at the beginning of March 2020) with migrants and refugees confirmed the image of the British context and of the country’s labour market as one that newcomers can hardly access. This is particularly the case for migrants moving in sake of humanitarian protection who experience not only personal challenges and vulnerabilities, but even more constraining legal and administrative barriers, preventing them, for example, to have their capacities and skills duly recognised and valued or to work for a long period (as is the case of asylum seekers). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how migrants and refugees cope with the difficulties of accessing the UK labour market, how their agency – intended as a set of capacities that allow individuals to exert self-determination when dealing with circumstances, including difficult ones – intertwines with the British context and therefore what strategies they put in place to

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realise the opportunity to be included in the UK social and economic system. We also discuss turning points, that is, crucial junctures in the life of our interviewees and how these have generated revelations (epiphanic moments) about the opening (or closing) of personal or contextual opportunities.

We begin by providing a brief overview of the national context, focusing upon specific critical issues that were raised during the 3 years of our research. We then briefly outline the methodology and provide an overview of the interviews conducted and newspaper articles collected. The chapter then investigates through the analysis of the data stemming from our biographical interviews how migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers perceive their integration into the labour market and what have been individual barriers and enablers in their path towards employment. We then conclude by exploring a typology of the factors that triggered turning points and epiphanies.

### **3.2 Britain the Fortress: Barriers and Enablers for the Integration of Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers**

Migration has been a contentious policy issue and public terrain in the UK for decades and even more in the 2000s (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). In fact, it has been mobilised as a rhetorical rallying point for those seeking to garner popular support for the leave campaign during the country's most important political event of the 2010s: the Brexit referendum. Much of the anti-EU rhetoric was channelled through an anti-migrant discourse which oscillated between, on the one hand, portrayals of foreigners as exploiting the country's welfare system and, on the other, as migrants stealing jobs (Dennison & Geddes, 2018).

However, in the interstices of such a contentious debate, there has been space for the political elite to recalibrate the narrative of migration to better fit the country's history and the demands of the labour market which are both undeniably interwoven with migrants. Such a refocusing of the political narrative of migration (through decades of conservative government) has borrowed from a mainstream policy discourse of 'deservingness' and therefore has developed alongside an assumption that migrants are allowed settling in the country should they 'deserve' it. Newcomers must prove their 'being worth' their host country (Calò et al., 2022; Sales, 2002). Much of this deservingness is framed around their capacity to contribute to economic growth, and thus being economically self-reliant (Calò et al., 2021; Mayblin & James, 2019). Accordingly, when one looks at how the political elite has conceptualised the barriers for migrants' integration in the labour market, such barriers are portrayed as the outcome of migrants' inadequacy to the requests of the British labour market such as migrants not being proficient in English, having a scarce knowledge of the UK job market, and a limited understanding of the UK culture (Bloch, 2008; Mulvey, 2018).

In full contrast with the anti-migration rhetoric elaborated at central governmental and policy level stands the narrative of migration promoted by policy implementers at local levels and third-sector organisations. They instead identify as the main barriers of integration into the labour market of newcomers the restrictive and punitive policies promoted at central level as well as the poor capacity of integration services such as English courses for non-native speakers (Caló et al., 2019a, b, 2022).

Scholars have assessed immigration policies as the most critical issue for the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the labour market (see for example Bloch et al., 2015; Mulvey, 2018). They have been described as very restrictive, bureaucratic, and expensive for both migrants and employers (Anderson, 2010). Moreover, experts have stigmatised these immigration policies' focus on attracting primarily high-skilled migrants, thus reducing the accessibility to the UK labour market for those who do not have highly specialised skills or are not filling high-earning positions (Bloch et al., 2015).

Despite such a restrictive policy context, experts and migrants appreciate the integration strategies elaborated by devolved authorities such as the Scottish one and the services provided by third-sector organisations (Calò et al., 2021). However, due to the lack of funding attached to these initiatives, their contingent nature, and the low number of organisations providing formal employability services or skills development services, our interlocutors often described them as 'fragmented and residual' and thus falling short in terms of their accessibility (Calò et al., 2021).

In light of these two different approaches and narratives we can say that there are various challenges newcomers must overcome to be able to access the labour market and become economically self-reliant: they must learn or even master the language to a sufficient level; possess the legal status that allows them to work – a complex task which requires navigating the bureaucracy of the UK Home Office; and, ultimately, they must find someone who provides an opportunity for employment, that is, an employer who is persuaded about their suitability for that specific job and their right to work (Anderson, 2010; Bloch et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2016; Mulvey, 2018). While the literature has mainly focused on analysing enablers and barriers of integration in the labour market at the policy and services levels (see for example Calò et al. (2022)), scant attention has been given to the stories of migrants, their role and their agency in shaping their lives. It is then important to explore their agency through the voices and lives of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, which is the aim of this chapter. Exploring their lives and providing them with a space for their voices is important for understanding how the vulnerability-agency nexus works in different circumstances. The focus on epiphanies and turning points and the conceptualisation behind that can provide valuable information to policymakers and service providers to develop more effective public services and hopefully reshape a migration narrative more focused on addressing the real needs of individuals.

### 3.3 Methodology

We conducted a total of 11 biographical interviews involving migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Table 3.1 provides an overview of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers involved.

People involved present very different paths of migration, including economic migrants who have moved to the UK to study or work, refugees who have obtained their status through the asylum process, refugees who have been resettled through one of the resettlement programmes, and one asylum seeker who is still waiting for the refugee status. More than half of the biographical interviews involved women of working age (between 25 and 40 years old), while the other half involved men between 30 and 40 years old. Almost everyone interviewed achieved or is achieving in the UK or their origin country a high level of education (tertiary level). A wide range of nationalities was covered including Commonwealth, African, and Asian countries. Different recruitment strategies were used. The majority of respondents were found through the lead author's social and professional networks and word of mouth/snowballing. Civil society organisations helped identify potential interviewees and create a connection between them and the researchers. Participation in events organised by migrants' communities, faith organisations, and third-sector organisations were also helpful in recruiting participants and inform part of the research.

The majority of the interviews were recorded and transcribed 'intelligent verbatim'.<sup>1</sup> When it was not possible to record, extensive notes were taken by the researcher and reorganised in a document after the interview. The confidentiality and anonymity of each of our interviewees were protected throughout the interview process. In doing so, pseudonyms are used in detailing the stories and for quotes presented in this report. Any details that might disclose the identity of the interviewees are not reported. Ethical approval was requested and obtained from the SIRIUS Ethics Board and the ethics committee of the Glasgow School for Business and Society at Glasgow Caledonian University. Sensitive data were kept password-protected on the researcher's laptop. Data that participants requested not be disclosed in connection to their story were not used. After the interview transcription, the data were then imported into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software QSR Nvivo and an in-depth analysis following biographical interviews approach was undertaken. Turning points (crucial junctures in the life of our interviewees) and epiphanies (that is, revelations occurring after turning point, events that made clear to the interviewees how their life was affected for the bad – withdrawal epiphanies, as the event generated a self-retrenchment or a regression in career and personal life – or for the good – generative epiphanies, as the event offered opportunity for personal development or career progression) were selected and organised across themes, as reported below.

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<sup>1</sup>Intelligent verbatim is a type of transcription that omits all ums, ohs, laughter, and pauses throughout the conversation.

**Table 3.1** Demographic information on Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers (MRAs)

Pseudonym of Interviewees	Date of interview	Age	Gender	Family Status	Country of origin	Migration year	Education (primary, secondary, tertiary)	Current occupation in host country	Occupation in country of origin	Languages the individual speaks
John	23/10/2018	Early 40s	M	Married with children	Sudan	2012	Tertiary	Student	Public sector official	English, Arabic
Valerie	27/10/2018	Mid 30s	F	Married with children	Iran	2009	Tertiary	Unemployed	n.a	English, Persian
Jack	27/10/2018	Early 40s	M	Single	Iran	2011	Tertiary	Student and waiter	Civil servant	English, Persian
Maria	01/11/2018	30s	F	Married with children	Pakistan	2002	Tertiary	Not working	n.a	English, Pakistani
Danielle	29/10/2018–10/03/2020	30s	F	Married	Somalia	2008	Tertiary	Policy officer	n.a.	English, Arabic
Susan	1/07/2019	30s	F	Married	Malaysia	2011	Tertiary	PhD student	Banker	English, Malay
Sofia	1/07/2019	30s	F	Married	Turkey	2006	Tertiary	PhD student	Secretary	English, Turkish
Julie	8/07/2019	30s	F	Married with children	Algeria	2015	Tertiary	Not working	Customer support	English, Arabic, French
Tom	18/07/2019	30s	M	Single	Iraq/Iran	n.a.	Tertiary	Not working	n.a.	English, Farsi and Kurdish
Anita	1/04/2020	30S	F	Married	Egypt	2015	Tertiary	Student	Not working	English and Arabic
Artur	27/03/2020	30S	M	Single	Jamaica	2017	Tertiary	Student	Banker	English

### 3.4 The Voices of Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers in Fortress Britain

Four different themes were identified across our respondents: trauma/vulnerability, skills acquisition, entrance in the labour market, and resilience. Each related to major epiphanies and turning points explored in the following sections. Pieces from the stories of Susan, John, Jack, Maria, Anita, Danielle, Artur, Sofia, and Valerie are used to explain the different themes.

#### 3.4.1 *Trauma and Vulnerability: Solitude and Precarious Temporality*

Solitude was one of the main vulnerabilities outlined by our informants. Loneliness in facing a completely different legal, social, and economic system was often expressed by our informants as one of the vulnerabilities they had to endure. For Artur, for example, a 30-year-old man who came to the UK to pursue a PhD, solitude played an epiphanic role in his migration experience. He recalls that his migration path was not ‘a smooth transition’ and that the only information available to him on arrival was that he had ‘14 days to go to the post office to get [his] biometric’. It was the first time he was living outside his country and he was ‘expecting something more’ – that ‘there would be a person to help [him] to integrate in a new space’. Instead, he realised that he had to navigate the new context alone, counting only on his own capacities, from finding out how to register with the doctor to understanding the legal implications of his student visa. The ‘shock of the integration process’ was an epiphanic moment which instilled in him a sense of temporality. He felt that he was ‘integrated enough to function’ while he was living in the country but because he was only a student with an ‘expiration date’ on his visa ‘there was no need for further integration’. At the time of the interview, he did not know how this feeling would affect his life, whether it was what we call a generative or withdrawing type of epiphany, that is, if this situation would push him towards others and embracing the new society or if that would push him to ‘withdraw’ into his self. He was still in the process of understanding it, but he was sure that it could represent a key barrier in exploring possible job opportunities and, overall, the opportunity to stay in the UK.

Other interviewees point to the feeling of precarious temporality as something generating a ‘withdrawing epiphany’. In fact, a sense of temporal precarity attached to their settlement in a country based on a non-permanent legal status affected their willingness to integrate and questioned their choice of living in the UK. Such a sense of temporal precarity was perceived as a vulnerability. For example, Anita, a 25-year-old woman who moved to the UK to study, described her several experiences at the UK border as almost traumatising:

They make you feel that you are just a guest, they investigate you, you are a guest, they always ask a lot of questions, like are you going back home to get a job? Sometimes when

you finish the border there is another desk with other people, you see looking at me. They will pick me out of the crowd, is it racist? Is it because I am not white? What is this about? They try to make it friendly but it is not, they stop you and they ask what are your plans for the future, they really make clear that I am not welcomed to stay as long as I want.

The feeling of precariousness was also aligned to her (temporary) migration status and the instrumental process of renewing her visa several times. Each time she had to start from scratch and sometimes even go back to her own country and apply for a visa from there. All such experiences were epiphanic in how they revealed that she would 'always be a temporary person, on the edge, without a home, not welcomed'. This feeling made her question her choice of living in the UK even though she loved the community where she lives and 'considers it as home', she is uncertain about her life in a country where she does not feel welcomed. Hence, in Anita's case, the security checks and level of personal scrutiny she repeatedly went through can be considered as both emotional and instrumental factors that triggered epiphanies which have both enabled her by training her resilience and determination. However, they have also constrained her by leading her to doubt her decision to settle in the UK.

The sense of precariousness that Anita and Artur described is often only overcome after acquiring either indefinite permission to remain or British citizenship. The change in migration status makes job opportunities available to British and EU citizens also accessible to third-country nationals, thus becoming an instrumental turning point that reduces the sense of temporality. For example, Sofia a 25-year-old woman who moved to the UK to join her brother and study in college, described her acquisition of British citizenship (after 10 years of living in the UK) as a fundamental turning point. Up to that moment her willingness to travel abroad was restrained due to the restriction in the number of days she could spend outside the country. In addition, the types of jobs and organisations to which she could apply were very limited and often she had to accept underqualified jobs to pay for her studies or to continue to live in the country. She emphasised that thanks to acquiring citizenship, she could enjoy 'different experiences without having any restriction', but more crucially she 'could look like everyone else' when competing for a job and have the same opportunities as everyone else. She always felt as 'a second order citizen' who did not have the same rights and opportunities. Sofia was able to build up resilience from her 10 years as a migrant and as soon as she became a British citizen she began to take advantage of all the opportunities she found, starting, for example, to work in a position matching her qualifications and travelling in Europe with her partner and friends without having to worry about the number of days spent outside the UK.

However, not everyone's story is similar to hers. John, a refugee who moved to Glasgow with his wife and children, had always desired to work in the criminal justice field. To fulfil his ambition, he decided to resume his studies, although he was already middle-aged and with a family to support. At the end of his undergraduate degree, he decided to apply as a prison officer. However, he was never invited for an interview:

I applied five or six times just for prison officer. . .and I have more qualifications and they didn't invite me for the interview. And I phoned them why you are not calling me for an interview I am very qualified for this job just chasing you. . .and a lady told me because for this job you have to be a UK citizen. I am entitled to work in this country I have a paper. . .no. . . you have to be a full citizen. . .

The disappointment he experienced from being rejected several times – and not only in his sector of interest but also in other sectors – deeply affected his motivation and ambition, triggering a partial withdrawal epiphany: he decided not to apply for any permanent employee position and instead to develop his own business. He believes that people like him ‘should make their own job’, whether creating a social enterprise, running a kitchen, or providing new services and products. Only in this way, according to John, would it be possible for a refugee to be integrated in the labour market. Hence, John provides additional evidence that difficulties and perceived rejection do not facilitate a personal retrenchment from seeking economic fortune and employment integration, but changed the means to reach such goals, shifting it from obtaining paid employment towards testing his entrepreneur skills.

In other cases, the trauma of being treated differently by local people was so internalised that it became almost acceptable to the migrant self. Such an internalisation and acceptance of discrimination became a turning point in the life of some of the migrants because it led them to withdraw from the job market, as in Valerie's case. Discrimination emerged as the normality. For example, to Valerie it ‘made sense’ that she would not get the job when competing with a British citizen. Her motivation to find a job aligned with her qualifications and ambitions decreased and she ended up working for a beauty salon of a big retailer – a job that she considered aligned with her migrant background. In this case, discrimination turned from a contextual into a personal barrier, deeply affecting the impetus to find a job that corresponded to her skills and aspirations. A sense of precarity and solitude were deeply rooted in the trauma that our participants face. For some, this led to generative epiphanies that increased their resilience and the potentiality of becoming integrated. For others, conversely, the vulnerability became an insurmountable barrier that made them withdraw from the job market.

### **3.5 Acquiring Skills ‘Recognised’ by the Host Society: Language, Education, and Work Experience**

Migrants also identified the acquisition of skills and education in the UK, or in a similar context, as a fundamental condition for increasing their opportunity to find a good job. Hence, our interviews unveil that learning English, undertaking a qualification issued by a UK body, and building up a curriculum aligned to the UK serve as turning points. Danielle, a young woman who moved from a war zone to the UK for studies first and then applied for asylum, described learning English from a young age as a critical turning point affecting part of her life. Her father urged her to focus on math and English, pushing her to learn the language to the best of her



ability. Her level of English was then high enough to pass a test for obtaining funds to study at a prestigious university. The importance of learning the language was also highlighted by Julie, an asylum seeker who moved to the UK without previous English knowledge. She suggested that at the beginning, integration was difficult because she did not speak a good level of English. She explained that

if you don't speak good English you can't integrate. When you understand people, you have a good communication, and after that, everything becomes easy. You can then go to different organisations and you can do volunteering.

Learning English in the community first and then in college gave her enough confidence to begin to think about undertaking a master's degree, and strongly reinforced the idea that 'you need confidence [to integrate]. If you are not confident, you can't go out and face people'. Participating in the English language classes was a turning point for Julie, giving her enough confidence to volunteer and start her integration path. This, in turn, helped her improve her language skills and feel good enough to enrol in a post-graduate course and think about a possible future working life in the UK.

With regard to the value of qualifications obtained in the UK for finding an employment, some of our respondents highlighted that the qualifications they had obtained at home did not result in finding a suitable job in the UK. Their perception was that only migrants with British qualifications had the possibility of finding a decent job without undertaking further education in the UK. Moreover, UK-acquired education was not enough: work experience gained in the country was also perceived as very useful for finding a job in the UK. Almost all respondents had to build a curriculum vitae that included both UK education qualifications and work experience. John, for example, despite qualifications from his home country, 'realised that [his] qualification back home was not suitable to find a job in the UK'. Once this epiphanic understanding of his new country of settlement materialised, he decided to enrol in a university and obtained a bachelor's degree; he is now planning to continue studying and obtain a master, that 'hopefully will help [him] to find a job' because he was not happy to work part-time in a job that did not suit his qualifications. He described his decision to enrol in further education to obtain a job in his field of interest as a 'hard way'. Most of his friends 'are working in security or some of them in restaurants'. They joined what he called 'a marginal labour market' because they usually have family commitments and need to send money back home. However, he hoped that in the longer term his decision would pay off.

### ***3.5.1 Entrance in the Job Market: Volunteering, Networking, and Discrimination or Lack of Knowledge***

Finding a first job in the UK was critical moment in the lives of all our respondents. Mechanisms and events that helped entry into the labour market were proper turning points. Our interviewees pointed out two main interrelated factors as enabling their

access to the job market: volunteering and widening their personal network. They also identified two mechanisms as obstructing factors to integration: employers' lack of knowledge of migration and scant knowledge of employment laws, and the impossibility of accessing specific jobs.

Our interviewees highlighted volunteering schemes as one of the most important activities enabling labour market integration. They indicated civil society organisations (CSOs) as providing a space where people with different pathways of migration could widen their social networks and obtain some form of work experience that is perceived as value by prospective employers.

Danielle, for example, identified volunteering as a turning point twice in her migration path. When she was still living outside the UK, she understood that volunteering helped her obtain the funds to undertake her studies (this was an epiphany in her personal development). In fact, she believes that the experience she had previously acquired while volunteering was considered as an invaluable asset by her studies' funders and one of the elements that made her CV competitive compared with others. She then continued to volunteer once settled in the UK during her postgraduate studies. At the end of her programme, one company – which was a partner in one of the projects she was volunteering with – noted her skills and CV. The company offered her an internship, first, and a job placement, after. She is now working in a position that matches her qualifications and skills, and she enjoys her job. She recognised that without the volunteering experience, it would have been much more difficult to find a job and most probably she would still struggle to obtain one.

For Tom, a young refugee who moved to the UK to join his brother, volunteering was a key mechanism for gaining work experience. He was active as a volunteer in different organisations since arriving in the UK. While volunteering, he read a leaflet that triggered a turning point in his life: it explained that there was a shortage of men taking up posts in childcare and education. He decided then to enrol in a course in the same non-profit organisation for which he was volunteering that offered a pathway to childcare. Subsequently, he obtained a placement opportunity and the possibility to progress to a college course. Therefore, the volunteering experience represented an enabling turning point in Tom's life which helped him better understand his professional ambitions and how to fulfil them.

Volunteering is clearly connected with opportunities of widening one's social connections; being able to rely on a network of personal ties and contacts is a condition *sine qua non* to find a job in the UK, like elsewhere. As Danielle explained, accessing the UK job market 'is not just finding the link and applying for jobs. It is all about network connection and experience in the country. So, it is not easy to create personal connections if you are not here since you are born'. However, mobilising networks to one's advantage is not always as simple as we might imagine – it may be a matter of people's social skills and character. But it can also depend on cultural aspects. At least this is what Anita thinks: for her, in her own culture to 'speak out and ask for support' is often discouraged, hence it becomes even more difficult to build that network of support that may be useful when one needs to find a job, for example. For Anita, the support of some of her contacts 'just

happened'. At the end of her study abroad, she felt that she did not have enough experience outside her home country and wanted to further improve her skills, 'learn a new path, be a better person, an independent woman who can find her independent life'. She had to start looking for something that could help her to extend her visa. She could have enrolled in another course but lacked the financial means to afford it. She realises now that she was lucky because people in charge of her study programme learned about her situation and decided to offer her the opportunity to undertake a paid internship. Hence, Anita's story shows that the widening of her personal network was a fundamental turning point to better understand what she wanted to do in life and to have the opportunity to realise it.

Difficulties accessing the labour market also generated epiphanies in the lives of other informants. Maria, for example, described employers' lack of knowledge of migration and employment laws as very stressful and detrimental for her willingness to continue to work. She pointed out that many companies do not know that the Home Office takes time to process visas, describing a specific event with a non-profit organisation that deeply affected her willingness to look for a job. While employed through a private agency placement in a large third-sector organisation – in a job she considered below her qualifications and skills but 'better than nothing' – she was also waiting for the renewal of her visa (a spouse visa). While her passport was with the Home Office, she received a call from the organisation asking for her visa, and then the organisation called the Home Office which was unable to provide the information needed. As a consequence, the organisation told her to stay home because according to them she did not have a visa. This episode represented for Maria an epiphany since she now understood how organisations' lack of knowledge could impact her life and led her to think that nobody should have had the right to talk to her in that manner given that she was only following the government procedure: 'Not every company knows visa policies, they don't know that the Home Office takes time to process [visa requests]], I had to explain to many people that this is the condition I am working with'.

### ***3.5.2 Resilience: A Potential Propellant for Inclusion***

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

C. P. Cavafy – Ithaka

Resilience and migration come together beautifully in Cavafy's poem which details in the last verses the agency capacity underpinning resilience. Agency has been defined as 'one's capacity to shape one's life and exploit opportunities or indeed

open up new possibilities for one's self and their family' (Triandafyllidou, 2019, 8). Resilience is one type of agency that migrants can use to change their own situation or rework their own circumstances (Triandafyllidou, 2019). In the integration in the job market as detailed by Bernsten (2016), it could mean, for example, working multiple jobs or switching between jobs on a regular basis. In the poem, it means using the experience acquired to rework one's circumstances.

Resilience was the propellant to facilitate integration into the labour market across all our stories. All the people interviewed had aspirations, motivations, and expectations – and for all of them these were important for finding a way to access the labour market. For some of the informants, resilience was also a key mechanism to overcome vulnerability and trauma often generated along the migration path.

Resilience was conceptualised in different ways and consequently was used differently by each informant. In some of our stories, resilience meant accepting an underqualified job or a job that was aligned to a stereotype associated with the country of origin. Susan, a 30-year-old graduate student, was working in the banking system in her own country before moving to the UK. She had a high social status, a permanent job in a high-skilled sector, and a good salary. When she moved to the UK to undertake a funded PhD, she decided to continue to work (the hours allowed by her visa) to help support her family back at home. The only easily and quickly accessible job that she could find was a position in a call centre. She described the experience of working there as a 'real experience of work'. Although the job was not difficult because the process was defined and clear, it triggered an epiphanic moment of her life that in the new country of settlement through the job she 'felt as an immigrant' and that due to her 'immigrant situation' she 'had to lower her level, to lower her ego' and accept a job for which she was undoubtedly overqualified. In Susan's case that revelatory epiphanic moment triggered a reaction of resilience that made her accept a job for which she was overqualified and motivated her to find a job aligned to her skills. The experience in the call centre gave her the impetus to continue her studies and reinforced her aspiration to work in academia, helping her achieve a (precarious) position in a university. Hence, her spirit worked as an agency enabler by keeping her working and studying with the aim to improve her life.

A similar conceptualisation of resilience but with different outcomes was identified by Valerie, a young woman who moved to the UK to join her husband. Her studies were in education and educational needs support, and she had hoped to find a job in this field because working with children was her highest aspiration. However, she could not find a job as an educator in the UK. She applied several times, including jobs for which she was overqualified, but she was never even invited for an interview. She identified her lack of English language proficiency and her legal status (not being a British citizen) as the main reasons for not being shortlisted for education-related jobs. Having a family and economic needs obliged her to accept the only job available: working in a beauty studio (providing waxing and other beauty treatments) for a department store. While navigating the UK labour market and testing her profile in sending in job applications, the multiple rejections she received and seeing the job placements of friends from her home country led her

thinking, as an epiphanic moment of her new life of immigrant, that there were stereotyped understandings attached to her culture of origin (being a young woman from a Middle East country) and gender labour divisions that pre-structured her options about employment sectors and occupations. Describing this epiphanic revelation, she says: 'I am working in something that is seen as related to our culture, so mostly Middle East people from Iraq, Iran, Pakistan which are working in beauty companies'. Her resilience lay in her acceptance of a job that nonetheless reinforced a stereotyped idea of migrants. She needed to work to support her husband and kids, and she accepted that what she would be offered was limited to employment in some specific sectors due to a stigmatised understanding of her capacities and competences as a young woman from the Middle East. She accepted that employment even if the sector offered 'no plan of future development nor career'.

In some of the stories, resilience meant accepting personal limitations and coming to terms with one's possibilities. Maria is a young woman living in London with her husband and a baby. She fled her country with her family when she was an adolescent. She had job experience and studies in the UK, and also married in the UK. She moved from the north of the country to London to follow her husband on his work trajectory and thus had the opportunity to explore the job market competition there. She described her life in London as very stressful, particularly because she applied to several jobs without any positive results. Seeing 'some people going to a couple of interviews and getting a job' while she was struggling so much was an epiphany for her because it made her question her skills and qualifications. She started to realise that Human Resource managers were expecting the candidates 'to do something extraordinary...they expected people to be perfect'. She detailed that doing marathons, being involved in charities, climbing mountains, and being widely travelled with a blog were typical activities that other job seekers promoted during interviews. Thus, she often compared herself with other candidates who came from migrant families, but frequently found that 'they were born in the system' and thanks to this, understood how to manage this tough competition. She realised that job market competitors were usually 'very talkative, skilful and very wise in terms of vocabulary' but especially they knew 'actors, television programmes, and football' – topics that were appreciated because it allowed them to 'interact quicker and better with colleagues'. All these reasons made it easier for them to find a job. Understanding why she was not selected during job interviews was a turning point in her life. However, in Maria's case, the epiphanic revelation led to a withdrawal from the labour market; in fact she decided to pull out from the 'job seeker' status and focused instead on family and home caring.

In other stories resilience was the mechanism that helped our interviewees achieve turning points that completely changed the course of their lives. Danielle decided to apply for asylum and stay in the UK at the end of her graduate programme. To be able to obtain the funds for studying in the UK, she had to face challenging travels and experiences. She had to undertake an English language test in a country neighbouring the one where she used to live and which was usually difficult to access from her country of settlement. Second, she had to visit the country of her nationality, a country she had never seen before having spent her life outside

of it and which was experiencing a significant difficult economic and social situation. She believes that it is the resilience she deployed to survive while passing through these challenging experiences without giving up to her goal of studying in the UK that helped her obtain the funds. She used these challenges as an example of her motivation to persuade donors that her will to pursue studies was well grounded:

That was one of the things I used in the interview, they asked why I thought I should get the scholarship, yes because I come to [the country of my nationality overcoming various difficult situations also in terms of personal security] for the first time, and my parents have not been in there in many years.

Thus, her capacity to exert agency by seizing opportunities despite very adverse circumstances changed her life, allowing her to obtain the funds and pursue her ambitions. She was then able to reflect on such turning points and realise how much her determination to succeed had helped her throughout her personal development journey.

### **3.6 Social Capital, Discrimination, and Temporality**

Thanks to our fieldwork, it was possible to identify what barriers and enablers of integration in the UK labour market were perceived as a turning point and epiphany by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Our interviewees pointed to two different factors as common turning points and positive epiphany generators: volunteering and social connections. Two additional variables were pinpointed as important, but not critical, mechanisms to access integration into labour market and promote positive turning points: learning English and building a curriculum aligned to the UK context. Finally, three variables were identified as obstructing factors, negatively affecting the possibility of economic integration and generating withdrawal epiphanies: employers' lack of knowledge of migration and employment laws, discrimination, and the sense of precarity. Table 3.2 provides a typology of the actors and mechanisms triggering the turning points and epiphanies discussed earlier. Some (+) led to generative epiphanies while others (−) instead led to withdrawn epiphanies.

In some cases positive turning points have been created by accessing social networks of ties and acquaintances that provided work or work experience opportunities: such events generated epiphanic revelations about the importance of social connections in one's life and the further barrier newcomers face by the simple fact of living in a country in which by definition they are 'new' and therefore deprived of the same number and quality of social connections that native or long-term residents have. Such epiphanies fostered an awareness among some of our interviewees of the disparity of the situation and its effects on their professional and economic success, thus pushing them to act to mitigate such a disparity. For example, volunteering and civic engagement and involvement with educational training institutions emerged as formidable tools for expanding social connections in a new environment.

Learning English as well as participating in educational activities to shape a CV more aligned to the UK context were considered important factors supporting the

**Table 3.2** Typology of Actors and Factor

Interviewees	Personal/Friends/ Family (micro)	Civil Society support (meso)	Educational Training Institutions (meso)	Professional contacts/ employers (meso)	State Policies (macro)
Artur			University lack of support (-)		State Policies (macro) Visa expiration (+/-)
Anita	Social capital (+)			Support of professional con- tacts/ (+)	The security checks and the level of personal scrutiny (-)
Sofia					Acquiring British citizenship (+)
Valerie				Discrimination (-) Lack of knowledge migrants' rights/legal knowledge (-)	
Danielle	Family support for learning the lan- guage (+) Determination to succeed (+) Social capital (+)	Volunteering (+)		(+)	
Julie	Social capital (+)		Community and college English courses (+)		
John	Social capital (+)			Discrimination (-)	Lack of recognition of abroad qualification (+)
Tom		Volunteering (+)	Community English and professional courses (+)		
Susan				Discrimination (+)	
Maria				Discrimination (-)	

good level of confidence necessary to try to be integrated in the UK labour market but were not considered fundamental factors for generating turning points.

We also encountered turning points generated by migrants' experiencing a repelling environment, an environment practicing direct and indirect discrimination. Such turning points have provoked both generative and withdrawal epiphanies, depending on the specific characteristics and story of the person involved. In some cases, a repulsive environment has led to migrants to question their migration choice. In other cases, they have reacted by becoming even more determined to attain economic success by opening their own path, starting an educational path, or imagining their lives as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, there have been cases in which a change in legal status (moving from a time-limited visa to a permanent status) has generated a turning point in the life of newcomers looking for a decent job as it has allowed them to be on an equal – at least formally – level compared with native and EU citizens. In the everyday reality of job seekers, this is tantamount to the opportunity to apply for a wider selection of jobs. Moreover, having a permanent permit to stay triggers other positive emotional developments related with the possibility to embark into a new personal-sentimental relation. Hence, the turning point provoked by a change of status has fostered a generative epiphany that contrasted the many 'withdrawal epiphanies' of temporality and precarity experienced by many of our interviewees when thinking about their situation as newcomers; they started to feel as part of the community instead of being only temporarily integrated.

All the stories we collected had something in common, which worked as the propellant to facilitate integration: resilience. Resilience was used to accept personal limits and underqualified jobs but was also at the same time the propellant to continue to look for integration in the UK job market. Hence, resilience has pushed migrants to bear with difficulties and strive for inclusion. On the other hand, many of our interviewees also faced vulnerability as consequences of their stories. Trauma and the resulting vulnerability tend to have a 'depressive' effect on personal agency, but when the vulnerability is overcome, and when participants are able to take advantage of positive epiphanic events, resilience can be generated.

### **3.7 Concluding Remarks**

Our biographic interviews unveil two different focal points related to labour market integration as particularly important in generating turning points leading to epiphanic experiences (positive and negative). Social capital was seen as the most critical enabler to access employability and foster the development of generative epiphanies. Almost all respondents had to start from scratch in building their social network – a network that did include third-country nationals but also local people who could help access employment opportunities.

Volunteering was used as an opportunity to develop social connections with the communities where migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers live. Experiencing direct



and indirect discrimination was the second focal point that our respondents centred on. Migrants and refugees often felt treated differently from British and EU nationals, and such experiences of discrimination generated epiphanies that led them to think they needed to be overqualified to have a chance to be selected for a job interview or a job position. The trauma of being treated differently from local people was so internalised that it became almost acceptable by the migrant self, conditioning their motivations, ambitions, and jobs they decided to accept. From being a barrier of the system, discrimination then became an individual barrier, affecting the lives of migrants and refugees forever.

Finally, resilience, alongside vulnerability were the outcomes of the turning points of our respondents. Rarely is the role of resilience and vulnerability considered by policymakers or are the specific barriers that newcomers encounter as a consequence of their particular experiences recognised. In our research, resilience and vulnerability play a critical central role in favouring or not the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers into labour market. Resilience acted as a propellant of integration, favouring positive labour outcomes while vulnerability acted as a barrier favouring negative outcomes. However, the learning process behind both resilience and vulnerability paths could be used to help other migrants integrate into the labour market, creating a virtuous circle of increasing resilience and better labour and societal outcomes.

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# Chapter 4

## Switzerland and the Two Faces of Integration



Maria M. Mexi

### 4.1 Introduction

Historically, migration has played an important role in the Swiss economy, while foreign population recruitment has contributed to the economic growth of the past century. Today, Switzerland has one of the highest percentages of foreigners in its population. In 2020, about 38 per cent of the permanent resident population had a migration background (SLFS, 2019), 0.3 percentage points more than in 2019 (SLFS, 2020). As with other European countries, Switzerland saw a refugee inflow in the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By April 2022, more than 33,000 of the 40,000 Ukrainian refugees who had arrived in Switzerland since February 2022 had been given a special legal status called a “S status,” which permitted them to avoid the typical asylum process and live, work, and attend school in Switzerland for a year or up to 5 years depending on how long the war lasted. Holders of Status S are entitled to family reunion and employment rights, which are not available to other asylum seekers with provisional permits. Asylum seekers from Arab, African, and Asian nations, who had also escaped bloody conflicts, expressed mixed feelings about the Swiss government’s decision to offer Ukrainian refugees special protective status, alluding of “legal inequity” and “double standards” (Kamel, 2022). Overall, examining the history of Swiss migration policy reveals that the country has driven active economic recruitment policies, opening doors to foreign labour forces when needed while being quite restrictive in its integration and naturalisation policies.

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This pragmatic approach to integration (driven largely by economic considerations rather than the enactment of normative understandings of integration) has evolved gradually over time and has been strengthened by the divisive debates around foreigners that surrounded the 2014 initiative against mass immigration (Ruedin & D'Amato, 2015). The initiative requesting the re-establishment of quotas for all categories of foreigners, including European citizens, was supported by 50.3 per cent of Swiss voters. In 2016, Parliament approved the amendment to the Foreign Nationals Act concerning implementation of Article 121a of the Federal Constitution. The aim of this amendment is, in particular, to prioritise use of the domestic labour market potential. Migration policies since then have become more restrictive, with increased focus on integration presented as a responsibility to be shared between individuals (the migrants themselves) and institutions.

Drawing on the findings of a series of interviews with actors at the governmental level (confederation and canton), political actors, and members of integration support services conducted within the framework of the three-year SIRIUS research project, we have found that generally policy actors view Switzerland as performing well in terms of the labour market integration of its migrants when compared internationally, attributing the favourable picture mainly to the overall good domestic labour market conditions, but also to the various interventions and policy reforms implemented (Mexi et al., 2019).

Strikingly, the findings of a set of biographical interviews we conducted (last interviews conducted online in early July 2020) with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (MRAs) who arrived in Switzerland between 2014 and 2019, shed light on a different story. MRAs consider themselves not well integrated in the labour market and there are several signs that the labour market outcomes of certain groups of migrants are diverging, with some disadvantaged groups, particularly migrant women, running the risk of being left behind. Such evidence points to overall divergence between the realities of policy actors and the experiences of MRAs, exposing Switzerland's two *contrasting faces* of integration. Against this background, the purpose of this chapter is to highlight MRAs' individual biographies, experiences, and perceptions of integration against the backdrop of the complex dynamics between structural factors and agency and how their interplay enables or constrains integration. Emphasis will be placed on MRAs' epiphanies and turning points and sensemaking in shaping the course of individual action within the contested discourse of integration that can provide valuable information to policy actors and practitioners to design effective policies tailored to the needs of migrants and foster cooperation and trust between migrants and the localities in which they settle (Tables 4.1 and 4.2).

We begin by outlining our methodological considerations in conducting the biographical interviews with the MRAs, followed by a brief overview of the Swiss socio-political and policy context, focusing upon specific critical barriers and enablers of MRAs' labour market integration that were raised during the 3 years of our research. We then discuss how the complex interplay of structural and agential factors is crucial in explaining migrants' integration, emphasising the extent to which structural conditions determine how to gauge effective integration or

**Table 4.1** Demographic information on MRAs

Pseudonym of interviewee	Date of interview	Age	Gender	Family status	Country of origin	Migration year	Education (primary, secondary, tertiary)	Current occupation in host country	Occupation in country of origin	Languages the individual speaks
Interviewee 1 Alicia	February 2020	55	F	Married	Brazil	2014	Tertiary education	Project coordinator in an NGO	Police officer and project coordinator in the department on the Defence of minors	Portuguese, French, Spanish
Interviewee 2 Maud	February 2020	58	F	Married	Peru	1995/ 2016	Secondary education	Secretary and employee in the administration department (bank and hotel)	Housekeeper	Spanish, French
Interviewee 3 Omar	February 2020	36	M	Married	Turkey	2014	Tertiary education	Intern as coder in a data processing enterprise	Mechanical engineer	Kurdish, Turkish, French, English
Interviewee 4 Nathan	February 2020	30	M	Single	Nigeria	2015	Primary education	Street artist	Artist	English, French, Italian
Interviewee 5 Daner	March 2020	34	M	Single	Syria	2014	Primary education	Intern as gardener	Plumber and electrician	Kurdish, Arabic, Italian, French
Interviewee 6 Mohamed	March 2020	48	M	Married	Syria	2014	Primary education	Hairstresser	Hairstresser	Arabic, Italian

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

Pseudonym of interviewee	Date of interview	Age	Gender	Family status	Country of origin	Migration year	Education (primary, secondary, tertiary)	Current occupation in host country	Occupation in country of origin	Languages the individual speaks
Interviewee 7-Subi	March 2020	18	M	Single	Syria	2014	Professional training/ education	Intern as electrician	Student	Arabic, Italian
Interviewee 8 Lucia	February 2020	33	F	Married	Colombia	2018	Tertiary education	Unemployed (occasionally working as baby-sitter)	Project manager	Spanish, English
Interviewee 9 Diana	February 2020	40	F	Married	Costa Rica	2014	Tertiary education	Unemployed	Project manager	Spanish, English, French
Interviewee 10 Elias	March 2020	38	M	Married	Eritrea	2014	Tertiary education	Consultant	Researcher	Tigrinya, English
Interviewee 11 Eddie	February 2020	46	F	Married	USA	2011	Tertiary education	Self-employed in the area of interior design	Fabric director in design studios	English, French

**Table 4.2** Typology of the actors and factors

	Personal/ friends/ family (micro)	State policies/ support (macro)	Civil society support (meso)	Educational/ training institutions (meso)	Professional contacts (meso)
Interviewee 1	Husband (-) Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion and vulnera- bility (-)	Swiss lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)	Local NGO (+)	Training coach (+) French lan- guage (-)	Local NGO (+)
Interviewee 2	Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion and vulnera- bility (-) Friends (+)	Swiss lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)	Local NGO (+)	-	Local NGO (+)
Interviewee 3	Close ethnic community (+) Personal resilience (+) Friends (+) Personal exhaustion* (-)	Municipality contact person (+) Swiss lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)	Local NGO (+)	New skills training programme (+) French lan- guage (-)	Local NGO (+)
Interviewee 4	Personal resilience (+)	Swiss strict legislation (-) Access to sup- port and aid programmes (-)	Local NGO (+) Political activism movement (+)	Internship programme at local cultural institutions (+) French lan- guage (-)	Local NGO (+) Political activism movement (+)
Interviewee 5	Friends (+) Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion (-)	Lack of administrative support (-) Integration office contact person (-)	Local NGO (+)	Local NGO member (+) Occupational programs for not recognised asylum seekers (+) Internship programme at local organisa- tions (+) French lan- guage (-)	Local NGO (+)

(continued)



**Table 4.2** (continued)

	Personal/ friends/ family (micro)	State policies/ support (macro)	Civil society support (meso)	Educational/ training institutions (meso)	Professional contacts (meso)
Interviewee 6	Personal resilience (+) Local employer (+)	Strict permit system (-)	Local NGO (+)		Local NGO (+)
Interviewee 7	Family (+) Personal resilience (+) Personal trauma (-) Friends (-)	Strict asylum and permit system (-)	Local NGO (+)	School teacher (+) NGO member (+) Employer (-) French lan- guage (-) Professional training (+)	Local NGO (+)
Interviewee 8	Husband (-) Personal resilience (+) Personal trauma (-)	Swiss lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)	-	French lan- guage (-)	Lack of network sup- port (-)
Interviewee 9	Husband (-) Personal resilience (+) Personal trauma (-) Close ethnic community (+)	Swiss lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)	Local NGO (+)	University studies (+)	Local NGO (+) Swiss devel- opment cooperation organisation (+) Lack of network sup- port (-)
Interviewee 10	Family (+) Personal resilience (+)	Lack of administrative support (-)	-	French lan- guage (-) Internship programme (+)	Personal network (+)
Interviewee 11	Friends (+) Personal resilience (+) Personal trauma (-)	Municipality support (-) Swiss lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)	-	French lan- guage (-)	Personal network (+)

otherwise, as well as the manner in which the MRAs feel they have agency to challenge the barriers to labour market integration. We conclude by exploring how MRAs exercise agency and, in particular, how epiphanic moments events – especially critical events related to motherhood, political self-affirmation, trauma, or

marginalisation experienced by our interviewees – have affected what they think the society and context in the host country allows them to achieve.

## 4.2 Methodological Considerations

We conducted a total of 11 biographical interviews involving MRAs of various ages, genders, religious or spiritual backgrounds, educational and socio-economic backgrounds: five women and six men. The respondents were from the following countries: Peru, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, USA, Turkey, Syria and Eritrea. They arrived in Switzerland between 2014 and 2019. Three interviewees from Syria were temporarily admitted persons who arrived under the asylum framework, two were recognised refugees (from Turkey and from Eritrea) and the six others came through family reunification. Their professional situation was diverse; they were active either as students, interns, employees or self-employed persons in the sectors of construction, horticulture, electricity, healthcare, informatics, social work, art, development, human rights and research. Four of our interviewees were actively seeking a job at the time of the interview. Most of the interviewed MRAs could not continue to work in the sector in which they were trained in their origin country; those who did had to study for it again or turn to self-employment.

To identify interviewees, we relied on our ‘personal networks’ and the snowball sampling method (e.g. friends of friends, connections of colleagues etc.). Given the sensitive nature of the fieldwork, particular safeguards were taken. Each subject was treated with care and sensitivity and in an objective and transparent manner. All the information provided by the interviewees was anonymised and data protection precautions were taken, following the ethics standards applied by the SIRIUS project. Several of the interviews could not be recorded so as to reassure the interviewee and allow him or her to talk about his or her background more freely. In general, during fieldwork, we avoided sensitive and potentially re-traumatising topics, such as sexual violence and torture. The biographical interviews were conducted in-person and face-to-face by a team of trained researchers, recorded and transcribed ‘intelligent verbatim’ (which involved transcription with detailed editing and sometimes omitting certain elements that were found to add no meaning to the script). When it was not possible to record, extensive notes were collected by the researcher and reorganised in a document after the interview.

In designing and conducting the fieldwork a ‘relational ethics’ approach was taken (Kaukko et al., 2017), that implies the lack of any possible stigmatising/discriminating attitude and behaviour during the research work. In particular, we aimed to promote a trust-based relationship by adopting a transparent, voluntary-based approach to research participation. In accordance with this approach, research participants are free to consider whether their participation in the research would benefit or harm them, while ensuring that no compelling participation, no misunderstanding or false expectation are generated by researchers’ behaviour. Hence, all the researchers involved in the fieldwork adhered with their ideas, language – both

verbal and body-conveyed – to an ethics of research that contrasts stigmatisation and prejudicial assumptions about the research participants. To ensure that potential harms are correctly understood by potential participants, the researchers-interviewers illustrated them during the first contact/meeting, both verbally and with a written information sheet; moreover they asked participants to repeat these principles and conditions.

In addition, we adopted in full the codes of conduct and the prescriptions of research ethics documents provided by international organisations (e.g. the EC European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and the Guidance Note—Research on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants, the UNHCR Guidelines for Good Research Practice). Particular attention was thus given to the informed consent by stressing a voluntary agreement to participate. To ensure the confidential nature of the research, all personal data were fairly and lawfully processed according to consent procedures followed, and no sensitive data were published. Finally, questions and items within the guidelines and questionnaire allowed respondents to abstain from answers in sensitive issues. It should be mentioned that during the interviews, the researchers did not experience moments where participants revealed particularly sensitive information nor came to terms with any incidental findings (involving evidence of ill health (mental/physical/contagious or not), violence and other forms of illegal/immoral behaviour).

An in-depth analysis of the interview data following biographical interviews approach was undertaken. In writing up our research results we took extra care to remove or edit particular details that might have made our research participants recognisable.

Overall, key questions guiding our research were: what do MRAs mean by ‘integration’? How do they experience integration? How do MRAs perceive the barriers and enablers of labour market integration? What were the ‘turning points’ and ‘epiphanies’ that helped MRAs identify these needs? How has the reality of labour market integration met MRAs’ aspirations of what life would be like in their host country and their resilience to adversity? To what extent do MRAs feel they have agency to challenge the barriers to labour market integration? To what extent do their perceptions (related to labour market integration) differ from the discursive representations of their policymakers and civic actors?

Critical life-changing events or ‘turning points’ that are crucial to MRAs’ life/professional trajectories in Switzerland – provoking them to re-think their attitudes and expectations and to develop their own theories or ‘epiphanies’ (Hanks & Carr, 2008; Nico & Van der Vaart, 2012) about life more broadly and adjustment to the host society – were selected and organised across themes, as presented below. We analysed those critical events in their connection to specific labour market integration barriers and enablers with which MRAs interacted.

Overall, by looking into the narratives and experiences of MRAs, our research sought to empower MRAs themselves, particularly those who may have been victimised (Couttenier et al., 2016) or relegated to marginalised spaces within the host society. As Maillot et al. (2016) stress, if research is to be a form of resistance, then it must be used to challenge dominant (native) narratives around ‘vulnerable’

populations, including those which (re)produce violence through the creation and enforcement of social hierarchies. Our research was thus driven by the aspiration to have these migrants' stories and experiences included within the current discourse on human migration and labour market integration, illuminating the reciprocal relationship between their agency and the socio-political and policy context.

### **4.3 The Swiss Policy Context: Barriers and Enablers for MRAs' Integration**

The dialectic interplay of structure and agency has long been discussed in the literature (Jessop, 1996; Giddens, 1984; Hay, 2002). Structure can create, but also hinder, opportunities for 'agency' (defined as 'one's capacity to shape one's life and exploit opportunities or indeed open up new possibilities for one's self and their family', Triandafyllidou, 2019, 8). As put by Hay (2002, 254), 'actors make outcomes but the parameters of their capacity to act is ultimately set by the structured context in which they find themselves'. The overarching national policy context in Switzerland clearly gives rise to both barriers and enablers for integration across all different groups of MRAs. The Swiss policy of integration of migrants into the labour market focuses on, amongst other things, enhancing the employability of those migrants who need it, preparing those who can't be taken over by ordinary structures by preparing them to engage in education measures or to engage them in other ordinary measures, or supporting them to enter the labour market.

Over the years, the Swiss federal and cantonal authorities have made concrete efforts to promote a more pragmatic approach to fostering MRAs' integration, considering the social tensions and additional costs of the non-inclusion of the MRAs into the labour market. As our review of key policies and services for MRAs' labour market integration and the findings of a series of interviews with actors at the governmental level (confederation and canton), political actors, and members of integration support services conducted as part of the SIRIUS project reveals, the integration of MRAs into the labour market, and more particularly the integration of refugees, provisionally admitted persons and recently arrived young persons, has been an increasingly important element in recent Swiss policymaking, leading to major reforms. Our interviewees mentioned the Integration Agenda<sup>1</sup> as a rather promising policy in terms of successfully promoting MRAs' integration as an individually tailored process. In particular, the Integration Agenda aims to support

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<sup>1</sup>The 'Swiss Integration Agenda', advanced in spring 2018 and implemented from 2019 provides for binding measures and strengthens individual support and case management for refugees and temporarily admitted persons. Additionally, it increases the lump sum paid by the Confederation to the Cantons to fund integration measures from 6000 to 18,000 Swiss francs per refugee or temporarily admitted person. As explained in SEM's Migration Report (2019, 38), the Integration Agenda foresees certain clearly measurable targets that the Confederation and the cantons should abide with.

the integration of refugees and temporarily admitted persons, with faster implementation of measures and by strengthening individual support and case management (BFH and Social Design, 2016). Until 2018, there has not been access to real integration measures for asylum seekers. Some cantons have opened some integration measures, but this has not been foreseen by federal policies. In the framework of the new Agenda, migrants coming from the asylum procedure will also have access to an integration assessment with an integration plan. Our interviewed policymakers and practitioners see the integration plan resulting from the assessment, alongside the support and coaching to achieve it, as a valuable tool that should be expanded. Case management was also cited by many stakeholders as a key tool that needs to be expanded to better support migrants in their integration into the labour market. Federal actors are implementing measures to strengthen the tool and provide useful guidelines to the cantons (Mexi et al., 2019).

Another positive development mentioned by the interviewees is the Foreigners' legislation that implements Art. 121a Cst. and places refugees and temporarily admitted persons into the category of 'native workers' that, from a legal point of view, ought to be considered as having priority access to the labour market. Positive enablers, in this respect, are considered the pre-apprenticeship programmes initially aiming to enable (through a ten-month apprenticeship that combines theory at school, practice in a workplace, and local language courses) refugees and temporarily admitted persons to obtain the basic skills required in order to participate in vocational training (Moreno Russi et al., 2020).

Yet, alongside positive appraisals concerning policy development and implementation, we have found that there a set of restrictive contextual factors hindering further progress remains. These include anti-migration discourses scapegoating MRAs for labour market downsides; lack of adequate psychological support for people who have suffered psychological trauma (this especially concerns refugees who have followed a difficult migration path and, as a result, become less resilient vis-à-vis the barriers they encounter as they seek to integrate in the labour market); discriminatory practices and inadequate institutional support.

In light of these contextual barriers we can say that there are various challenges the MRAs must overcome to be able to gain a foothold in the labour market: they must learn to cope with negative or difficult administrative experiences and prejudices often held by both employers and native workers and the resulting feeling of not being welcome; they must face an overall low appreciation of their skills and capabilities, as skills acquired in third-countries are often considered as being of lower standard; and they must be resilient enough to cope with prejudice or discrimination. All these are elements that can critically affect MRAs' sense of legitimacy and self-confidence in their path toward employment.

Moreover, as stressed elsewhere, over the years, the increase in the number of migrants in Switzerland has given rise to several direct democratic votes (Sciarini, 2017). According to the Migration-Mobility Indicators from the NCCR, there has been a significant restrictive effect of referendums and popular initiatives on migrants' rights (Arrighi, 2017; NCCR, n.d.). Direct democratic instruments have, therefore, provided important disabling barriers to migrant integration as they have

re-affirmed ‘Fortress’ actualities and exclusionary trajectories of boundary construction in the host labour market and society. These observations are crucial in understanding how the MRAs tackle the integration challenge. Our research shows that, overall, migrants operate as ‘frame articulators’ (Benford & Snow, 2000) of their approach taken to integration, and the processes and resources mobilised to achieve their outcomes. In effect, examining how contextual barriers and enablers become tangible and meaningful for the MRAs as they experience specific turning points and develop their own epiphanies about life more broadly and about their own access to the host labour market, in particular, can help bridge the divide between evidence and policy in the field of migration and integration and change the current negative narrative on migration. This requires that the narrative on migration must tell the true story – successes and failures – of what it means to leave one’s home, make the journey and settle into someplace new.

#### **4.4 Migrants’ Stories of Integration and the Dynamics of Structural and Agential Factors**

The biographical stories reveal how structures (general policy contexts and related services to support MRAs’ labour market integration) can be enabling or difficult in their integration process. They also highlight the role of individual agency and the extent to which migrants were effective in using their capacity to act, offsetting obstacles (i.e., effective agential action). Structural conditions can create opportunities for agency, for individual actors to interpret and understand the nature and value of integration and to apply it in different contexts. At the same time, the biographical interviews uncover a major tension or ‘gap’ between the extent to which migrants were able to exercise their agency and the ways in which a number of critical structural factors had come together to largely constrain MRAs’ efforts to achieve effective integration. This complex dynamics between structural and agential factors (engendering tensions or facilitating empowerment in other cases) are observed and captured in five themes: *motherhood, social or political activism; the fear of deskilling; informality and labour market marginalisation; and trauma*. These five themes are key elements in understanding how actors were able to shape ‘the depth and breath’ (Glasby, 2005) of their integration outcomes and provide a *common thread* to the different MRA life-stories we studied.

All interviewed MRAs had a common desire to achieve a better future and a safe life, and migration was the only strategy. The themes of motherhood or building a family, and of political or social activism, were mentioned as important triggers for migration and critical drivers shaping their life and aspirations for migration in the host country. At the same time, their perceptions of ‘work’ and ‘integration’, their attitude, professional choices, and how they cope with the difficulties related to labour market integration, were shaped or constrained in various ways by both structure and actors’ experiences before migration, having an important influence on learning, adaptation, and their decisionmaking toward the overall integration process.

#### ***4.4.1 Motherhood as a Driving Force and a Turning Point***

Motherhood was a central theme in the narrative of our female interviewees. It was at the core of their motivations to leave their origin country and influenced their identity formation and integration path in the host country, as well as their professional ambitions. Willingness to migrate for their children represented a turning point for the interviewed women. The decision to migrate changed their own lives and moreover made them realise that even if they were attached to their career, the well-being of their children represented a priority. The desire to provide better life conditions and future opportunities or the need to be close to their own children who previously migrated to Switzerland in fact pushed some interviewed women to leave a well-established career.

The story of Alicia, a 55-year-old woman from Brazil, is exemplary. Alicia grew up in a humble household in a close-knit family where a certain conception of morality, commitment to her own family, and work represented the most important values. These values determined many of the choices in her life. Following the path of her father, she started to work at the age of 15, pursuing the career as a police officer. In her mid-20s she was already a mother of three, a recognised police officer as well as a graduate student in criminal law. She had worked for almost all her life in the judiciary sector and in the department of the protection of minor victims of sexual abuse. When her ex-husband moved to Switzerland to start a 'better' life and their children decided to move with him to Geneva, she had to decide if she would leave her life and her work in Brazil to follow them. Since she noticed during her first visits that she was losing intimacy with her children, she decided to migrate to be close to them, even if it implied leaving her career to be a mother in Switzerland who at first didn't or couldn't have any meaningful professional ambition.

Alicia described her decision to move abroad and stay home as something that came as life-changing event, restricting her in moving her professional life forward. In this case, motherhood was the driving force for migration and had an impact on Alicia's ambitions for her own life. In fact, she underlines that since her focus was to reconnect with her children, she didn't have any professional ambitions and was prepared to take any work that enabled her to have enough money to live on. Alicia developed professional aspirations only later, after she had re-established a strong relationship with her sons, and as she got the residency permit and felt legitimate in looking for a job that corresponded to her professional profile. Yet, for the first 3 years, since she didn't have a permanent residence permit, she had been going there and back, working in Geneva occasionally as part-time cleaning lady and as a care assistant. She says:

When you accept working as a house-cleaner, there is something that moves in your head. Your values, your emotions, your dignity are touched and questioned. In my country I am someone. I had a job, a higher education. I belonged to my society. Here I was no one, I didn't know anyone and I didn't know anyone. I didn't speak the language. I started to feel depressed and lost. I also had to adapt to my children, who meanwhile became young free men used to live in Switzerland.

Overall, her change of legal status (mentioned as an enabling factor for labour market access in the stories of other MRAs too) in conjunction with the context in which the motherhood decision was taken at the very beginning of her migration journey – namely, that of supporting her ex-husband’s career ambitions and life plans – played a major role in hindering the realisation of her agency for pursuing a fully rewarding and meaningful professional life.

Like Alicia, Eddie, a 46-year-old woman from the United States, and Maud, a 58-year-old woman from Peru, also claimed that since they decided to move to Switzerland for their children, they were ready to take jobs in the informal sector or underqualified jobs such as a house cleaner, since the priority was providing a safe environment for their families. Switzerland represents a country that can offer a safe environment as well as better educational and professional opportunities compared to those offered in the different countries of Latin America such as Brazil and Peru. To be able to provide this security for their children, they had to choose to give up work and careers they loved as well as the opportunity to improve their social status through career advancement.

In sum, considering the biographical interviews of the women where the subject of motherhood was central, it is important to notice that their discourse about motherhood and family was strictly related to the subject of work and career. Also, that gender differences in opportunity identification have led to different and distinct enablers for and constraints on their decision to migrate and the usage of resources within this process. In their narratives about their lives before their arrival in Switzerland, the participants underline how important it was to work and provide for their families. It was especially clear in their cases that the importance/sense of work as ‘a must’ was part of their primary socialisation – it had been transmitted by their own family and was a central subject for them. Since childhood, work had been essential for survival.

For these women, combining their private and professional lives represented a challenge, but at the same time was considered as an experience that rendered them more resilient towards challenges in the pre-migration life, as well as in their new country. It gave Alicia in particular a way to cope emotionally with the struggles she encountered in the labour market and the integration process. For the last few years, she has been working for an association that supports the orientation of migrants and undocumented migrants; she works on several projects and is responsible for the beneficiaries from the Brazilian community. Concurrently, for Alicia, getting in touch with an association had an impact on her self-confidence, but also on her relationship with her professional project and the strategy she would later adopt. Hence, a loophole of the state integration policy, which represents an obstacle in the professional integration of migrants, is the absence of an effective psychological support system for people who have suffered psychological trauma; this especially concerns refugees who have followed a difficult migration path.



#### ***4.4.2 Social or Political Activism as a Cause of Migration and a Coping Strategy***

Social or political activism represents another central theme that accumulates in the biographical interviews of several refugees, as well as other migrants, and on different levels. It thus provides evidence on the question of the interconnectedness of the various processes of ‘identification’, such as political, ethnic, gender, class or occupational identity (see Nandi & Platt, 2012). Considering that identification can be contextually specific (Nandi & Platt, 2015, 2016) and has implications for others through processes of inclusion and exclusion (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the relationship between political identity, ethnic identity, and ‘integration’ cannot be ignored. As our biographical research reveals, in many cases, social or political activism had an impact on MRAs’ aspirations for inclusion into the host society, and on how they coped with the new reality after their arrival in Switzerland.

For example, Omar, a 36-year-old man of Kurdish origins from Turkey who was granted political asylum in 2014, shared how he eventually came to join a Kurdish association in Switzerland, with the aim to support Kurdish rights – as he has done in the past and prior to his migration journey. Omar, a highly active political activist in Turkey, experienced various forms of oppression there and was forced to flee to preserve his freedom. This experience –being an activist and becoming a refugee – is understood as relating to how life is managed before and after the refugee journey, how political identity determines life-changing choices and aspirations of ‘being included’ in the host country, but also how political self-affirmation and related actions can be considered as enlightening moments and turning points. He says:

In my family, being Kurds wasn’t a big matter, we weren’t religious and we didn’t have existential discussions about the Kurdish identity. It was at the university that it changed: everyone starts to ask you “who are you?”, and you have to decide which ethnic or religious group you want to belong to. I began to reflect on my identity, to do some research on politics and history. I opened their eyes on what was happening around me, to the Kurdish people in Turkey.

During his first years of university, Omar launched with some university colleagues a leftist democratic association that supported the Kurdish people and was politically engaged against the government’s oppression of them. This had an impact on who he wanted to be, and the decision to mobilise himself determined the course of events that forced him to look for asylum in Switzerland. As with other interviewed migrants arrived under the asylum framework, after becoming a migrant in a foreign country his priorities changed. In the first period he had to put aside political engagement to focus on himself. Political activism lost its importance, priority, and in some moments its meaning; surviving and becoming included in the new society seemed more important, as Omar among others explained:

We live in an individualistic world where everyone thinks to themselves. Which is sad but true. I come from a rich culture, where relations among people are strong. Thanks to this relation we could fight against the power and the oppression, but here I had to adapt to this system in order to survive, I become in some moments an individualist person as well. On

the other hand, I still think that everyone has a social responsibility and has to dedicate some of their own time to a social cause.

Even if they are put aside at times along the way, political ideologies affected the majority of refugees in a positive and empowering way, and they represented a driving force even after migration. Political ideologies provided a narrative to help the refugees accept new challenges and a new reality in Switzerland as the host country. For some who had to leave a well-established career, they learnt to accept their past because they believed that giving up their professional life for a political or social cause is more important than money and social status. Their engagement can be a source and a way of coping with the difficulties related to their professional integration process.

The story of Nathan, a 30-year-old from Nigeria, shows how he gained political consciousness after his migration and how a political reading of his own reality can have an impact on his own life choices, on the 'integration process' and on his path in Switzerland. Nathan grew up in extremely poor conditions in a marginalised neighbourhood in Nigeria. As he turned 18, he was pushed by his family to follow the path of his older brother and migrate illegally to Italy to send home some money that would allow the survival of his brothers and his parents. His arrival in Europe strengthened his disillusionment with the idea of Europe as an 'Eden', the sense deception and dissolution were stronger than expected. When he arrived in Europe he was young and full of aspirations; he carried on the dream to become a well-recognised and rich artist. Being a street artist in Nigeria was often considered as a real vocation. His aspirations were destroyed rapidly since being an artist is not a real 'job' or a respected vocation in Italy and he was, overall, simply 'a black kid from a poor African country'. He had to change his expectations and adapt to the new reality. To earn money, he had to become first a street seller and then a drug dealer. After one year of working on the street, he was arrested in Italy and sentenced to 18 months in prison. In this regard, he identified his detention as playing an epiphanic role that changed everything in his life as a migrant as well as his expectations:

Everything changed in prison. . . I don't want to go back but I miss the prison, the people who I met, the situation in which I decided who I wanted to be. I started to meet people and discover their stories. In prison I started thinking. I asked myself what brought me here? I looked around me and I saw black people, Arabic people, a few Italians from the margins. And I saw a pattern. I started to see races. I started to see myself. I understood what kind of artist I wanted to be. I started to change my way of writing and my plans. At first my choices and my purpose were always related to money. But there my work and my thoughts became political.

Reflecting on colonialism and the power relations among white and black people, Nathan reports that he began to understand the meaning of structural violence and racism. He realised that he did have and still has the right to look for a better life in Europe after all Europe had done to African countries; he began to believe there is no such thing as economic migration because migration is always driven by political relations. On one hand, this new consciousness triggered epiphanies that fostered his resilience and determination, empowering him with a sense of new legitimization that

in turn affected his expectation of a better and equal life. This expectation pushed him to leave Italy and search for better life conditions in Switzerland. On the other hand, Nathan decided that he would never become part of the official integration system nor of the formal labour market system because for him it reproduced structural racism and inequalities. He decided to become politically active by joining militant associations and he looked for support in alternative communities that occupied, for example, squats. Political consciousness shaped his main ambitions (to become a politically active artist) and his professional choices, respectively, to look simply for informal work to have the minimum to survive.

#### ***4.4.3 The Fear of Deskilling and Labour Market Marginalisation***

The possession of certain basic skills has an impact on a person's integration process in the new country and the possibilities of acquiring them may influence their trajectory and generate epiphanies that lead them to think they need to downskill to have a chance to be selected for a job position. As we have seen, the lack of recognition of skills can lead people who find it difficult to find work aligned with their skills to move to other fields or accept jobs requiring a lower level of qualification. For Alicia, the moment when she took the step of accepting a lower-skilled job was epiphanic and instilled in her a sense of despair and a moment of crisis that could be described as an existential crisis. While this choice may stem from a need to earn a living, it can also be a strategy for coping with other difficulties along the way, such as frustration or a feeling of not being useful, as in the case of Lucia. In her own words:

So I said to myself, I have to look for alternatives to occupy my time while I find a job, because it's full of frustrations, so it's doing things as a volunteer, reconciling myself with the academy, so I'm seeing if I can publish something from my thesis in a journal, I'm learning French. I think having patience is what has cost me the most so far, and also reconciling with the idea that doing jobs that are less qualified for me, like babysitting, well, it's not bad. In the end, it's a job, I can earn some money, but for me it's hard, you know. It's not a shame but it's a little bit, why did you study so much if you're going to end up babysitting someone else's kids. But maybe it's more my ideas than people's. I think that if I tell people that I'm working there, nobody will judge me, because they are also aware of how difficult it is to find a job, even for Swiss people.

The choice to accept less skilled work was not easy for Lucia, who has a PhD. Although she feels that it will be beneficial morally – and to some extent financially – she is not comfortable with the idea that people can judge this choice. She herself feels that those years of education would be wasted. However, this factor generated an epiphanic awareness for Lucia about the importance of deskilling, which she did strategically. The information received on public policies, such as sound advice, encourages Lucia to move towards undeclared jobs for fear of then being forced to remain locked into a field if she enters an unskilled but declared job:

I can't get a job as a waitress, or a job that will be reported [declared] to the unemployment. The people I've met here tell me, if you get a job as a waitress, unemployment services, officially are going to label you in this kind of jobs, because you opened the door to do that. It doesn't matter if you have a master's degree or a PhD. So, I have friends who work in the restaurant business etc. and they say, here they give you a job, but I say, no I can't because until I get past the unemployment story etc., I don't know what can happen. I told myself that I had to find an undeclared and flexible job so that could adapt to my time (French classes etc.) in the meantime, even if it's babysitting.

All such experiences were epiphanic in the way they made her question her choice of building her life in a country where her skills and education are not appropriately recognised. Interviews with other highly skilled migrants, such as Elias, a PhD researcher from Eritrea, have shown us that this fear was justified. Taking a low-skilled job that was very different from their field of expertise had been beneficial in terms of improving proficiency in the local language, integration, and the need to have an activity, but it had been a major obstacle for them when it came time to benefit from public services to help them return to work. In particular, they found themselves obliged to seek or accept a job in the same field since according to unemployment policies only experience in Switzerland counts and thus found that this was a policy that could foster deskilling.

At the same time, the subject of recognition of skills, experiences, and qualifications was a central focus of the interviews related to major epiphanies and turning points for their personal development and professional growth. Most of the interviewees expressed that they had faced a lack of recognition or low valorisation of their competences, experiences, and qualifications by public institutions, potential employers, and sometimes even their close circle of acquaintances. This negative judgement of their abilities played an epiphanic role in our interviewees' migration experiences affecting their access to the labour market and contributed to their labour market marginalisation. In some cases, these blows to self-confidence or to the feeling of legitimacy can even lead to problems or traumas at the psychological level, thus dragging the person into a vicious circle where the various problems are intertwined and feed into each other.

#### ***4.4.4 Labour Market Informality and Discrimination***

Lucia's decision to first enter the labour market through an undeclared job has been part of her strategy to fight administrative and policy barriers. However, most interviewed migrants legally entitled to work who entered the informal labour market did so because they could not find work in the formal labour market, even though they were looking for jobs requiring few or no qualifications. Maud is a 58-year-old trained secretary and administrator, who moved back and forth between Peru and Switzerland until she decided to relocate permanently in Switzerland as she thought Switzerland could offer herself and her family more opportunities for a better life. She attributes this difficulty to competition in the labour market:

Today it is much harder to find work at once. During my first stay I found a job straight away. I felt safer as well. But now the demographic reality has changed. There are too many people, too many requests. My age represents as well an obstacle. I am forced to work informally and not declare because any employer is ready to offer a contract.

Reflecting on the working conditions of women in Switzerland, Maud sheds light especially on the gendered dimensions of informality at work. She considers that women have more ‘advantages’ than men: they are able to find more easy jobs in the informal labour market, respectively, in the sectors of service, cleaning, and restoration. Processes of labour market informalisation and experiences of informality are a defining feature of MRAs’ trajectories in the country of settlement and draws attention to the urgency of understanding the ways in which social practices and cultural prejudices in host communities formalise and conceal the gendered dimensions of informality at work.

The political reality of some sectors of the labour market, especially construction, restoration, and cosmetics where employers prioritize cheaper cross-border labour forces, represents a barrier and challenge for entrance to the labour market. The question of increasing concurrence includes not only a concurrence among the Swiss and migrant labour forces, but also among migrants and cross-border workers, especially in the Italian part of Switzerland. Consequently, according for some of the interviewees, many low-qualified jobs, as for example hairdressers, are occupied by a majority of underpaid cross-border employees who work in Switzerland but still live in Italy or France where life is more affordable. The interviewed migrants, in particular temporarily admitted persons, feel that with this context they are not attractive enough.

Concurrently, six of our interviewees, especially men from Arabic and African countries, claimed that the structural racism and discrimination in the Swiss labour market represent a significant obstacle and barrier to fulfilling their needs. For instance, Subi, an 18-year-old from Syria, claimed that discrimination can affect you even if you arrived in Switzerland at a young age and attended school there. He escaped from war in 2013, arrived in Switzerland when he was 13 years old; he attended the secondary school and professional formation. He had never felt discriminated against either by his classmates nor from the people close to him. However, when he had to look on his own for an internship position, he experienced how his name and his origin became a barrier from entering the labour market:

I sent plenty of applications to find an employer who was ready to take me as an intern. For months I looked without success. There is for sure a great concurrence among young people, but I think, as many said, that an Arabic name on the applications and my provisory permit will always represent an obstacle. On this matter, the problem is related to how you look for a job and how the employers consider the applications; employers in general get the cv and a motivation letter, they don’t meet you. In this case it is normal that on paper I won’t ever be prioritised.

Similar experiences were described by eight of our interviewees. Many of the biographical stories of the interviewed migrants highlight that the first contacts

they had with Swiss institutions played a decisive role in shaping their path to integration. Forms of racism or discrimination were sometimes reproduced by the cantonal integration offices, related associations, or orientation offices as well. Some underline that their own social assistance officers treated them with condescension by undervaluing their previous professional experiences and skills. For instance, an interviewed asylum seeker accepted on a provisory basis declared that his own social assistant discouraged him from trying to apply for jobs as an electrician and plumber – professions he exercised for years in his origin country. The social assistant's main argument was that to practice these professions in Switzerland requires a much higher educational level and skills that someone from Syria probably doesn't have.

This first relationship with Swiss institutions is described as an initial factor delegitimising MRAs' migration and their status, triggering the start of loss of self-confidence that conditioned the way they were going to position themselves in the new country. Hence, the discriminatory behaviour and biased perceptions of key integration actors in the local host communities had a negative impact on the path of some interviewed MRAs and determined an epiphanic moment in their professional paths. Some were forced to re-evaluate their professional plans and expectations and choose to pursue a professional path in a sector that they either didn't like or didn't correspond to their profile. The implications of these discriminatory experiences were more acute for those MRAs who already had difficulties entering the labour market because of a missing network, language difficulties, legal status, or lack of recognition of their own diplomas.

Overall, legal status affected the risk of being discriminated, constrained MRAs' agency, and was often considered as a negative turning point that migrants and refugees didn't experience. For instance, several migrants who arrived for family reunification reasons claimed to be discriminated against because they couldn't find any support and help since they weren't refugees. They had to pay for language courses themselves and experienced more difficulties than those benefitting from social assistance. Migrants who arrived for family reunification were also more frequently confronted with the question of legitimacy. Women who moved to Switzerland for familiar reunification or those defined as 'economic migrants' were often considered either as privileged migrants who took advantage of the national resources or as foreigners who didn't have the right or the reasons to be and work in Switzerland – or both. They suffered a more subtle and invisible discrimination that often restrained their professional ambitions. Moreover, migrants who came to Switzerland for familiar reunification or as a result of a personal choice are often not considered in terms of psychological vulnerability and have feel they have less access to the support offered refugees who suffered under more evident and strong traumas. Overall, temporarily admitted persons seem to have encountered more difficulties and structural obstacles that blocked labour market integration.

#### ***4.4.5 Trauma and Ways of Coping with Psychological Distress***

The emotional state of the MRAs interviewed is a key factor in their journey towards integration. The difficult experiences they (may) have lived through before, during, or after migration are events that leave a trace, giving rise to feelings from simple nostalgia to trauma. In some cases, MRAs have identified specific needs to help them cope with and manage these feelings. The identification and management of these needs have been key steps in their journey towards professional integration. Many migrants suffer from psychological stress, which can slow down or even block the process of integration into the labour market.

The story of Subi, who left Homs in Syria when he was 10 years old because of the violent escalation of the conflict and who had to embark to a long and difficult journey to Europe, shows that to be able to build a new life and to start an integration process, it is necessary to face emotional trauma and find a strategy to cope with the past. It enlightens us as well about how the support of an association and its personal accompaniment can have an impact on this process.

We told our stories, how we left our country, our journey with the boat ... and how we experienced our arrival in Switzerland. I see now how it helped me. I could free my heart and head, which was full of anger. At the beginning it was hard but after I learned how to talk about everything. By talking I learnt how to cope with my emotions. I don't know where I would be today if I couldn't express myself in this way. I was listened to by the people and I could feel their solidarity, this helped as well.

The sense of emotional liberation was an epiphanic moment for Subi, and an essential step to being able to deal with the challenges and dimensions of his new life in Switzerland. He learnt to cope emotionally with his traumas related to the war and to his own migration path; he felt more accepted by the society of the new country because of the empathy shown by the other young people. He understood, as he said, that only by confronting himself with his 'nightmares' and his past he would be able to handle the new challenges and his path in Switzerland.

For some, working is the only way of coping with trauma. This was the case for Mohamed, a 48-year-old political asylum seeker from Syria who worked as a hairdresser. He escaped from his origin country in 2013 because the daily living conditions had become unbearable. The neighbourhood where his family lived was constantly bombarded as well as the saloon where he was working. Mohamed's family has always been against the Assad government; some brothers and cousins were active members of an extremist rebel group. As some family members started to disappear and after Mohamed was threatened with death several times, he decided to leave the country with his family and the family of one of his brothers. He arrived in Switzerland in 2014 after having stayed for one year in Libya and a difficult illegal journey through the deserts and across the Mediterranean Sea. A few months after he arrived in Switzerland, he and his family – his wife and their 13-year-old son – received the support of an association that helped them find an apartment and a job. Finding work represented for Mohamed his turning point:

Working in a saloon in the same village where I was living and meeting people every day helped me greatly. I could learn the language by practising it, getting to know the people, and making myself known overcoming the first cultural barrier. I am a Muslim man after all, in a village that, especially a few years ago, didn't have almost any people from other countries [...]The work didn't allow me to become economically independent. But still, by working, I could keep myself occupied. Staying at home, watching all day on television what was happening in Syria, made me feel useless. I would become crazy.

The nostalgia of home, the distance from some friends and relatives are very present in everyday life; work was the only way for Mohamed to escape, or at least to cope with this suffering. He could see that by working he could also overcome difficulties related to a social and cultural integration. Subi's experience shows us how the resolution of psychological stress or trauma can facilitate a migrant's integration. Mohamed's experience, on the other hand, explains how entering the labour market helped him manage his emotional traumas.

In other cases, positive epiphanic experiences have been created by seeking support from civil society organisations. For some interviewees, asking for support from an association was considered as a moment of action that eventually changed their professional path. Admitting to needing help, and to be able to ask for it, was an active decision and a way of taking control of their own situation that eventually had a positive impact on their psychological and emotional state. For Diana, a 40-year-old trained project manager from Costa Rica, contacting an association had an impact on her self-confidence, but also on her relationship with her professional project and the strategy she would later adopt:

In September, the association invited women to testify about their successes, and I was very touched by this event and the journey of these women, and I identified a lot with them when they said it wasn't our fault. And I think that this sentence alone, it's not your fault, put the structures and functioning of the labour market into more perspective, and it took some of the weight off my shoulders. It takes some of the pressure off you from putting yourself on the shoulders and also from seeing that you're not the only person going through it. That's when I decided to talk to representatives of the association to look for an alternative. . .they told me, you have the qualifications, the studies, the knowledge about what to do at a job interview etc. What you lack is the network. They proposed actions that I could implement to develop my network and to be able to access what they called the hidden market.

Moreover, many underlined that they were befriended by members of the association; becoming friends with them was an important step. This point was underlined by Daner, a 34-year-old man from Syria who arrived in Switzerland without knowing anyone. After escaping from his country because he was affiliated to a group of militant Kurdish people, he tried to forget his past; he has never wanted to become too involved with other Kurdish and Syrian refugees because he wanted to build a new life, speak the local language, start to work, and socialise with 'Swiss people'. One of the biggest challenges to achieving this was, according to him, a lack of knowledge about the culture and customs. Becoming close to Swiss people allowed him to get a better look and understanding of the local culture, which in turn is essential to fit in the labour market:

Without an inside [understanding] of the culture, it is not possible to relate to the new host country, to make friends and eventually to find a job. Learning how to behave in the



workplace, how to work, how to relate to the other colleagues and to your own superior are essential to feel confident and to pursue a process of professional integration.

In his case, becoming close and building a friendship with the members of the association not only helped him recover from psychological distress, but represented an important personal turning point leading to epiphanic experiences. Reflecting on obstacles and the support that he started to receive through the association, he reports that what he noticed at this moment was what he missed the most, beside the language courses and an administrative support from the integration office, was an introduction to the local culture. As he experienced this introduction, he felt more comfortable and readier to face specific situations in his private and professional life.

In sum, our findings show that there are various dynamic combinations of turning points and epiphanic experiences at play, with social structural conditions acting as both enablers of and barriers for MRAs' labour market integration, having also consequences for both their identities and the shape of individual lives. Resilience to adversity, associated with specific turning points when MRAs' lives changed direction, seems to be a key factor for several of our interviewees, bringing about an identity-promoting switch in roles from 'victims' driven mainly by the policy, economic, and social barriers and circumstances of the host country to doers, able to exercise reflexive agency. More specifically, their labour market entrance and integration have been found to be conditioned by the 'reflexive competences' (Caetano, 2015) through which they act to address critical barriers related to restrictive institutional and legal frameworks, racism, cultural prejudices, restrictive labour market integration policies and discourses, and distrust. This is shown in the stories of Omar, Subi, and Nathan. How they reflect on earlier life experiences as they battle trauma and seek to redefine and transform their identities and life plans to enter the formal or informal labour market, is also a crucial part of a fundamentally reflexive process, as shown in the stories of Omar, Mohammed, and Nathan.

Yet, resilience, associated with an active process of re-direction, does not necessarily lead to resilient labour market outcomes, as in the case of Diana, not just due to contingent events, but because social structural conditions affect and constrain in cumulative ways MRAs' capabilities to convert those resources into effective agency. As we have seen, some of the resources enabling MRAs to take action to shape their futures are given in their current social situation by ethnic and personal networks, as the story of Daner indicates. Others are deprived after interaction with stereotypes and social institutions, knocking their lives off track, leading them to surrender past professional aspirations, and forcing them to come to terms with continuing 'downward' or negative trajectories. Thus, different structures of opportunity have been identified to exist for different groups of MRAs in the Swiss context, with economic migrants generally enjoying more opportunities than asylum seekers or irregular migrants, and with migrant and refugee women facing a disproportionate share of childcare responsibilities and becoming side-lined in the labour market. In this context, legal status provisions, family values and bias, and gender roles have been found to be associated with critical moments or turning points and their interpretations. The latter may take the form of adaptations to external

circumstances, which in several cases involves being forced to accept a deskilling process, abandoning professional aspirations, or entering the informal economy in order to survive. The stories of Alicia, Elias, Maud, Eddie, and Lucia are falling into these categories. For these interviewees the process of adjustment to the host labour market and society more broadly have led them to a greater sense of self-awareness.

## 4.5 Concluding Remarks

Overall, our biographical interviews underscore the dynamic nature of the integration process and the way in which different elements and factors constrain and enable action. Our research provides evidence to the fact that policymaking to support MRAs' labour market integration, and their social inclusion more broadly, can only be effective if it juxtaposes structural and agential factors in a manner that acknowledges their interplay and interdependence. This understanding could be a key missing link in explaining the *two faces of integration* and the underlying *discrepancy* between, on one hand, structural change that does not always deliver on the ground the prevailing perceptions and aspirations of Swiss policy actors for successful and promising policy implementation and, on the other, the realities of migrants' themselves.

As we have seen, MRAs' journeys towards integration were heavily influenced by structure and agency complementing each other – namely, by a combination of experiences, values, perceptions, and reasoning related to the individual and their interplay with contextual factors (e.g. policies, services) and other messages sent from the host society. Crucially, the biographical stories reveal that their journey towards integration in the Swiss labour market was never prescribed – nor always achieved. Some were able to turn integration barriers into enablers. Most of our respondents, though, were not able to reach the final destination (successfully or as they would have aspired to), as structural factors related to the prevailing policy paradigm and embedded biases and prejudice effectively constrained migrants' capacity to realise their (potential) agency, highlighting a major tension between actors' needs and structures that can be *disabling*. As discussed, critical life moments or junctures (Bourbeau, 2015) related to experiences of motherhood or social and political activism, trauma and perceived discrimination, as well as unsuccessful experience in the world of formal or informal work were decisive events affecting their lives and attitudes towards labour market integration. Negative or difficult experiences associated with deskilling, low appreciation of skills, and the resulting feeling of not being welcome, are all domains where contextual factors have played a relevant role and restricted MRAs' ability to access employment opportunities.

On the other hand, contact with a specific association and access to these networks were important for MRAs' integration, empowering and catalytic *enablers for using their capacity to act* and determining factors in conditioning their motivations, ambitions, and integration paths. Our research suggests that the role of civil society organisations in the integration of the MRAs into the Swiss labour market is

becoming increasingly encompassing. Civil society organisations possess significant experience and expertise, particularly at the grassroots level, that can help public institutions experiment with innovative actions and formulate policy and strategy effectively. Alongside the above, we found that questions of self-confidence and legitimacy – central to our biographical narratives – generated epiphanies which led almost all of our respondents to re-evaluate their labour integration path and made them feel they have agency to challenge the barriers to labour market integration. These need to be sufficiently taken into consideration in the professional support offered by the various services.

Moreover, the exercise of an activity in which the migrant felt useful and valued, positive feedback from another person or institution, the expression of recognition of the difficulties faced by the authorities, local people or other actors representing the host society, and access to integration support that empowers rather than victimises are among the elements that we found as part of the turning points and which have had a positive influence on MRAs' sense of self-assertion, giving them the resources to cope with obstacles and fight for professional integration in line with their values.

In conclusion, whilst our research might not discover the panacea for effective integration, it does highlight a strong normative understanding with strong implications for policy and practice: the freedom to lead the life one has reason to value, as Sen (1999) puts it, requires that MRAs have opportunities to achieve valuable functionings or, in other words, that policy interventions – institutional and legal channels – do not remain insensitive to MRAs' opportunities and liberties and to the way structure shapes agency in the integration process, and their interdependence. This finding on the synergistic relationship between structural and agential factors is very instructive for policymaking: leaving agential considerations outside the scope of structural reforms can expose migrants to further risks and vulnerabilities, perpetuating or exacerbating inequalities within host societies.

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# Chapter 5

## Precarity, Opportunity, and Adaptation: Recently Arrived Immigrant and Refugee Experiences Navigating the Canadian Labour Market



Claire Ellis and Anna Triandafyllidou

### 5.1 Introduction

Canada relies on immigrants as key drivers of the country's population and economic growth. Composing a quarter of the Canadian labour market, immigrants accounted for over 80 per cent of population growth between 2017 and 2018 (Yssaad & Fields, 2018; IRCC, 2020). Recognising this benefit, the federal government has projected increasing admission levels by 1% of the population and reach 451,000 new permanent immigrants per year by 2024 (IRCC, 2022a). Yet beyond the numbers, and despite clear advantages of a smooth transition into the Canadian labour force, many migrants and refugees experience a multitude of barriers that impede their earnings and pathways to sustainable livelihoods. Research has examined various dimensions such as skill devaluing (Bauder, 2003; Creese & Wiebe, 2012), the effects of neoliberal restructuring (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Hiebert, 2006), bias and discrimination in hiring practices (Esses et al., 2007; Fuller & Martin, 2012), the role of points-based selection policies (Sweetman & Warman, 2013; Warman et al., 2015), and the impact of familial structures (Dyson et al., 2019; Shields & Lujan, 2019). Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has introduced new dimensions that interplay with existing labour market barriers and enablers facing newly-arrived immigrants and refugees. In particular, job loss as a result of the pandemic was more significant for recently-arrived immigrants, who saw a reduced employment rate during the initial months of the pandemic compared to Canadian-born workers (Cornelissen & Turcotte, 2020).

The study presented in this chapter examines the employment-related needs, experiences, and aspirations of recently-arrived immigrants and refugees in the

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Greater Toronto Area. Using qualitative data collected through narrative-biographic interviews, the chapter presents first-hand experiences of individuals as they navigate labour market policies, settlement dynamics, and personal circumstances during their initial years in Canada. We have purposefully selected people from a variety of socio-demographic backgrounds, professions, country of origin, and migration pathway to Canada. We did not distinguish in terms of security of status (e.g. temporary migrants vs refugees or permanent residents) but rather in terms of not having arranged a job prior to coming to the country and hence not having had the chance to fully connect their pre- and post-migration experience.

The study's focus is on migrant agency in relation to labour market integration in their new country of residence. We specifically want to explore how pre-migration conditions and experiences inform their actions upon arrival and at a later stage. Our approach is inspired from a contextual understanding of migration as not simply about where one wants to go and what one wants to achieve but also about who one wants to become (Collins, 2017; Bal, 2014). We are particularly interested in how migrants assess their options and take action, reflecting also on past experiences, desires, and expectations, as well as how such information and experiences may be selectively processed in ways that favour some options over others (Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016).

We chose the narrative-biographical approach because we feel this offers a special tool for connecting pre-migration experiences, expectations, conditions experienced, and the effort to shape such conditions and improve one's work position and overall employment situation. As we explain in the next section, migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees face significant barriers upon arrival in Canada, particularly underemployment and down-skilling. Thus, our study aims to contribute to a better understanding of how such barriers are navigated and superseded in different ways. Overcoming these barriers may involve improving one's professional situation but for others may involve setting on an alternative course of action. This chapter focuses on critical events and emerging reflections through the uncovering of specific 'turning points' and 'epiphanies' that arose as interviewees identified their experiences and needs in seeking employment. Turning points, significant life events or changes in circumstances, and epiphanies or transformational realisations about one's life or situation are conceptual markers that allow us to uncover and map the experiences and responses of individuals as they navigate labour market settlement in a new country. Linking the individual trajectories with broader structural conditions, we also employ the notion of precarity to make sense of the structural barriers that migrants face in their labour market integration journey.

The chapter is organised in four sections: first, we provide a brief overview of Canada's family, humanitarian, and economic immigration streams, including recent demographics and policy shifts with a view to presenting the context within which our biographical analysis is situated. We then discuss our methodological approach and the benefit of examining labour market settlement through micro-level analysis. The third section delves into the experiences of interviewees, mapped through the lens of central turning points and epiphanies. Here we also provide critical analysis



of existing policy interventions that pertain to the experiences revealed through the interviews. The final section provides a typology and discussion of actors that catalysed significant events and experiences for the interviewees, contributing to individual trajectories of labour market settlement.

## 5.2 Immigrant Labour Market Settlement: The Canadian Context

Canada's immigration system includes individuals arriving through both temporary and permanent immigration streams. Although the Covid19 pandemic resulted in a significant drop in immigration rates in 2020 (IRCC, 2022a), pre-pandemic levels showed increasing numbers across programs and in 2021 there were record levels of new permanent residents accepted in the country (IRCC, 2021a). Temporary migration channels such as the Temporary Foreign Worker programme and International Mobility Program bring in the largest group of workers, with approximately 405,000 arriving in 2019 (IRCC, 2020). Of these, 15.5 per cent had their temporary work permits replaced by permanent residence status (*ibid.*), while the majority return to their countries of origin after two years because of restricted pathways to permanency or a desire to return (Prokopenko & Hou, 2018). Permanent admissions, on the other hand, consist of three core categories: economic, family, and humanitarian streams. The largest population consists of those arriving through economic channels, averaging 173,000 per year between 2015 and 2019 (IRCC, 2020). Family-sponsored immigration is the second largest group, with an average of 80,000 family stream immigrants arriving per year (*ibid.*). In 2019, India, China, Philippines, Nigeria, and Pakistan made up the top five source countries for permanent immigration, composing about half of the overall population of permanent stream immigrants (*ibid.*). Finally, humanitarian streams include individuals granted permanent residency through private or government refugee sponsorship, applications based on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, and refugee claimants who are granted refugee protection status. Between 2015 and 2019, an average of 49,000 people per year arrived in Canada through all humanitarian streams combined (*ibid.*). Over the last 10 years, over 300,000 people have made claims for asylum at a port of entry or inland office, with rates building to an average of over 56,000 per year between 2017–2019 (IRCC, 2021b). Further, it is estimated there are up to 500,000 non-status migrants in Canada (Ellis, 2015), a population that faces limited access to rights and services such as health, housing, education, employment (Nyers, 2005).

Establishing employment is an integral part of immigrant and refugee settlement. Yet many newcomers arriving through family or economic streams land in Canada without pre-arranged employment and face a multitude of barriers as they navigate the new labour market landscape. Refugees face specific challenges as a result of the often-abrupt nature of their departure that may have interrupted career and educational plans and can result in having fewer networks in the receiving country.



Refugee claimants, in particular, face precarious labour conditions as the result of insecure immigration status while waiting for their protection claims to be determined.

Across immigration streams there remain gendered and racialised dimensions to labour market settlement (Li & Li, 2013). Immigrant and refugee women, particularly those who experience discrimination on the basis of race, report a lower employment rate compared to their male counterparts (Lamba, 2008; Senthnanar et al., 2019; Yssaad & Fields, 2018). There are also particular disparities on the basis of race and country or region of origin. African-born immigrants – compared to European, Asian, or Latin American-born immigrants – have consistently had the lowest employment rate of all immigrant groups (Yssaad & Fields, 2018). This disparity has been seen across immigrant streams, including high and low wage earners and education levels (Creese & Wiebe, 2012). This points to the enduring systemic racism – and more specifically anti-Black racism – embedded in the Canadian labour market, which has been core to Canada's history of colonial immigration (Calliste, 1993; Hernandez-Ramirez, 2019; Kelley & Trebilcock, 2010).

The immigration pathway through which an individual arrives has been shown to have an impact on future economic integration in Canada (Kaida et al., 2019; Krahn et al., 2000; Picot et al., 2019). Workers from refugee backgrounds, for example, have been reported to have the lowest incomes of all immigrant groups in their initial years in Canada, and are more likely to be pushed into social assistance and need for settlement services than other immigrant categories (Abbott & Beach, 2011; Kaida et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). This trend has also been found in other refugee receiving countries such as Australia, United States, Sweden, and Norway (Ott, 2013). Research has also demonstrated a differentiated labour market trajectory depending on the refugee migration pathway. There are several programmes through which refugees can seek protection in Canada, including government resettlement, private sponsorship, and the In-Canada Asylum Program for those making claims for asylum on arrival or within Canada. Picot et al. (2019), for example, found that in the first year of arrival, asylum seekers who had made claims for protection in Canada through the In-Canada programme had the highest earnings compared to both government and privately-sponsored refugees. However, after 10 years, privately-sponsored refugees showed the highest earnings compared to the other two groups (Picot et al., 2019). These diverging outcomes have been linked to policy provisions directed to particular refugee streams. The Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), for example, which provides income support for government-resettled refugees for 12 months after arrival, includes a clawback provision, dollar-for-dollar, if the recipient earns more than half of the monthly income entitlement (IRCC, 2019a). This has been reported to discourage the pursuit of employment during the initial year to avoid losing vital social assistance (IRCC, 2016). At the same time, research has also revealed that in the long-term, refugees have one of the highest-earning growth rates, some even surpassing economic and family class migrants after an average of 10–15 years (Abbott & Beach, 2011; Kaida et al., 2019; Picot et al., 2019; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017).

Significant increases in refugee resettlement and asylum claims in Canada since 2015 resulted in a growing number of refugee newcomers entering the labour market. Between January 2015 and April 2022, Canada resettled over 190,000 refugees (IRCC, 2022b) and accepted over 125,000 refugee claimants between January 2015 and March 2022 (IRB, 2022). While economic integration is not the impetus for refugee protection, once in Canada finding work quickly becomes a major focus of refugee newcomers seeking to support themselves and their families as they settle in a new country.

Refugees' labour market integration has risen on the policy agendas of public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. The Canadian federal government included the economic independence and integration of refugees as a core priority in a 2019–2020 departmental plan and is currently exploring the potential for skilled refugee immigration through economic streams (IRCC, 2019b). A growing rationale for the business case for refugee employment has also gained the attention of major employers, with companies such as Starbucks developing specific refugee hiring programmes (Legrain, 2017). Indeed, refugees contribute to Canada's economic fabric, composing between 11–17 per cent of newcomers since 1990 (Wilkinson, 2017). However, evidence of a prolonged 'refugee gap' in employment indicates lower economic outcomes for refugees in comparison to other immigrant groups and those born in Canada (Ott, 2013).

One key aspect of hindered employment opportunities among all immigration streams is the de-skilling and credential devaluing of immigrants arriving with education and training obtained in other countries (Bauder, 2003; Esses et al., 2007). Overqualification, defined as the circumstance 'in which university degree holders (bachelor's degree or higher) hold jobs that require no more than a high school education' (Cornelissen & Turcotte, 2020, 1), has been found to have significant impacts on immigrant employment attainment in Canada. In a study using integrated data from the 2006 and 2016 Canadian censuses, Cornelissen and Turcotte (2020) report that newly-arrived immigrants and those who obtained their education outside of Canada were more likely to work in jobs below their qualification levels. A portion of this population experienced persistent overqualification lasting 10 years or more, especially those with non-Canadian credentials in medical fields. There are not only economic consequences of this misalignment between migrant credentials and available opportunities facing individuals and their families, but also a human cost tied to diminished psychological and personal life satisfaction (Frank & Hou, 2017).

While macro-level analysis of labour market trends has provided important insights into the state of migrant and refugee employment in Canada, less is known about the processes in which individuals navigate dimensions of precarity and agency in employment-seeking and how their perspectives and experiences may differ from the policy directives of policymakers and settlement service providers. Further gaps remain in understanding the particular experiences with enablers and barriers faced within this diverse population. It is our intention to address these gaps through the following micro-level analysis and narrative accounts that speak to individual experiences navigating complex economic, political, and social terrains that intersect with job finding, skills training, and employment.

## 5.3 Methodology

### 5.3.1 *Interview Recruitment and Analysis*

To examine the labour market experiences of recently-arrived migrants and refugees, we employed the narrative biographic method of interviewing and analysis. A total of 14 interviews were conducted between June and August 2020. The interviewees (seven women and seven men over the age of 18) came from nine countries (Bangladesh, Cuba, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, and Syria). Interviewees arrived in Canada through economic, family, and humanitarian immigration streams including family sponsorship, Express Entry, and the In-Canada asylum system. The inclusion criteria required that interviewees be over the age of 18, currently live in Canada, had arrived after 2013, and belong to one of the following groups: (a) resettled refugees who came either through government or private sponsorship; (b) former refugee claimants who succeeded in obtaining legal status in Canada; (c) refugee claimants currently waiting for a decision on their claim; (d) immigrants who arrived without pre-arranged employment. Recruitment was conducted using snowball and purposive sampling. After each interview, interviewees were asked if they could provide the researchers' contact information to any individuals who met the criteria and may be interested in interviewing with us. This resulted in several individuals getting in touch with us directly. Emails were sent to contacts at community, employment, educational, and settlement service organizations and a government newcomer office, and asked to distribute an invitation to interview to their networks.

Interview transcripts were analysed using Nvivo software. A coding framework of turning points and epiphanies was developed through a process of skimming, reading, and interpretation to organise information into categories, followed by a more thorough reading for thematic analysis including pattern recognition, coding, and category construction (Bowen, 2009). The data was also analysed through the conceptual apparatus of the precarity-agency-migration nexus, with attention paid to particular impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the interviewee experiences.

### 5.3.2 *Researcher Positionality and Ethical Considerations of Narrative Biographical Approach*

The writers of narrative biographies, as well as the readers, have a role in absorbing, interpreting, and reproducing the life stories and experiences of the participant (Denzin, 2001). The researcher also holds editorial control of the participant's retelling of stories, selecting what is relevant to share in the research context depending on the study's objectives and the researcher's own positionality (Clark-Kazak, 2009). Although all interviewees were provided the opportunity to request their interview transcripts, they had no control regarding the interpretation and

analysis of their responses for the current chapter. Here, the researcher acts as a gatekeeper of the information provided during the interviews and plays a critical role in ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. To this regard, all research data in this study was anonymised and de-identified. The participants were not asked to share any sensitive or personal experiences that did not involve the project's focus on labour market settlement. However, in the course of the interviews several experiences of personal trauma and hardship were shared with the interviewer. The interviewer provided time for interviewees to have time to recollect themselves after sharing an emotional story and when appropriate guided the conversation to align with the interview scope. Participants were also provided access to resources for counselling and mental health support after the interviews. To protect participant identities, all participants were assigned a pseudonym, chosen by the participant or provided by the researcher team. Finally, the interview excerpts selected for this chapter were anonymised to ensure no identifying information was shared, such as workplaces, countries of origin, or interaction with settlement service organizations.

Given the issues discussed above, it is integral to reflect on researcher positionality and power relations throughout the research process. The authors of this study are white, straight, female, settlers in Canada, and have obtained high levels of education. The researcher who conducted the interviews is Canadian-born and a doctoral candidate with no personal experience as an immigrant. The Principal Investigator was born in Europe and immigrated to Canada in 2018. These factors, as well as being researchers from a Canadian post-secondary institution, composed a differential power relationship between the researchers and the research participants. As the study progressed, the researchers worked to maintain an awareness of this imbalance and mitigate the effects, even though this was particularly challenging in an online interview context.

### ***5.3.3 The Narrative-Biographic Approach***

This study employs the interpretive narrative method which focuses on people's life experiences and stories (Denzin, 1989). Narrative research sits at the micro level of analysis, seeking to understand the ways in which individuals observe and recount experiences and events in their own life (Creswell, 2007). The researcher's task is to then draw out reported experiences within broader contexts, which in the case of this study, is settlement into Canada's labour market. Through personal narratives we examine the factors, internally and externally, that enable or act as barriers within the process of seeking and obtaining employment.

Within the narrative-biographical method are conceptual markers of turning points and epiphanies. Turning points are significant events in one's life that 'leave permanent marks' (Denzin, 1989, 8). In line with Triandafyllidou, Isaakyan and Baglioni in this volume, we have identified two overarching types of turning points: instrumental and emotional. Instrumental turning points include events induced by external factors such as changes in immigration status, being hired at a

new job, meeting an influential mentor, or starting a new training course. Emotional turning points are reactions to events that evoke difficult emotions such as grief, sadness, or anger (such as loss of a family member, leaving one's home country, or loss of job or career), as well as events that evoke positive emotions such as joy, hope, inspiration (such as birth of a child, entering a new relationship, or getting a new job). An epiphany is a transformational realisation that results from turning points (Denzin, 2001). Epiphanies mark a change in how one perceives their life experiences and choices, where the individual may adopt a new perspective that explains their current life trajectory and interactions with factors such as employment, family, and community. Importantly, turning points and epiphanies do not take place in a vacuum, but reside within the context of broader structural, historical, and cultural dimensions that make up one's life (*ibid.*). The turning points and epiphanies located in the narratives in this study are found to be influenced by a multitude of factors that stem from experiences of precarity and opportunity, as well as migrant agency, that accumulate along unfolding settlement paths. In our analysis we also consider 'generative' epiphanies that empower the migrant and lead to a decision to move onward, and 'withdrawing' epiphanies that may lead to a feeling of disempowerment or withdrawal, a step backwards or stagnation.

#### **5.4 Precarity, Agency, and Migration**

In mapping the turning points and epiphanies shared by participants during the interviews we draw on concepts of precarity and agency in the context of migration to examine the relationships between migration pathways and labour market settlement that participants navigated their initial years in Canada. Specifically, in the context of employment, precarity can be conceptualised along dimensions of structurally-induced economic insecurity, such as temporary versus permanent employment, income reliability, availability of employment protections and benefits, and agency in work processes (Goldring & Joly, 2014). This chapter takes the position that precarity is best analysed as an experience rather than an identity (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Literature has shown that employment precarity in Canada is experienced at a higher rate among groups such as racialised people, women, and immigrants (Teelucksingh & Galabuzi, 2005; Goldring & Joly, 2014; Premji et al., 2014; Lightman & Good Gingrich, 2018). Such studies reveal the rippled effects of insecure economic settlement. Premji et al. (2014), for example, in a study of racialised immigrant women in Toronto, found that structural barriers to stable work resulted in adverse impacts to physical and mental health for the women and their families.

Despite the inequality faced by migrant groups, it is also important to acknowledge the strands of agency held by individuals and groups that are used to confront oppressive structures and evoke change at micro and macro levels. Even in situations of powerlessness due to structural or social constraints, individuals and groups can enact agency through collective organising or individual choices that alter their life

course. For migrants, agency can be conceptualised as one's capacity to manoeuvre the 'archipelago' of migration and settlement dimensions that includes a variety of actors and policies – 'islands' – that lie in their path (Triandafyllidou, 2019). The landscape of labour market settlement for the recently-arrived refugees and migrants in this study is layered with dimensions of precarity, opportunity, agency, and adaptation to both long-standing labour market dynamics as well as new barriers and enablers brought on by the shifting sands of Canada's pandemic affected economy.

The individual narratives shared during the interviews revealed several collective experiences such as the challenges of downward labour mobility, familial responsibilities, discrimination, the benefits of mentors and community, and hardship due to prolonged economic precarity. At the same time, there were also distinctive personal narratives and responses to different stages of settlement and employment contexts, some of which included more positive experiences with entering the Canadian labour market and finding suitable work. Examining the first-hand accounts provided by participants, we discuss the instrumental and emotional turning points that arose in the participants' stories and how they connect to insights that the respondents developed about their interactions with the Canadian labour market and more broadly about their own lives and identities.

#### *5.4.1 Navigating Precarious Status*

Within Canada's humanitarian stream, individuals who come to Canada as Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) and Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) are granted permanent residence on arrival. Refugee claimants, on the other hand, who make claims for protection through the in-land asylum system either from within Canada or at a port of entry, are subject to a tiered process of eligibility determination followed by a hearing by the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) before having access to permanent residence. Significant administrative delays at the IRB have resulted in prolonged waiting periods, growing to an average of 2 years by 2018 (Office of Auditor General, 2019). This uncertain waiting period has been shown to impede labour market participation, family reunification, and access to education and social services such as domestic tuition fees, bridging programmes, and federally funded employment and language workshops (Brouwer, 2005; Coates & Hayward, 2005; Jackson & Bauder, 2014; Renaud et al., 2003; Wayland, 2006).

Six of the interviewees came to Canada as refugee claimants. Uncertain immigration status, coupled with employer discrimination, was identified by several interviewees as a barrier to obtaining employment. The lack of secure immigration status contributed to income precarity, frustration, and stress, and was seen as a source of discrimination from employers during the hiring process. Adam, for example, was a doctor in his country of origin before coming to Canada to make a claim for refugee protection. Since arriving in Canada, Adam has applied for numerous jobs and worked in a fast-food restaurant, which he described as an

extremely degrading experience. He eventually found temporary employment coordinating a mental health programme and volunteers with refugees in his community. On several occasions, Adam was asked about his immigration status as a refugee claimant during interviews, which he felt became a source of discrimination from potential employers:

I haven't any job. I'm just looking for a job. I apply a lot. Being a doctor, being a professional degree holder, I try a lot, but mostly they refuse me because I'm a refugee [claimant]. Why do they discriminate? Why do they discriminate with refugees and others? I don't know.

Rocky, another interviewee currently waiting for his refugee determination hearing, was also asked about his immigration status during job interviews – which he isolated as the point in which employers no longer pursued his application:

The first thing when I was looking for official jobs, the first thing I encountered is that they were looking for someone who was a citizen. So I got some phone interviews before the actual interview, so most of them ask me what is your residency, so when I say I don't have permanent residence, they just told me "we are looking for someone for a long time, we are searching for someone who is a permanent resident or citizen." So they just stopped at that point.

Receiving permanent residency status after arriving in Canada, and the security such status provides, is an instrumental turning point for many newcomers. Yet for participants like Adam and Rocky, it is one that has remained out of reach. Instead, they contend with ongoing unpredictability because of their refugee protection status remaining in limbo. As Rocky described it, this led to feelings of being trapped in his current situation: 'Living with this uncertainty, like really living in a jail. You don't know what's going to happen after two days'. This lack of stability led Rocky to an epiphany that life had turned into one 'infinite loop' in which he had no control:

I have to think again, every time it's like breaking a new plan. So back home that time I had some...when I arrived here I started looking for one year, after one year I had to start thinking again, kind of like beginning again. Kind of like I fall into an infinite loop. It's really hard to plan something.

Adam, who has been waiting for his hearing for over 3 years, spoke of the broader injustice facing refugee claimants: 'They are waiting for hearings. They have different issues for employment. But it's disgusting, I think. It just ruined the life of everyone'.

Another focal point of insecure immigration status that arose from interviewees was the lack of access to training and education, such as bridging programmes that require permanent residency. Restricted access to education, as well as the high cost of international student fees, has particular salience for refugees seeking to recalibrate their skills for the Canadian context (Brouwer, 2005). As Rocky shared, his plans to attend a post-secondary institution have shifted as a result of his ongoing wait for his refugee determination hearing:

The expectation has changed, when I came and I was struggling I thought I'll start my study here. When you study you can start something. So I've been waiting for that thing to be done, that hearing thing, when that thing is done I can pay domestic fees at any college or university. It's been almost two years I've been waiting for that.



The interviewees who arrived through family or economic streams noted the positive aspects of not having to worry about their immigration status. Lisa, for example, who arrived through the Express Entry economic stream, shared how her secure immigration status enabled her to feel settled and less fearful:

I like that I don't have to think about it. This...I'm settled. Mentally, I'm so settled. You don't want to walk around being afraid of cops, or... you know, small things, always wondering where...So, from an immigrant's perspective I think, and I know from my own perspective, coming with that paper and having that, being here legally is very important.

Certainly, gaining permanent residence status does not always translate into gainful employment opportunities, as noted by one interviewee, Sue, who had been granted Convention refugee status and permanent residency in Canada:

Now I am a confirmed refugee, a protected person, I was thinking before because I wasn't a confirmed refugee, I wasn't getting any job, because they would say, "you're not protected you can just go anytime, we don't want to employ you for a short time". Now you are a convention refugee and still you wouldn't be able to get a job.

This was both an emotional and an instrumental turning point for our interviewees. They not only had to achieve secure status, but they had also to come to terms with the fact that they would keep facing barriers and that the onus was more on them to overcome them. This was a withdrawing epiphany that induced in several of our participants a broader sense of life in Canada as one based on waiting, struggle, and restricted opportunity.

The issue of employers requiring applicants to disclose residency status has been addressed in a Canadian provincial court. In 2019, the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario ruled in a landmark case that an employer who had asked job applicants to disclose their permanent residence status was in breach of the Ontario Human Rights Code (*Haseeb v. Imperial Oil Limited*, 2019 HRTO 271). The ruling made it illegal for employers to discriminate based on lack of permanent residence status. As of 31 March 2022, there were over 50,000 pending claims before the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB, 2022) – a population faced with ongoing employment precarity despite spending years in Canada. Despite recent small-scale regularisation measures, such as a temporary pathway to permanency for asylum claimants who worked in healthcare during the Covid-19 pandemic (IRCC, 2021c), there are ongoing barriers to labour market settlement in the wake of prolonged exclusion on the basis of immigration status.

#### ***5.4.2 Taking a 'Step Back' – Downward Labour Mobility***

Labour market settlement encompasses more than the number of immigrants employed; it also pertains to meaningful participation in labour markets that provide a stable and enriching livelihood. Research has shown that a significant number of migrants and refugees in Canada are working in jobs that do not match their skill sets and previous employment experience in their home countries, indicating a trend of



downward occupational mobility that lessens their earning potential (Jackson & Bauder, 2014; Krahn et al., 2000; Lamba, 2008). Of the 14 interviewees, three were working in jobs comparable to those they held in their previous country of residence. Several of the interviewees described the process of ‘taking a step back’, where they came to understand that they would need to take on opportunities below their professional level or desired career objectives. For most interviewees, this resulted in taking survival jobs to make ends meet while attempting to enter their respective fields through additional training, networking, and ongoing job seeking.

As one participant, Penelope, explains, this hindered her self-confidence as she worried that the lower-paid job would have a negative impact on how she would be perceived by people in networking circles:

For me, I started in a job that wasn't. . . I felt like I could do so much more. I felt so limited, like I work in a daycare and in my country, I was a psychologist. It's tough. And then for example, I have a job and I want to move on to a mental health job, if I'm going to network, what am I going to say, I work in childcare? I don't think that's going to, you know, what are they going to think? Are they going to believe that I have the skills? So that's also really hard, how do I get to that next step if what I am doing right now doesn't really show what I can do.

Rocky, an IT professional in his home country, worked as a busser in a restaurant and is looking for more entry-level work. He described the shift in his employment objectives after arriving in Canada and realising the challenges faced in finding work at his career level:

My career objectives have changed up in a whole way. I came here unprepared, I didn't have any plans to live in another country, so without planning anything I came here, what I used to do was a decent job and everything. So it's not related to the labour intensive jobs that I am searching for right now. I was thinking at least if I can get any kind of job I'll at least be starting. I'll get some meaningful thing.

For some, this process was perceived as a stepping-stone to gain Canadian experience required by employers. Coco, an educator from Latin America who worked as a Covid-19 screener in a hospital, felt his current work experience was providing him with skills and opportunities to translate into future work opportunities:

I mean, I am enjoying what I am doing, and as a second thought, I have to say, “Okay. This will be good for me.” Because it's not forever this job. And I am trying to find a career maybe in which I can little by little move forward.

Another participant, Asad, also had a more positive outlook towards his job, which was different from his previous career in office automation technology. He explained how his current job was providing him with the necessary skills and cultural knowledge to navigate the Canadian workplace:

Here it's a different culture, different experience. Of course, I have very good experience in my role, in my profession. But now I'm in a new country, new people, new business relationship, a new nature of the business, actually. So we need to communicate with people, we need to be close to the people, and try to perform the job with the people who are living here. It's different, different mentality, different type of relationship. So that's the reason I accepted to work part-time in [a home improvement company]. Even if it's away from my profession, from my experience, but I needed to be close to the people, to know, to learn how

I communicate, what's the culture of the people here, and that helped a lot. Because it gave me more experience, how to communicate, how to bridge my experience and how I can contribute with the community here.

Another example is Abdul, a nutrition specialist and researcher from East Africa who faced hurdles getting his credentials recognised to start working in his field in Canada. As a result, he has volunteered, worked as a research assistant, and more recently as a personal support worker during the Covid-19 pandemic. Gary, a social services worker from West Africa, has been earning income by driving for a rideshare company. He explained how not being able to work in his field made him feel that he was unable to give back to Canadian society with the skills and experiences he arrived with and wanted to provide in exchange for living in Canada. The process of 'taking a step back' was presented by these interviewees as a process induced by requirements for Canadian experience that pulled them into lower-paying jobs below their career level. This became a turning point in their labour market settlement, where they took lower-paying jobs and often enrolled in re-skilling and educational courses at the same time. A common epiphany came forward: despite the difficulties, 'taking a step back' is a difficult yet imposed part of an immigrant's entry into the contemporary Canadian job market.

While acknowledging that the new 'migrant self' is different from who the person was before migration and accepting their new circumstances was an important turning point, we also found that for some participants this became a broader epiphany, not just in relation to their professional life. Interviewees expressed a theme of adaptation as they navigated the uneven terrain of entering the labour market as an immigrant. For example, Asad shared an epiphany that his experience with the Canadian labour market was one of adaptation rather than a transfer of skills:

It's not easy to transfer your history to a new area, it won't happen at all. I need to adapt to the people, to the life here first, then I can transfer my experience in a way that the people here can take the benefit of my experience.

On one level, this took the form of discovering what language is suitable to describe professional identities in Canada, a hidden curriculum of norms and expectations. Penelope, who immigrated from Latin America through family sponsorship, explained her transition:

There's a sense of professional identity that you come with and then you come here and it's like, you can't call yourself a psychologist, you can't call yourself a psychotherapist either and you have to learn, what is it that you can say. I learned to say I am a mental health professional.

Lisa, a healthcare manager from East Africa who studied and worked in the United States before coming to Canada, also described learning about the 'correct' language to use during an interview:

One interview, I remember I qualified, and one of the managers, one of the hiring managers, was very open to me. She told me, "We can tell you're qualified by your resume. You know your stuff, but you need to understand, you're using a lot of American language. You have to learn the Canadian language." They told me that.

This exchange, as well as meeting a mentor who explained how the Canadian job market operates, was a turning point for Lisa. She came to learn about the hidden expectations of the labour market, as well as how she should be presenting herself to employers. This led to ongoing frustration with the lack of transparency in the job-finding process and what Lisa described as the ‘battleground’ of looking for work. Reflecting on what she wants for her life and why she came to Canada, Lisa had the realisation that she might fare better by starting a consultancy business and working for herself, as in her words, ‘by the end of the day as a human being, all I want to do...I came here to Canada to have a good life, and to work’.

Babs, who arrived in Canada as a refugee claimant from West Africa, spoke about adaptation as ‘part of the game’:

Everybody should be able to adapt to situations or things. Because initially when you come to a new country, a lot of people will tell you “in my country, I was the director of this. I was the director of that.” But when you change your destiny, when you change where you’re living now, you just have to move along with the situation of things around you. . .Some will say, “Yeah. I was a bank manager in my country and you’re expecting me to come and work in the factory.” That’s how that’s the same thing, and I owned my own business in my country, but here I am today. This is part of the game; this is part new life. It’s a different thing entirely. You’ll surely get to wherever you’re getting to.

Beyond taking a step back, our participants also experience an epiphany of adapting, of being one’s new self as demanded by circumstances in a new local labour market. Paradoxically, taking a step back was a generative epiphany that led to a feeling of agency, of taking back control even under adversity. This epiphany involved both an instrumental turning point – it was about changing career path or settling for less but also most importantly an emotional aspect of accepting that in the new country you are no longer the same ‘self’ as in the country of origin or previous country of residence.

### ***5.4.3 Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Unsurprisingly, a significant instrumental turning point of 2020 that impacted all interviewees was the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants’ stories revealed a plurality of impacts on their employment status and well-being. For those who had not been working, the pandemic exacerbated existing fault lines of precarious labour market status. Rocky, who was focusing on getting out and networking, described the impact of the pandemic on his plans:

I was pushing myself a bit out before the pandemic, I started doing some volunteering, so because of the pandemic, everything is shut off. I used to like pushing myself to get out, talk to people and deal with the social anxiety, but with the pandemic everything has died.

Conversely, some interviewees explained how opportunities for employment emerged as a result of the pandemic. As Lisa explained:

It's weird. I work in the mental health field, so the one thing I'm so grateful in my field... There's always a need in the health field. So, I am grateful in that way. So, right now with the Covid, it's helping me, and I'm praying because of... It's sad that it's there, but because of my public health background, it will open more opportunities.

For others who were working when the pandemic began, the first months of the global health emergency made them appreciative of employers and union environments that maintained pay and ongoing employment during the initial lockdown months in Ontario. Babs, who installs medical equipment, was initially paid by his employer while staying home during a province-wide pandemic lockdown in Ontario in the spring of 2020. He used this time to take online training courses and volunteer in the community. As soon his employer was unable to keep paying employees, Babs applied for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), financial support from the federal government in response to the Covid19 pandemic and job shutdowns. For Babs, the prospect of looking for more work in his field was significantly hindered by the pandemic and ongoing city shutdowns, as the nature of his work requires onsite installation:

Even when I check on jobs online, you can't really go out there because of the nature of job I want to do. Working from home isn't the nature of my job, I have to be out there on the field.

Reema was an educator in a South Asian country before coming to Canada with her children in 2018. Her husband remained in their country of origin to finish his current job, so she has had to manage the job-finding experience while taking care of her young children. Reema was completing a teacher training programme when the Covid-19 pandemic erupted. While noting the slowing of available job postings because of the pandemic since completing her programme, she explained how suddenly moving to online teaching during the pandemic has prepared her for a post-pandemic labour market in post-secondary education:

I am very hopeful because in the middle of my teaching, it was March that the pandemic hit. I was doing my co-op in January. So I was two months already into teaching the college class when the pandemic hit. The things all together, they were changed, and they were switched to being online altogether. That was a big new learning for me also as a teacher and as a student, both at the same time. So I feel myself very much equipped to be teaching right now, because I've already been a student learning how to teach. I experienced teaching online also. That was very different from what I used to do in [country of origin]. So I feel myself very well equipped for the job sector right now.

She shared that she felt hopeful about her employment chances of getting a job after the pandemic restrictions are reduced:

I've been applying continuously to different colleges and I'm in touch with a few of my teachers also just to know if there's any opportunity anywhere around. I know that colleges are really working hard, because a lot of people are returning back to the colleges. There are classes that are going on and people are getting enrolled in the system in the colleges. They need teachers. Obviously they do. So I'm quite hopeful that if things get a bit better, a bit more normal, then probably I can get a job.

For Penelope, the pandemic reduced the amount of risk she was willing to take in looking for a new job:

It makes me feel like I am trapped because it doesn't seem like a lot of employment options right now. I know there are people hiring but in general seems like there are less, so it makes me...like maybe if there wasn't a pandemic, then maybe I would have quit it already and gone somewhere else. But as things are now even if I'm not completely satisfied where I'm at, I am hesitant to make a move.

The impact of the pandemic was different among female- and male-identified interviewees. Research has demonstrated a gendered element of immigrant economic settlement in Canada, with women less likely to find work than their male counterparts (Lamba, 2008; Lightman & Good Gingrich, 2018; Senthana et al., 2019). A 2016 evaluation of Canada's resettlement of Syrian refugees found that a lack of suitable childcare was a significant factor in Syrian refugee women not having sufficient time to search for employment opportunities (IRCC, 2016). The women in our study navigated these new challenges in different ways; several indicated the challenges of balancing familial and childcare responsibilities with job-finding and their overall economic settlement. Reema, in particular, who arrived in Canada with her two children before her husband, explained the impact of taking on childcare as well as her job-finding pursuits:

It's a personal thing for me, probably that. Because I'm living here alone and I have two small children, so I am doing things that are for...I can only commit part-time. I cannot give a full-time commitment to a job or education at this point in my life. It's majorly that.

Sue, who came to Canada as a single mother with her two children, described similar challenges: 'I have not even started doing anything, yet. I am the single mom of two kids, which is the area for me that is the most frustrating, for you to be all alone with kids and not have a job'. Rashida, a software tester from a South Asian country, immigrated to Canada with her husband and children. She spoke of the challenges of navigating her field in Canada while balancing childcare responsibilities, in addition to a lack of support in Canada as family remained overseas:

The IT sector is always upgrading continuously, and I almost forgot many things which I learned. I need some time to practice them, to prepare me. To prepare me for a job interview. To prepare me for English-speaking and to gain some knowledge, and also for networking, but I cannot do this before my children. I do not have the support from any relatives. Also, I am not able to get any partial childcare. It will be more delayed for me to go back to the workforce. It's making me unhappy.

The additional complexities of job-searching and halted plans due to the pandemic heightened existing challenges, such as familial responsibilities and gendered dynamics. The pandemic's onset was a turning point that led to both generative and withdrawing epiphanies. For Reema and Lisa it opened up new possibilities and led them to realise that in the midst of a broader crisis new opportunities arose of which they could take advantage. For others like Sue, this situation introduced new layers of uncertainty to the already difficult process of finding work and finding a sense of stability, and led to withdrawal; as Sue expressed it, 'the only thing I want at this point is stability. When you are talking about stability, it's a job'.

## 5.5 The Role of Mediators in Labour Market Settlement: Individuals, Networks, and Institutions

The events and perspectives discussed above arose as individuals navigated their way through the complexities of migration, family life, job-seeking, working, and global events such as the Covid-19 pandemic. While macro level actors such as governmental agencies and policy played an important role in dimensions that impact employment opportunities like immigration status, interviewees also discussed the micro (e.g. personal and professional contacts) and meso (e.g. civil society and educational institutions) levels of actors that served to both enable and hinder the process of seeking employment in Canada.

### 5.5.1 *Personal and Professional Networks*

Several interviewees described the impact of engaging with a particular individual or group that had a positive influence on their experience with job-seeking or working. These actors ranged from unplanned interactions with strangers to family and community-based support networks. Most interviewees discussed how meeting a particular person, often unexpectedly, changed the course of their job search. Lisa, for example, noted the benefit of engaging with a mentor with a shared cultural background:

I met with this mentor. And I think for me, the biggest blessing is...which I didn't know...it worked for me because she was African. We both didn't know each other, our last names were different. That connection was very important because from an African perspective, she told me some of the expectations, some of the challenges.

Lisa also described meeting other people from her country of origin who provided advice on the kinds of employment she might expect to get and how to navigate the job-seeking environment:

They tried to tell me what things I need to do in terms of interviews, and in terms of just giving it time, because I came here thinking, okay, I'll have a full-time job. And they're like, "No, most companies here will not hire you full-time. You will start as casual" and that was very foreign to me. Just getting that information was very, very, very helpful.

Reema benefitted from learning from family members about how to navigate the initial years in Canada:

I actually had an example of a wonderful family member who arrived. He's my brother-in-law. He completed immigration before we did. It was actually him that we saw as an example. After he went into Canada and he got settled, then we decided that we need to do it, too. If he can do it, probably I can do it. It was that. He had a very good experience. He was an engineer by profession. When he came here, he started doing his masters right away. Because of the engineering degree and the master's that he did, he got a job right away.

While meeting and learning from personal and professional contacts proved helpful in several interviewees' job searches, often serving as both emotional and instrumental turning points in the newcomer's settlement in Canada, there was also frustration from the realisation that some of the most important job-finding information would come from networking instead of more formal or organised channels. As Yasmeeen described it:

...that concept of networking, like going to events and job fairs, it's not actually efficient... There are many jobs which are actually unadvertised. They were just recruited by networking relations, volunteers, interns. So, immigrants usually do not have access to these jobs because they are less qualified in this part, let's say. Because you cannot ask an immigrant who's coming to this country with, let's say, two kids and say, "Hey, go and volunteer." That doesn't make any sense because you should provide at least something that makes sense to him or her. So, the lack of the real information is a very bad thing.

### ***5.5.2 Settlement Services and Educational Institutions***

At the meso level, participants shared a variety of experiences engaging with actors such as settlement agencies and educational institutions. Several of the interviewees were disappointed with employment programmes where they felt their needs beyond resume assistance were not adequately met. Gaps in a continuation of services and feelings that agencies were more concerned with quantity of people served than the quality of programming led to a lack of confidence in the role settlement providers play in securing employment. One interviewee shared that after continuously going to an employment resource centre for assistance with her resume, there was little support for the process of looking for specific jobs to apply for and how to make the necessary connections for networking. It wasn't until the employment agency referred her to a mentoring programme that she was able to learn from another newcomer about the nuances of applying to jobs in the Canadian context as a recently-arrived immigrant. Challenges with settlement services then led individuals to rely on more personal networks. Coming to understand this process was described by several interviewees as a waste of their time, prolonging job searches and hindering their self-confidence.

Others shared more positive interactions with settlement actors. Reema, for example, spoke of the benefit of accessing settlement services and building a network through her children's school:

I am a changed person now, yes. And definitely these settlement services, the support system that I've built around me, even from my kids' schools... I remember there were a lot of workshops for the parents volunteering in the school. I used to go to the school every day. I volunteered there for two months. There were a lot of things that were being offered to the newcomer parents, especially. So all of that, that helped me to rebuild my confidence and made me feel more comfortable here. And then by the time I went back to my college, I was ready to learn. I had overcome all of my homesickness, my anxieties, my depression. I was settled by then. So when I went into the college, I was ready to learn.

In addition, the teacher training programme she attended provided another network that supported her intentions of teaching in Canada:

That's because you build a good network around you. Your colleagues, your teachers, everybody around you. That's a very successful programme. We had a very good group of colleagues working together. We were trained once again to be teaching. It was a wonderful programme, and I learned a lot from there. Right after we graduated, before, actually, we graduated, the pandemic hit. Afterwards, I also got an opportunity to teach. It was a cool art programme.

Attending training courses and settlement programmes provided experience in the Canadian context that many interviewees recognised was important to leveraging their skills with Canadian employers. Despite largely already having the skill sets and experience required for job opportunities, each encountered the demand for 'Canadian experience' that diminished the value of their credentials and experience outside of Canada. This led some interviewees to remove their foreign credentials from their resume and instead highlight any Canadian volunteer or training courses they had attended. The importance of Canadian experience was routinely positioned by employers and employment programmes, contributing to an epiphany for many interviewees that their previous experience was less valued. Penelope pointed out some broader questions this brought forward in the questioning of her worth as an immigrant:

I've been told that employers want to know that you can adapt to the Canadian work culture, so my assumption is if I don't have Canadian work experience, you're assuming that I won't integrate well or I won't understand the social rules or politics of the work environment. I'm not sure. Or in my field they use a particular system to report information, are you assuming that I won't know or that I am not able to learn? I assume that you think I won't be as capable if I'm not Canadian.

In summary, our conversations with participants shone a light on a plurality of turning points that led to generative and withdrawing epiphanies and shaped how they experienced their initial years in Canada and introduction into the Canadian labour market. Table 5.1 summarises the different levels of actors and factors of intervention and non-intervention.

## 5.6 Concluding Remarks

The importance of Canadian networks and experience in supporting newcomers' labour market integration has been well-documented in the relevant academic literature and policy analyses. Earlier Canadian earnings (which are taken to demonstrate previous employment in Canada) for newly-landed immigrants is an important factor in shaping their initial labour market trajectories, cushioning newcomers from deskilling and downwards mobility (Crossman et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2020). It is notable that security of status – notably permanent residency and hence full socio-economic rights – does not suffice for skilled people to find jobs in their profession even if they fulfilled all the formal requirements for immigration and assessment of



**Table 5.1** Typology of Actors and Turning Points

	Personal/friends/ family (micro)	Professional contacts/ employers (meso)	Civil society support (meso)	Educational/training institutions (meso)	State policies/ support (macro)
Interviewee 1	Lack of family support (-) Childcare demands (-)		Lack of free counselling (-)		Secure immigration status (+) Lack of childcare (-)
Interviewee 2	Family and friend support in job finding (-)	Discrimination – lack of Canadian experience (-)	Mentoring programme (+)		Secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 3	Friends with shared experience (+)	Meeting a mentor with shared cultural background (+) Workplace politics and hidden expectations (-) Discrimination – lack of Canadian experience (-) Meeting a professional contact who assisted with resume (+)			Secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 4		Contact made through networking (+)	Employment programmes (+) Mentoring programme (+)	Interpersonal skills training (+)	Secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 5		Discrimination – lack of Canadian reference (-) Lack of networking opportunities (-)	Connections made at a non-profit centre (+) Library as resource for settlement services (+) Lack of information on job finding process (-)	Free online training (+)	Secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 6		Discrimination – immigration status (-)	Career counselling (+)	High tuition costs with international student status (-)	Precarious immigration status (-)

Interviewee 7		Contract work (-)	No progress from networking group (-)	Recertification courses	Precarious immigration status (-) Challenges of credential recognition (-)
Interviewee 8	Childcare demands (-) Lack of familial support (-)	Discrimination – lack of Canadian experience (-)	Mentoring programme which was not helpful (-)		More secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 9	Familial responsibilities (-)	Lack of discrimination (+) Advice from manager (+)		Employment course (+)	Precarious immigration status (-)
Interviewee 10			Exclusion from networks and organizations (-)	Reskilling courses (-)	Precarious immigration status (-) Lack of credential recognition (-)
Interviewee 11	Loss of family members (-)	Discrimination – immigration status (-)	Community from volunteer groups, giving back (+)		Precarious immigration status (-) Lack of credential recognition (-)
Interviewee 12	Husband living abroad (-) Family members as role models (+) Childcare demands (-)		Connecting with people at settlement service programmes (+)	Teachers college training (+)	Secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 13	Lack of friends and family support (-)	Challenges of the hidden job market (-) Discrimination – Canadian experience (-)		Interpersonal skills course (+) Lack of impact of training courses in job search (-)	Secure immigration status (+) Lack of credential recognition (-)
Interviewee 14	Friends (+)	LinkedIn (+)	Co-op placement course through newcomer organization (+)	Interpersonal skills course (+) Career related course (+)	Secure immigration status (+)

their educational credentials. Several studies (Esses et al., 2007; Creese & Wiebe, 2012; Premji et al., 2014) have also documented the experiences of discrimination faced by many newcomers. This study builds on this literature and carries it further by not only looking at migrant agency, notably the capacity of migrants to navigate and overcome barriers and shape their own livelihoods, but also the interplay between cognitive and emotional aspects (notably epiphanies) that they have during the process, structural discrimination, and their concrete steps in shaping their employment situation and professional future in Canada.

Our analysis has shown that a secure legal residency status is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a positive labour market experience in Canada. While those with uncertain status – such as waiting for their asylum application to be determined – faced particularly high barriers, those with Permanent Resident status also faced hurdles as they were still stigmatised as ‘outsiders’ to the Canadian labour market. Assumptions by employers regarding immigrants’ lack of experience in the ways in which people act, behave, or relate in Canada was even a barrier for an informant who was a qualified professional who had worked in the United States for several years before moving to Canada. Thus, our study suggests that our understanding of ‘precarity’ should include not just legal or economic precarity but overall as being classified as a ‘stranger’ or ‘newcomer’. The quote from Penelope in the previous section is telling in this regard: ‘I’ve been told that employers want to know that you can adapt to the Canadian work culture, so my assumption is if I don’t have Canadian work experience you’re assuming that I won’t integrate well or I won’t understand the social rules or politics of the work environment.’

Navigating these barriers has required several of our interviewees to take a ‘step backwards’ and accept mentally and emotionally that their skills, education, and professional experience are not equally valued in their new country of residence. This often came at a significant financial and emotional cost to our participants. On the other hand, it also became a source of resilience for several of our informants who took this acceptance as an invitation to change their professional path and find a career that would be feasible and rewarding in the new context. The interplay between the instrumental and emotional factors and how a ‘step backwards’ can lead to a generative epiphany and to migrant empowerment is a very important finding, without of course this meaning that it justifies discrimination or deskilling. It shows however how a narrative biographical perspective reveals important aspects of agency that would otherwise remain hidden.

While this research was not aimed to be a case study on the Covid-19 pandemic, it has unavoidably included the specific challenges of the pandemic times as our fieldwork developed during the summer and fall of 2020, with pandemic restrictions in full swing. The study highlights how the pandemic has become a magnifying lens of the challenges and hurdles that immigration entails and particularly for recently-arrived immigrants, but also how the turning points that it provoked led to both generative and withdrawing epiphanies. The family and employment challenges were an important aspect that conditioned the migrant workers’ dealing with the pandemic.

Turning our focus to the actors that mediated and shaped the labour market integration process for our informants, we find that these can be categorised into three distinct groups: individuals, networks, and institutions. These groups of course are closely interconnected. While individual relationships included family and friends, or friends of friends, they partly overlapped also with professional networks. People met at work or at a training or settlement programme and became friends. Advisors and social workers gave important support and became friends too. At the same time these professional networks developed in various directions were often initiated as part of formal policy programmes aimed at supporting newcomers' labour market integration. While several interviewees lamented the superficial use of performance indicators (i.e., number of people served) by settlement actors, they also spoke about how some programmes fostered the insider knowledge and personal connections that they needed to navigate the labour market. What transpires as one of our most important findings, beyond the crucial dimension of full immigration status, is that the positive emotional and cognitive experiences that our interviewees had – whether in personal, informal, or formal settings – were vital for their well-being. These experiences enabled them to take decisions and move forward where possible. Even when such decisions involved settling for less or for something different than what they initially aspired, they were experienced positively when mediated by a sense of being recognised as individuals, for who they are. We should strive towards improving the relative policies and practices supporting newcomers in their labour market integration pathways, but this study also shows that beyond Canadian experience, what people need is a recognition of their individual value, history, and a secure trajectory for their future.

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# Chapter 6

## Italy: The Promised Land? Journeys of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers Towards Labour Market Integration



Mattia Collini

### 6.1 Introduction

Italy's first large exposure to migration can probably be identified with the arrivals of Albanian citizens fleeing their country after the collapse of the Communist regime in the early 1990s and to whom the Italian government granted asylum. However, Italy has not been the destination for large numbers of migrants until much more recently. Indeed, with few exceptions, migration did not enter the public spotlight until the early 2000s, when the issue became increasingly politicised, particularly by some parties on the political right. Things changed even more radically when Italy found itself at the forefront of the migration crisis that started in 2014 and the country experienced the highest influx of non-EU citizens looking for economic opportunities and international protection in its history. Among southern European countries, only Greece experienced a similar situation. The increased inflow of migrants placed the issue of migration again at the centre of public debate. It brought new problems and heightened the old ones, namely a deficit in reception and integration structures.

Italian immigration policies have since evolved against this backdrop. Recent laws have upheld an increasingly restrictive and securitarian approach, which has eroded integration and support programmes for protection seekers and affected foreigners' absorption via the labour market. Very few legal channels are provided for non-EU citizens to access the Italian labour market, and migrants face additional challenges from its structure. This is particularly true in the wake of the economic crisis, which left migrants more exposed than native workers to health and safety

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risks as well as the informal labour market. Nonetheless, migrants represent a crucial component of the workforce in many sectors.

The complexity of such struggles can only be partly grasped with systemic analysis at the macro or meso levels, and finer detail is needed to disclose specific aspects potentially neglected by broader analyses. This chapter makes use of biographical narratives to bring together the actual life experiences of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (MRAs) in their journeys towards integration in the labour market, contrasting the formal legal framework and their pre-departure expectations against their lived reality upon arrival. In particular, the pool of informants – comprised of both recently arrived migrants and those who have been in the country for a longer period – allows comparing experiences across different periods and the differences or similarities in their challenges towards a successful integration. Our focus will be to outline the role of migrants' agency related to the macro-reality, particularly when implementing resilience strategies to overcome adversities. In other words, we aim to highlight the relationship between the agency of our MRAs and the socio-political context in which they live.

In the light of this specific context, this chapter examines the migrants' lived experiences and their inner thoughts about these experiences. Migrants in Italy have been identified as extremely 'labour-oriented' – either by necessity, will, spirit, or all – and work has been considered one of the most successful paths for integration. However, knowledge about how this process develops is limited. Moreover, it is not clear how a successful integration, with a safe and decent occupation, can be achieved. In fact, not just any job is sufficient, particularly if inhumane; as stated by the ILO (2020), decent work<sup>1</sup> is necessary for migrants to achieve self-fulfilling lives in their host countries.

A growing body of literature has developed on the integration of migrants in Italy and also on labour market integration. This is presented in scholarly works across disciplines, each shedding light on different aspects of integration, namely: education (Azzolini, 2015); employment-related policies (Accorinti, 2017); the contrast between irregular/informal employment and labour exploitation (Sagnet & Palmisano, 2015; Chiaromonte, 2018) or reception services (De Petris, 2018); and, migrants' welfare rights (De Marcello & Lagravinese, 2015). Valuable data are also contained in other kinds of research, mainly reports produced by associations and research centres (most recently, for example, Oxfam, 2016, 2017; Capitani, 2019; IDOS, 2019; ISMU, 2019). However, these works do not specifically investigate migrant agency: they do not explore the capacity of migrants for navigating and overcoming barriers or for shaping their own lives in dynamic environments and under instable circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup>Decent work is intended by ILO as 'fair income, security in the workplace, social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, and equal opportunity and treatment for all women and men'.

Indeed, the role of agency in migrants' integration is an under-researched theme in Italy (see, for instance, Meini, 2019; Razzoli & Rinaldini, 2019). Even though data from qualitative interviews and focus group have been used in reports with a broader scope (i.e., UNHCR, 2017), there is a gap in the literature on the use of biographical data. This chapter aims to fill this gap by adopting a biographical perspective on the pathways to labour market integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (MRAs). It offers a novel viewpoint that can complement existing analyses of policies and structural factors. Hence, this case study will foster a more in-depth understanding of the challenges that migrants face, highlighting their needs and the key elements that help or hinder their integration processes. On a broader level, it can lead to identifying possible differences between stakeholders' perspectives, official data, and migrant perspectives.

In short, this chapter examines the role that individuals can play in the integration process. It also looks at what we can learn from their experiences, needs, and aspirations. We focus on the role played by the different skills and agency of MRAs in overcoming integration barriers and utilising opportunities they receive or conquer. This approach is based on to the 'agency-structure' nexus, where agency is 'one's capacity to shape one's life and exploit opportunities or indeed open up new possibilities for one's self and their family' (Triandafyllidou, 2018, 8), and the structure can create or impede opportunities for agency. According to this nexus, migrants can develop new personality traits and make new decisions influenced by various circumstances of their migration, while also creating opportunities for themselves through these dynamics (Giddens, 2000; for this paradigm applied to integration of migrants see King et al., 2017; Squire, 2017; Triandafyllidou, 2018; Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2020). To do this we make use of diverse life stories that represent some of the most common categories of migrants, looking at the main turning points in their lives that helped them achieve a (hopefully) successful integration in the Italian labour market.

This is traced across four main sections. The first provides background information on the Italian context, describing the evolution of the migration phenomenon and the socio-economic and policy context. It also highlights the most relevant challenges MRAs face in their integration journey. The second introduces the methodology used for the research – in-depth biographical interviews and biographical narratives – and discusses the ethics and strategies employed. The third section is the core of our chapter, where we analyse the narratives of the integration paths of our informants, centring on the main turning point epiphanies they experienced and how these influenced their lives as migrants. Here we look at the interplay between the structural factors and MRAs' agency as well as relative resilience strategies. The last section more specifically examines the role played by other actors according to the agency nexus structure and provides a typology of those actors as well as how they acted as catalysts for the events presented in the previous section.

## 6.2 The Italian Context: Immigration and Integration Challenges

To better understand the complexities of immigration in Italy and the main challenges migrants face, it is useful to start by briefly examining migration's evolution. In this regard, we can follow the recent work of Michele Colucci (2018b), who presents a comprehensive historical reconstruction of the phenomenon in Italy since the post-war period. Another perspective, particularly looking at more recent times, is provided by the work of Maurizio Ambrosini (2013, 2017a) and Anna Triandafyllidou (Triandafyllidou & Ambrosini, 2011), which are more focused on both migration policies and migrants in the labour market. Looking at the legal context, and specifically its impact on MRAs' labour market integration, has been the subject of a recent comparative work by Federico and Baglioni (2021).

Over the course of a few decades, Italy moved from being a country of emigration to a country (also) of immigration, with migration progressively becoming an issue present in public debate and society over the past 30 years. The earliest data on the presence of foreign workers in Italy are from 1978, when half a million foreigners resided in Italy, representing less than 1 per cent of the total population (Censis, 1979); in 1998, foreign residents were slightly less than 1 million, while in the past 20 years their number grew over four times, reaching more than five million in 2020, or roughly 9 per cent of the population.<sup>2</sup> Such growth has not been experienced by any other of the larger European countries. For some authors, this relatively recent (and sudden) exposure to migration has been proposed as one of the main causes of the legislative barriers and disfunctions characterising the Italian immigration and reception system (Colucci, 2018a). Indeed, across this period, Italian society struggled between the contradictions of experiencing the economic benefits of migrants while also rejecting them (Ambrosini, 2013).

We can identify four main phases of migration in Italy. In the 1980s, the number of foreign workers migrating to Italy started to see a slow but steady increase, particularly for domestic and agricultural workers. But it is not until a decade later, in the early 1990s, that Italy 'discovered immigration', a consequence of the fall of the Berlin Wall (De Cesaris, 2018; Piro, 2020). The early 2000s saw a spike in the arrival of foreign workers and a parallel politicisation of migration. This flow stabilised after 2008, and over the next decade, the number of foreign residents increased by just one-fourth to 5.14 million. The start of the latest phase followed the 2011 'Arab springs'. The 2014 migration crisis, in particular, placed the spotlight on the massive influx of refugees and asylum seekers arriving via the so-called Mediterranean route and can be considered a watershed in Italy migration history. However, the picture of the Italian migration scenario is more complex: indeed, between 2014 and 2017 (the period which saw the highest number of arrivals), residence permits for asylum or humanitarian reasons rose significantly and the main

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<sup>2</sup>To these numbers one should add an estimated 500,000–600,000 irregular migrants (ISMU, 2019).

channel for obtaining it has consistently been family reunification, citizenship applications, and recognitions (Ambrosini, 2017a). Other paths taken by undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are represented by the so-called Balkan and Mediterranean routes, while a residual way is that of visa overstayers. Such trend was confirmed in the period 2018–2019, when we saw a significant decrease in the number of asylum seekers and refugees as a result of a more restrictive approach implemented by the government.

The migration crisis did not radically alter the presence of foreign workers in Italy.<sup>3</sup> Still, the noticeably greater presence of African and Asian migrants in the period 2013–2019 can be linked to the new influx of refugees and asylum seekers from 2014 to 2017 from Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA, and southern Asia. However, a significant number of arrivals in Italy at the peak of the migration crisis is not present in official statistics (i.e., undocumented migrants outside of the reception system).

The evolution of migration and integration policies is strictly related to the political environment. Generally, the 1990s were characterised by a benevolent public opinion towards migration, which also resulted in regularisation processes for migrants (Colucci, 2018b). A major reform of the immigration law in 1998 (the so-called Turco-Napolitano law) failed to address some already evident problems. In the early 2000s the main consequences of the increase in the number of foreign workers and a politicisation of the issue, with right-of- centre parties opposing the rising influx of migrants, was the 2002 ‘Bossi-Fini’ migration law approved by a centre-right government. Migration did thus become a polarising element in the political arena, with left-wing parties generally promoting more favourable integration and migration policies and right-wing parties promoting a restrictive approach. This is also reflected in the policies and stance of the various government coalitions since. Nonetheless, the core of migration policies in Italy, the ‘Bossi-Fini’ law, remains in effect to this day with minor amendments, which are related mostly to the reception and integration of refugees and asylum seekers. In particular, we can observe a significant difference between the more open policies of the centre-left governments in the 2014–2017 period.

If we look more closely at Italy’s immigration and integration policies and the related barriers, the foremost element is the increasingly unfavourable political, normative, and policy environment. Since the 2018 general elections (until very recently), immigration was progressively treated more as a security issue – something to be discouraged. This shifted away from political interest in integrating migrants to promoting new anti-immigration stances and policies. Still, one of the most severe barriers for a positive integration of MRAs remains the ‘Bossi Fini law’. Policies governing reception and integration are also insufficient, with migrants’ integration paths characterised largely by fragmentation, considering the

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<sup>3</sup>The largest community is by far the Romanian, which is over 1 million strong and represents about 22 per cent of all foreign residents in Italy; they are followed by Albanians, Moroccans, and Chinese.

connectivity between actors, official texts, laws, and contexts (see, for example, Oxfam, 2016, that defined the system of reception a ‘lottery’ for migrants). There is also a marked division in the paths towards integration according to different categories of migrants, with refugees and asylum seekers relying heavily on institutionalised patterns and programmes, often managed by civil society organisations operating as service providers for the government. Yet, standards of care and assistance for asylum seekers and refugees vary a lot between the different centres of accommodation, and the enjoyment of basic rights becomes a matter of luck’ (Oxfam, 2017). Indeed, the level of support offered varies widely between first-tier (CAS) and second-tier (SPRAR/SIPROIMI) reception,<sup>4</sup> where the former provides only a limited amount of support, generally on a voluntary basis, and the latter provides an ampler range of services for social and economic integration.

On the other hand, economic migrants, have no statutory support and are less reliant on CSOs and more dependent on informal ethnic networks or the ‘common’ network of services available for the resident population (job offices, agencies, trainings, professional formation) – or both (Maggini & Collini, 2019). Furthermore, the possibility of a successful integration is strongly influenced by the geographic, economic, political, and sociocultural peculiarities of the Italian context (see, among others, Triandafyllidou & Ambrosini, 2011; Ambrosini, 2013; Testai, 2015). The already unfavourable background was aggravated by more restrictive and discriminatory normative and policy changes approved in late 2018 (the ‘Salvini Decree’), which severely impacted the reception system and related integration policies and was in force until 2020 (Chiaromonte, 2019). Despite such an opposing trend to migration, the practical management of migration displays examples of openness and solidarity, with the tertiary sector being at the forefront, particularly in the case of irregular migrants (Ambrosini, 2018).

Another critical element is the structure of the labour market; generally, foreigners experience low levels of unemployment (also during and after the post-2009 economic crisis) and, at the same time, poor quality jobs (Chiaromonte & Sciarra, 2014; Ambrosini & Panichella, 2016; ISMU, 2019). They are mostly employed in a ‘complementary’ labour market that generates ‘ethnic specialisations’ (or occupational segregation) in low-skilled jobs often avoided by the natives, particularly agriculture, tourism, construction, and domestic work (Ambrosini, 2017b). Ethnic specialisations also largely apply to migrant entrepreneurship, with some nationalities concentrating in specific sectors (i.e., food and beverage activities, shops). Migrants are also a large part of the workforce in new ‘gig economy’

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<sup>4</sup>CAS (Centres for Extraordinary Reception) were established in 2015 as short-term facilities. However, they ended up hosting the majority of refugees and asylum seekers. The Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) was created in 2002 and omprises the network of local institutions that implement reception projects for asylum seekers and refugees. The system was financed by the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services and managed by the Ministry of the Interior. It is generally composed of small structures hosting a limited number of people according to a principle of ‘diffuse reception’. Since 2018 the system has been known as SIPROIMI and currently as Reception and integration System (SAI).

jobs, such as couriers and delivery (the so-called riders). This results in significant wage differences and a slowdown in the process of labour and social integration. At the same time, it creates a phenomenon migrants' 'ghettoisation'.

Foreign workers are found mainly in the highly industrialised and developed northern regions, while only a smaller number, mainly seasonal workers, resides in the less-developed and more agriculture-dependent south (Ministry of Labour, 2019). According to a report by the Ministry of Labour (2017, 41) 'foreigners easily face discriminatory behaviours, widespread risk of informal employment and high mobility. But foreign workers are strongly labour-oriented, so that the phenomenon of the so-called "disheartenment", that is, the renounce to search employment, is very uncommon. In fact, unemployed foreigners can be constrained to accept the first job they find, under the pressure to maintain themselves and their families and/or renovate the residence permit'.

Furthermore, the Italian labour market (for both nationals and foreigners) is divided between regular and informal (non-regular) work, where the latter is particularly relevant for migrant workers with all the related risks of exploitation as well as for health and safety. On the other hand, this is also a necessity for the large number of irregular migrants present in the country and a consequence of the insufficient ways to legalise migrant workers without a valid permit of stay. There is also a lack of knowledge on how to tackle the problem of integration and cultural diversity in the workplace. Finally, the local socio-economic context is also a relevant factor for the successful integration of migrants in the labour market, influencing strategies and opportunities (for more details see Maggini & Collini, 2019; Collini & Federico, 2020).

If we want to understand the challenges and life experiences of the migrants interviewed, we cannot ignore the macro-level context outlined, as migration does not happen in a vacuum. Indeed, although barriers and enablers – i.e., formal and informal (macro) factors hindering or facilitating a successful integration – are usually structural, they still play a role in migrants' lives and daily experiences. Hence, this chapter aims to lay out and analyse this interpolation through a micro-level scrutiny of the individual narratives, exploring the diverse experiences, strategies, and paths put in place by which migrants must navigate an intricate web of laws and a complex set of formal and informal practices present in the Italian socio-economic context.

### 6.3 Methodology and Ethics

This research is based on the interpretive biographical approach (Denzin, 2007; Creswell, 2013), with an in-depth analysis of the interview data collected for the SIRIUS research (Collini & Pannia, 2020). The interpretative narrative method focuses on people's stories and experiences; in our specific case, the interviews aimed to uncover the most relevant turning points and 'epiphanies' in informants' migration and integration experiences, which are our main analytical tools.



Epiphanies and turning points can be defined as conceptual markers. Turning points are made by significant events, while epiphanies are consequential to the former and represent transformational changes. This is generally exemplified by changes on the perceptions on their lives and reflects on life trajectories, both personal and professional (Nico & Van Vaart, 2012). Turning points and consequent reflections, or epiphanies, are also related to structural factors such as the socio-economic and cultural context (Denzin, 2001). Thus, in our analysis we can identify personified turning points, which are reactions to personal events (positive or negative) and institutional turning points, which are induced by external ‘structural’ factors (see Triandafyllidou, Isaakyan and Baglioni in this volume). On the other hand, for epiphanies we can differentiate between negative epiphanies, which may cause a withdrawing process, and positive epiphanies, which can generate empowerment and virtuous processes in our informants. The main epiphanies and turning points have been organised across themes; in the narratives examined, we could also observe a particular relevance for resilience strategies and agency. Human agency is generically defined as the power of individuals to freely make choices and perform actions that affect the course of their lives (Giddens, 1984), with its constitutive elements of being: iteration, projectivity, and practical evaluation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). As can be seen in detail in the next sections, we were able to identify agency (to perform actions that affect the course of one’s life) in relation to migration itself, such as how to plan and execute the journey, and throughout all the subsequent phases of a migrant’s life.

In selecting participants for our research, we aimed to include a broad range of backgrounds and experiences that could offer a comprehensive representation of the main ‘types’ of migrants present in Italy (economic migrants, family reunifications, refugees and asylum seekers). The recruitment of informants largely relied on the collaboration of the various stakeholders we encountered during the work for the SIRIUS project (mostly NGOs and social cooperatives), as well as personal networks/contacts and ‘snowballing’. Regrettably, the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with the period dedicated to the in-depth interviews, with Italy being the first affected country in Europe and the first to implement drastic restrictions. We thus had to adapt and approach migrants who were more easily open to remote interviews. Consequently, we conducted interviews mostly with ‘early’ migrants who have a long or ‘most successful’ story of integration. The limitations posed by the pandemic precluded face-to-face interviews and forced us to rely solely on remote interviews<sup>5</sup> that could not guarantee the same level of connection. In some cases, we were unable to create a significant bond with the interviewees, which made the process more impersonal. Generally, the remote format led to shorter interviews, lasting about 1 h. Hence, in most cases the interviews focused on recalling the informants’ more relevant experiences rather than extensive biographical narrations.

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<sup>5</sup>Due to either technical issues or informants’ personal preferences, all interviews were conducted via phone or Skype without video, which also impeded the ability to observe facial expressions or body language, which can be a relevant complement to the analysis of responses.



Overall, we conducted ten interviews, presenting the experiences of MRAs with different geographic, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds. Six arrived in Italy between 2000 and 2013, while the remaining four arrived in Italy after the beginning of the so-called migration crisis in 2014–2015. In terms of gender, we have an even proportion, with half the interviewees being females and half males. With regards to their status at time of arrival, we have economic migrants (including three former irregular migrants, all arrived in the early 2000s), family reunifications, refugees, and asylum seekers (all from Sub-Saharan Africa). Looking at the origin of the interviewees, most of them (five) are coming from Sub-Saharan Africa, three from eastern Europe and the former USSR, and two from Latin America. Most informants are currently located in central and northern Italy, which is an area with a traditionally high social capital and employment rate – a direct result of the availability of contacts and the restrictions related to the pandemic. At the same time, most of our informants are employed in the personal care and domestic work sectors, as through available sources we could not reach anyone employed in other sectors that see a high presence of migrant labour such as agriculture and construction. However, some of our interviewees had some past experiences working (occasionally) in such sectors. A detailed breakdown, including additional information such as migration year, education, family status, languages spoken, and occupations can be found in the annexed Table 6.1.

All interviews were conducted with close attention to ethical issues, in full compliance with the SIRIUS Project ethical standards. For use in this publication, all informants have been anonymised, omitting all sensitive details that could make them identifiable. The interviews were conducted by two native Italian researchers, one male and one female. To mitigate potential gender-induced issues, we tried to have the female researcher interview most of the women; however, due to various constraints, this was not always possible. The male researcher concentrated on interviewing female migrants with a more solid integration background in Italy and coming from eastern Europe, where cultural barriers in this regard were hypothesised as being less relevant than for Muslim or African women. In several instances, the interviewees were not willing to open up about more sensitive issues they may have faced or provide details in that regard; we thus refrained from broaching potentially re-traumatising topics. The impersonal nature of phone interviews may have made some informants more reticent about disclosing personal traumas or details. Nonetheless, most still provided extensive narrations of their stories and even described sensitive experiences, for example regarding their journey and the violence they had faced. In general, they seemed more open to discussing their experiences after their arrival in Italy. As previously mentioned, most interviewees are migrants with a longer and often successful story of integration, with many denying having faced any ethically sensitive issue after their arrival; most were also educated individuals, holding high school diplomas or university degrees. This helped establish a favourable working environment for the interview. Another element conducive to the ‘opening up’ process of some informants is the fact that they have already exposed their stories to migration officials, researchers, or even in public.

**Table 6.1** Profiles of interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Education level	Years at destination	Profession at origin	Profession at destination
1 Ecaterina	30–39	F	Moldova	Tertiary	9	Student, anthropologist, and trainee	cultural mediator, social worker, language teacher, translator
2 Samuel	30–39	M	Cameroon	Secondary	17	Student	Student, part time worker
3 Valentina	60–69	F	Moldova	Secondary	20	Clerk	Domestic worker
4 Mariam	40–49	F	Georgia	Tertiary	19	Student	Family assistance, freelance interpreter
5 Franck	30–39	M	Cameroon	Secondary	4	Student	Care worker (in a nursing home)
6 Patricia	30–39	F	Venezuela	Tertiary	5	Assistant in a fashion house	Student, PR assistant, unemployed
7 Moussa	30–39	M	Mali		6	Mechanic	Metal worker
8 Jean	40–49	F	Cameroon		20	Hotel housekeeper	Operator in a nursing home
9 Abdoulaye	20–29	M	Guinea	Secondary	5	Student, professional football player	Operator, reception Centre
10 Andres	30–39	M	Peru	Secondary	11	Mechanic	Domestic worker

## 6.4 Integration Paths of the Migrants, Biographies of Integration

Biographic narratives constitute the core of our research through which we can identify the relationship between structural factors (i.e., policies, labour market structure, integration services and opportunities) and individual agency. Indeed, our informants' stories are rich of instances in which they effectively acted to overcome barriers in a sort of tug of war between opposing structural factors and personal efforts.

Based on the data provided by our interviewees, we identified some primary common themes from the most relevant turning points experienced with a particular focus on agency: migration channels, entrance in the labour market, expectations versus reality, and resilience. We have chosen to present first the most common themes that were linked to the journey of migration: how they arrived, why they migrated, what they expected, and what was the initial contact with the Italian labour market (regular or irregular). These experiences generally laid the foundation for their subsequent paths. The last themes represent some of the most relevant elements of the agency nexus and how they interplay with structural conditions, barriers, and enablers the migrant experienced and how they overcame these challenges.

### 6.4.1 *The Beginning: Migration Channel and Legal Status*

The first theme we present can be identified as 'background and migration channel' and is the extended set of experiences that are linked to the choice (or the need) to migrate and the subsequent journey, along with the associated legal status upon arrival, which has a direct impact on the pathways for integration. Indeed, for several of our interviewees, their background and reasons of their migration have a relevant impact on their expectations and resilience strategies that characterised their struggle for integration in Italy and in the labour market. In parallel, this also has a direct impact on the actors and factors that can influence their path.

How the migrants reached Italy represents in most cases the starting point from which the migrants narrate what happened before and after, a watershed between their previous life and their current one – in other words the beginning of their life as a migrant. Still, for some their consciousness of being migrants had begun even before, at the start (or during planning) of their journey or if they had already spent time living or working in other countries before reaching Italy. One element common to all interviewees is the desire to achieve a better life than the one they would likely have in their home countries, and as such migrating was the only possible way to achieve it.

Abdoulaye, a young man from Guinea who was later granted refugee status in Italy, left the country because he felt he had no future and also feared his very life was at risk in his home country. He grew up in the capital. He lived there with his

family, enrolled in high school, and was also successful in one of his main passions, football, and recognised as a talented player. In general, he recalls living a good life, at least until 2010, when things started to worsen. It was on the football field that the idea of leaving the country started to mature in his head, amid the Ebola outbreak that had begun to plague the country, and the increasingly threatening ethnic conflicts. All these fears ultimately accumulated and made him think his life would have been at risk in Guinea. He recalls, ‘all of a sudden’, the moment when he, on the eve of his eighteenth birthday, realised it was time to leave, to try a new life in Europe, or he would not have a life in his natal country. He made the final decision overnight, without informing anyone. He left suddenly, carrying little more than the clothes he was wearing. This was when he became conscious that he was about to start a ‘new life’ as a migrant and that this would be a tough journey, although, as he admitted, he did not fully realise all the challenges that he would endure.

Arrival in Italy and his stay in the reception centre resulted in another turning point that created a positive epiphany:

There [in the reception centre] I started to get conscious I wanted a new life in Italy, a real life, where work is a central part of it. I was meant to be here.

In Abdoulaye’s case, we can see the interrelation between an institutional turning point (being in a reception centre) with a personal generative epiphany taking decisions about his future. This is the result of a personal maturation, based on his previous experiences and struggles, which was also helped by people he encountered in the reception centre, both fellow guests and operators.

Similar stories can be found in the narratives of other asylum seekers and refugees such as Franck, an asylum seeker in his early thirties. He was a student at the university in Cameroon and took part in some political protests. For this reason, he had to leave his country before graduating. He arrived in Morocco (after having passed through Niger and Algeria) and spent 2 years there, doing different jobs such as gardener, farmer, and manual labourer. This was his first experience of a migrant’s life. However, one day he was detained by the police; since he was without documents, they beat him and returned him to Algeria. At this point he realised he could not live the life he wanted there and decided to try the ‘Mediterranean route’ via Libya and eventually reached Europe. Upon his arrival in Italy, he was too inserted in the reception system, and, while things were not easy in the reception centre, he was greatly helped by a volunteer from a local association by organising some language courses in the reception centre and helping him to find a job as a cultural mediator. As we can see, Franck and Abdoulaye share a similar path in terms of clustered events and the accumulation of epiphanies that shaped their lives as migrants in Italy. It also shows the importance of finding actors capable of generating positive epiphanies in the reception system – something that cannot be given for granted (as many other migrants hosted in the reception system do not have these experiences).

Another important aspect that emerges from the stories of asylum seekers and refugees is that Italy was not necessarily their destination of choice; they only

wanted to reach the mythical ‘Europe’. This often resulted in positive epiphanies once they arrived in Italy, although these were often followed by withdrawals once they gained full awareness of the struggles related to establishing a new life (and a new working life) in their host country, as we will see below.

The stories of Mariam and Valentina are those of early irregular migrants coming to Italy out of necessity or in search of personal affirmation and autonomy compared to the meagre prospects in their respective home countries.

Mariam was born in Georgia and raised in a city near the capital. A gifted student, she completed university studies in medical biology. She worked as an unpaid trainee at the local hospital; approaching her late 20s, she felt the need to pursue independence, personally and financially – something she could not realistically achieve in her home country at the time. The fall of the Soviet Union proved disastrous for the Georgian economy and the chances of finding a job and, more than that, a decent salary, were slim, thus also those of becoming effectively independent.

That period was terrible for my country. After graduating, I was working in a lab at the hospital, as a volunteer, an intern. . . I was not paid. I wanted to become independent and have my own salary. . . but there was no work. That is when I decided I shall leave. . . At that time, many people were migrating to Western Europe.

Ultimately, she decided to move to Italy because it was one of her favourite countries and one where, along with Greece, there was a realistic chance to move.

Valentina was forced to leave her country to find a job abroad to support her family, which was deeply indebted after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic crisis. Initially it was intended for her husband to seek work abroad: he tried twice in neighbouring countries and failed in both instances. Since her husband could not manage to find a job abroad, she decided to go because ‘women had better chances to find a job in Italy’, at least according to anecdotal evidence at the time; after all, the family desperately needed the money: ‘I was forced to leave for Italy, otherwise it would have been impossible [to live] with our debts’. Before the collapse of the USSR, she recalls living a ‘decent life’ that would have never led her to migrate to a different country. She eventually arrived in Italy in 2000 on a tourist visa bought through smugglers specialised in ‘facilitation of unauthorised entries’ of eastern European migrants in western Europe and she stayed on as an irregular migrant.

In both cases, the decision to migrate was personal: in one, it was conscious and ‘positive’, in the other the result of a traumatic situation. Both, however, shared similar goals of temporarily migrating to achieve a secure economic position and returning to their countries of origin.

Looking at regular migration entries, we can refer to the stories of Andres and Samuel. Andres is an economic migrant from Peru; he decided to migrate because he was attracted by the possibility of a better life in Italy, where some of his family members already moved.

I was a mechanic. . . It was easy to find a job in Peru, but the pay was not good. . . I arrived in Italy in 2009, with a work visa, thanks to my father who already migrated to Florence a few years before. He managed to get me a job from his same employer.

In 2011, his wife and kids also reached him through a family reunification procedure. In his case, the turning point was facilitated by the presence of an established (family) network in Italy and the migration was not perceived as a traumatic event.

Family reunification allowed for a much smoother migration, at least in terms of legal status and support networks, although it often required a long bureaucratic process. However, for Patrick, who was a child at the time he migrated, reaching Italy represented the possibility of being reunited with his mother: ‘For me, when I arrived in Italy, the most important thing of all was that I was finally going to be with my mother’. At the time, he was not fully conscious of the efforts it had taken his mother to bring him to Italy, but this sense matured after several years and became a generative epiphany that motivated him to work hard to reach his goals, leading to a successful integration in terms of work and life.

Looking at the main aspects identified in the narratives, in most cases the turning points associated with the pre-emigration are generally personified and not institutional, although largely influenced by structural factors (economic crisis, wars, political issues). Institutional turning points, on the other hand, are present related to the legal status, and for economic migrants.

### **6.4.2 *Entering the Labour Market***

The second most relevant theme is entry into the labour market. Indeed, the first job can often be a major milestone in the integration process; it conveys the ‘first impression’ of the Italian labour market and can shape the subsequent integration path, as well as actions, trauma, and resilience strategies. It is also often related to the migration paths we explored before.

Clear examples of an immediate entrance into the labour market, albeit the irregular one, can be found in the stories of some of our ‘oldest’ migrants. For Mariam, local contacts were instrumental for finding her first job:

I was initially helped by a Georgian family that moved to Italy for long. . . and with whom we were in contact already before moving. Within a couple of weeks, through some contacts in the Russian speaking community I had already found a job as a [live-in] babysitter in an upper middle-class Italian (Roman) family. Luckily, my new “family” soon kind of “adopted” me and proved extremely supportive. At the beginning we were able to go along with my “fractured English” and later they helped me with learning the language [the main barrier back then] and to “settle” in Rome. . . Less than a year after my arrival, I could regularise my position, [thanks to the 2002 regularisation of undocumented migrants].

Entering the labour market represented her first step of integration, an occasion to get in touch with people and experiences that shaped her future life in Italy. Despite being in the informal market, a necessity given her irregular status, her first job was a very positive experience. It quickly allowed her to overcome the language barrier,

the trauma of being alone in a foreign country, and to be regularised. It also helped motivate her to try to follow her wish to have her degree recognised in Italy. In short, her first work experience allowed her to be able to rely on herself and to approach the labour market also through formal channels (employment agencies). This turning point became a generative epiphany, from which she felt her new chapter in life was really beginning and gave her confidence towards the future.

Something similar also happened to Valentina, who also benefitted from the 2002 regularisation.

For others, such as Patricia and Ecaterina for example, entry into the Italian labour market was a rather negative experience. Looking at the full sample, we see both formal and informal sector experiences. In several cases, the first jobs were in the irregular market. This was expected by some migrants, particularly domestic workers (Valentina, Mariam), or other migrants who arrived through family networks, like Jean, an economic migrant from Cameroon. Her brother found her a job so she started to work the day after her arrival as a kitchen helper in a restaurant. However, that was not a positive experience: after 4 months, she had not been paid. Thanks to an Ivorian friend who spoke with her boss, she managed to get her money but was immediately fired. In this case, entrance into the labour market provoked an epiphany that made her conscious of the Italian labour market's real face.

For refugees and asylum seekers, resorting to the informal sector was often necessary to earn an income or due to the legal constraints. However, the formal or informal nature of the first job does not predetermine a positive or negative experience, as we can see from the examples of Mariam and Patricia. For Mariam and Valentina entrance to the labour market (albeit, the informal one) was instrumental to their further integration as it allowed them to learn and improve their knowledge of the Italian language as well as find a reference point (their employers). On the other hand, Jean, who also got her first job in the irregular market, had a negative experience. Experiences also vary among economic migrants and asylum seekers involved in integration programmes, although even participants in the SPRAR system do not have a guaranteed positive labour market integration.

I found my first job as a handyman in a construction company. . . I found it by myself, looking on the street until I find a group of people who were looking for workers. *Abdoulaye, CAS guest*

There [he found his first job as a welder for a small company through the SPRAR] I felt treated as a slave. . . After some months, as soon as I found another job as a mechanic, I quit. *Moussa, SPRAR guest*

Eye-opening experiences on the discriminatory character of the Italian labour market resulted in a valuable lesson that motivated informants to look for better options (Moussa) or to realise their value and what they want to achieve or what they would not endure anymore (Franck, Abdoulaye). It should be noted that in no case did a disillusioning first contact with the Italian labour market stop our informants from continuing to look for other jobs nor did it lead them to consider returning to their country of origin or migrate to another country.

As we have seen, agency is prominent in relation to entering the labour market. Several migrants pointed out how their integration into the workforce was a personal endeavour, with little support from CSOs or public institutions. In this regard, agency is also important for guests of the CAS systems, where labour market integration programmes are not implemented (Abdoulaye). Economic migrants and, generally, migrants arriving until the mid-2000s, received no support and in some cases, even built their relationship networks mostly by themselves, presenting a proactive attitude of our informants.

### 6.4.3 *Dreams and Reality (Expectations and Aspirations)*

Expectations can influence migrants' integration process, alongside life and work experiences. We found several examples in the narratives we examined. In general, from our informants, we can identify different sets of expectations. Economic migrants, particularly from eastern Europe (Valentina, Mariam), planned to stay for just a few years and then return. Still, in both cases they ended up staying in Italy much longer or losing the desire to go back to their home country. On the other hand, economic migrants from Africa or Latin America generally hoped to make a fortune and planned to stay longer in the host country (Patricia, Jean, Andres). Family reunifications mostly came with the ambition of having a new and stable life (Samuel). Unsurprisingly, things are easier for those who already have established contacts in Italy or even better a job, as was the case for Andres.

Refugees and asylum seekers present a different perspective as they recalled not having any clear expectations before arriving. Their main concern was saving their life or aiming for a better one; they just hoped for a better situation compared to their home countries. Most wanted to reach 'Dreamland' Europe and possibly France or northern Europe, not necessarily Italy.

'In Africa we imagine Europe as the Paradise...while in Africa we're in the Purgatory... You see it as in TV, this makes you dream...Down there [in his country] you almost never hear story of failures...because that would be shameful. Thus, you get the expectations that is a paradise, [when reality is much different]. Thus, this has an influence on the expectations, but this dreamland might work for students who go with visa to study in European universities...not for those who arrive through Libya'. *Samuel*

For Samuel, this knowledge made him more resilient as an agent. Although he had never set foot in Libya, he developed this opinion based on his experience and those of his (migrant) friends and acquaintances; he also did voluntary work and was active in an ethnic association. Overall, the fear of failure, of the shame associated with it, never left him and greatly contributed to shaping his behaviour throughout his life in Italy.

For migrants like Moussa, staying here was a matter of necessity; they could not leave once in the reception system. Still, most quickly accept this reality, are now happy to be here, and developed a sense of new belonging, as happened with



Abdoulaye. In these cases, we can see a series of institutional turning points, which resulted in generative epiphanies (reactions to external factors).

I was confused. I did not know where I was: I have heard talking about Italy in 2006 because the Italian team won the world cup. That was the only thing I knew. . . Once in Italy I applied for asylum and was transferred to a reception centre in a tiny village in Tuscany'. *Moussa*

This is also the case of Franck, who arrived as an asylum seeker and developed a new sense of belonging in the host country:

For me. . . working in a nursing home means giving back the help I received from the Italian community. . . especially from elderly people.

Franck here refers to the help he received, particularly from elderly people in the village where he was hosted. In these cases, thanks to the experiences in their initial period in Italy, migrants developed a new consciousness that would influence the way they both perceived their host country and the actions towards integration into both society and labour market.

We can also observe that expectations and aspirations generally change and adapt to migrants' stage of life and experiences. Such adaptations are generally related to knowledge or experience-based turning points that produce either generative or negative epiphanies, as we will see. Unsurprisingly, with higher expectations often comes greater disillusionment. High expectations are more common at the beginning, while migrants in Italy longer generally aimed for a stable life and stable job, even if this meant not being able to pursue their original ambitions. This can be considered a form of resilience in adaptability, which is also present in other themes (i.e., skills). We can see a general tendency to accept their current status and learn to live with it. This can be a negative process of fatalism, a condition that moves the migrants to accept their situation, realising there is no going back to their country of origin even if their initial aspirations or expectations were not met. Indeed, in our stories we almost always see an adamant unwillingness to 'go back'.

If we look at the stories of Ecaterina and Patricia, the impact with the Italian labour market proved to be a negative epiphany, which stimulated self-awareness, resilience mechanisms, and a change of their expectations.

Ecaterina is a highly skilled migrant in her mid-thirties who arrived in Italy in 2011 with a family reunification visa after her mother and sister had already moved there a few years prior. She came to Italy after completing her Master's degree and having already experienced migration to other countries. The main reason for leaving was the lack of opportunities in Moldova and her family's insistence:

I came to visit my family and initially I had no intention of moving to Italy, but since my mother and my sister were already here they convinced me. . . This was the only reason. . . Ultimately, I moved after doing all the procedures for the recognition of my degrees. I wanted to apply for a Ph.D, but with my limited knowledge of Italian I preferred to enrol for a second Master's degree in an Italian university in order to improve the language and have better chances.

She had a very disillusioning experience with Italian academia while trying to enrol for a Ph.D. This was followed later by repeated negative experiences with the Italian labour market:

I was hoping to find a much better environment and to be able to keep doing [at least] the same jobs I was doing before moving here. Reality was much different. . . Starting from how university [the academic system] works. I found just closed doors everywhere in my profession. And the private sector was not much better. . . If I had to say why I remained here, 90 per cent it is because of my husband [she married an Italian]. . . definitely I did not stay for work.

For Ecaterina, establishing a family was a turning point that created a generative epiphany, one that moved her to find resilience strategies in her new life in the host country, although there is still a feeling of surrender in her.

Patricia also experienced this resignation, even without a family or strong personal bonds in Italy, after a very disillusioning work experience and a period of unemployment. She recalls her first job as very disappointing:

I was young, we were just two in the staff speaking English, where English was the main working language. I was the only one with a master in fashion business. Nonetheless, I was the worst paid. I don't know...I don't know why. . . maybe they want to prove you for long time. . . maybe they do not care how much you earn...maybe it was because I was young and foreigner. They thought that I should have been rich to work in the fashion market and manage to survive in Milan. . . so I didn't need money [while it wasn't absolutely the case]. And then, my boss ... Sometimes he came to the office with prostitutes, and we had to pretend nothing and laugh at his vulgar jokes. . . I often felt humiliated...not respected...and I felt that my being a foreigner was a problem, they treated me differently. They thought "you're a foreigner, I'm giving you an opportunity!" And every day I asked myself why don't they see my potential? Why don't they invest in young talent?

However, the real epiphany for Patricia came from not having economic security, from not having the financial ability to visit her family. Realising that she was merely adapting to what little pay she received, that she deserved better and more, was an eye-opening experience:

[After two years] I realised I had to [quit]; they were exploiting me. I wanted to go back to Venezuela and visit my family, but I did not have the money for the ticket. . . If I do not have the resources to go back to my family, something had gone wrong. I tried asking for a raise, but my boss refused. . . I realised that I had to wake up. I had to go away. They were taking advantage of me only because I was new to this country, new to this job. I used to see my boss coming at work with a Ferrari and me working as a slave for a misery.

Ultimately, Patricia decided to remain because she felt there was realistically no other way. She also became more flexible in terms of expectations and generally more adaptable:

Now I am unemployed, tomorrow I'll maybe find something. . . I keep going on, it's ups and downs. . . but I have to be a realist. I am still happy to be here, after all.

Nonetheless, in both cases the negative experiences generated a resilience mechanism and self-preservation that moved them to keep pursuing a more pragmatic way in the Italian labour market, with more consciousness and fewer expectations.

By contrast, other migrants positively realise they have achieved a real new life elsewhere (Samuel, Valentina, Mariam, Abdoulaye, Andres). This can also be related to family, personal relations, and the ‘anchoring’ effect on our interviewees. For instance, having the family resettled in Italy from their country of origin can be seen as a very relevant achievement, or when they become facilitators for the integration of others (Valentina, Andres). More generally, the new sense of belonging can move migrants to persist in their attempts to find their way into the formal or informal labour market, or even to come back after having left for a period.

Mariam was so changed by the time she spent in Italy that she felt out of place once she returned to her home country. It was the beginning of the global economic crisis and she could only find temporary jobs as a waiter, domestic worker, or babysitter. She felt the need to try to change something in her life and in 2011 moved back to Georgia where things, supposedly, were much better than when she had left. Indeed, the economic situation was improved compared to the 1990s but still not particularly favourable. After living abroad for so long, with only occasional visits to her family, she did not easily manage to resume a life in Georgia. Furthermore, she did not have many friends and relatives left there aside from her brother and his family. Ultimately, after one year, the inability to find a job in Georgia, particularly in her old biomedical field where she faced competition by both established former colleagues and younger generations, convinced her to move back to Italy. Now, she does not foresee moving back to Georgia again. This was a moment in her life when she realised her belonging was no longer ‘at home’ and that her host country was the place to be.

#### **6.4.4 Resilience**

In previous sections, we already hinted at how resilience is crucial in the integration process of the migrants we interviewed. Here, we consider resilience in a broad sense as encompassing the emotions, actions, aspirations that provided them the strength to overcome some of the most difficult challenges in the struggle between dreams and reality. Indeed, this theme is present throughout all the stories in one form or another and plays a crucial role in the management of traumas and vulnerabilities. It is an arc spanning the whole story of both migration and integration.

Sometimes resilience was deeply connected with the struggle of the journey, what they did to overcome the fear. We can find in the stories of Abdoulaye and Franck the struggle, fear, and risk faced by young men who abandoned their countries to take ‘the Libyan route’ towards a new life in Europe and a story of determination to integrate into the host country.

These informants can be taken as examples of the relevance of resilience for a successful integration into the Italian labour market and society in general. They also clearly represent some of the resilience strategies that can be employed to address difficulties and overcome traumas or vulnerability (journey, discrimination). Determination, aspiration, and patience were particularly helpful on this road towards

integration and finding jobs. For instance, in the story of Abdoulaye (who was the most open about his journey), we can note at least three relevant epiphanies. The first was when he realised that he preferred to face an almost certain death rather than going back so that all further actions were aimed at creating a new life in Europe.

Abdoulaye left his home country conscious of the fact that he faced a tough journey, although he was not aware of all the challenges ahead: ‘The desert was the hardest part, that and violence, which started in Mali, and continued in Libya’. He experienced the same situation in Libya, where the locals expressed a strong racism towards ‘black African people’: ‘They kept calling us Negroes even if I am not [more] black [than them]’. There, he decided he would rather risk dying in the sea trying to reach Europe than again face all he had endured on the way there, burdened by an additional, unbearable, sense of failure: ‘Torture is dying many times, if you drown in the sea, you only die once’. This created in him a new sense of purpose, a potent drive that shaped his awareness and the desire to achieve a meaningful life, a new life for which he would work hard.

The second epiphany occurred while he was at the reception centre, when he felt destined to be in Italy and this pushed him to create a stable life in the country, to integrate and help others integrate: ‘I realised I was meant to be here, not to continue the journey to France or . . . other countries like many of my companions. . . I am sure of that now!’ He started doing volunteer work in the cooperative that runs the reception centre and helped other hosts whenever possible. Abdoulaye’s third epiphanic moment came after refusing a job and being offered better conditions:

While I was in the reception centre, one day a person came to us, inside the centre, looking for people to work in the fields. . . of course to be paid in black. . . A tough job, very demanding. He offered us five euros, but I knew other people were being paid ten euros per hour for that job and I told him that, that either he paid us the same or we won’t work for him. He left. . . The other people, my friends, were not happy I drove him away, because we needed the money. . . But the day after he came back offering us eight euros. In the end we went working for him for nine euros. . . Patience is fundamental for foreigners looking for a job. Patience [and dignity], also helps avoid exploitation, if they [employers] want you, they’ll come back for you [proposing more decent conditions], otherwise, you’ll just find something else further on.

This incident made him realise that one can actually have some leverage and obtain fairer conditions. He was adamant on this point, which we can translate as ‘do not undersell yourself, do not put your dignity up for sale’, something he also tried to teach to fellow guests of the reception centre. Indeed, he recalls that this stance did pay off in several instances afterwards.

Resilience strategies have been widely employed to overcome prejudice and discrimination, which have been experienced by many of our interviewees, both in their everyday lives and in the workplace. We can find several such examples in the story of Samuel, a migrant in his early thirties who arrived in Italy through family reunification while he was still a child and often had to face discrimination and racism: ‘When I was a teenager, I stopped playing football in a local team due to repeated racist insults’. Recalling his experience as a migrant teenager who went to school in the early 2000s, he remembers how

We [migrants/persons of colour] were fewer than they are now. . . I was the only black in my class. [And later] during the first weeks at my second job. . . actually my first real job as an employee. . . I was discriminated by some of my colleagues, because of my colour.

Growing up, Samuel learnt to withstand such incidents, recalling how he changed his perceptions and mentality while maturing.

Ecaterina felt discrimination and prejudice by employers or recruiters for being ‘another eastern European migrant’, regardless of her education level or good command of the Italian language: ‘They clearly favoured Italian candidates even when on paper I had a better qualification’. She felt she ‘had to prove her value much harder than others’. She did not feel a significant change of attitude even after gaining Italian citizenship: ‘They still look at your name and place of origin more than citizenship’. On the contrary, Mariam and Valentina, who are also eastern European women but arrived in the early 2000s, did not report any similar issues of discrimination aside from the occasional racist or prejudicial comment that they ‘learned to ignore’.

A good example of this mix of skills, agency, and resilience can be found in the story of Franck:

Since I arrived in Italy, I made sure to have all the possible tools that could help me find a job, make myself able to prove I am an added value. I bought a pc, I prepared online my CV. . . all. I also got an Italian driving license. . . everything. Moreover, I know I am a valuable person. . . I know who I am, when someone tells me I am not valuable, I do not even get angry because I know I am an added value.

We should stress this term ‘added value’, which is common in the public discourse when trying to present the positive aspect of migration – something that Franck seems to have fully internalised as a coping mechanism.

In general, personal attitude seems to be a key factor for several of our interviewees. Furthermore, will and motivation can also be included among (a sort of) agency-driven resilience. Indeed, during our conversation with some informants, it emerged that personal qualities, often linked to their personal attitude, or shaped by events or people, had a relevant impact on the way they managed to integrate into the labour market. Abdoulaye, for instance, recognised the help received, but also placed on his agency the merits of his integration: ‘I received help, suggestion, but [integration] it was also a personal thing, due to my commitment, my willingness to succeed’. Resilience is also a way to address vulnerability.

In the stories of Ecaterina and Samuel it also emerges how, in their opinion, determination and a confident attitude were very important for overcoming prejudice and getting the most out of their jobs, which were obtained following formal channels (job agencies, CV submissions, direct interviews) and not personal contacts. Other important motivational factors rely on the aspirations of our informants, the reasons to leave and reasons to stay, to persist in the struggle to integrate. In this regard, two recurring elements in the stories of our informants are the desire for independence (Ecaterina, Samuel, Mariam, Patricia, Moussa, Abdoulaye) and the fear of failure (often referred as ‘going back’ or ‘coming back’). The latter is present in the stories of Abdoulaye and Franck, who explicitly indicates this as a cultural

element: ‘You don’t want to go back, because if you come back you failed, you are a shame for your family’. Indeed, this was an important factor that helped them overcome hardships and obstacles, with a direct impact on their respective labour market integration. A final element to note is how several interviewees referred to a dimension that can be described as luck, fate, destiny, or ‘God’s will’, often using expressions indicating God, Allah, or deities, with a more profound meaning than simple interjections. This can be considered relevant, although in most cases seems more an ex-post acceptance of what they have achieved. In general, faith seems to be an element that can support the person, but in a very few cases was a motivational factor that directly helped them in successfully employing resilience strategies.

Thus, on the one hand we have the importance of personal resilience, while on the other personal exhaustion, which shall be considered two faces of the same coin.

## 6.5 Triggering Actors

Following the ‘agency-structure’ nexus, major turning points or epiphanies do not happen spontaneously, but were often a product of interactions with people or processes. For instance, material or immaterial help, psychological guidance, counselling, or simple advice received from someone (employer, operator in the centre, friend, host family) produced subsequent actions to bear fruit and, when successful, are often recognised as a major turning point in their lives. Indeed, many interviewees recalled how meeting a particular person, often unexpectedly, deeply influenced the course of their integration path.

Here, we assess the role of actors (or factors) behind those turning points, identifying which were mostly involved in shaping the integration paths of our migrants through actions or words. Following the common scheme identified for this book, Table 6.2 presents a summary of the main actors and their roles at the micro, meso, and macro levels. In order of relevance, as emerged during our interviews, we can identify a few particularly influencing categories such as: (a) family and friends; (b) ethnic and professional contacts and networks; (c) civil society and State support; (d) educational and training institutions.

### 6.5.1 *Family, Friends, and Ethnic Networks*

In almost every story, we see that recurring actors are generally family and friends. From the outset, family can be a trigger for migration and also affect migration channels. Of course, for family reunifications, family is the main actor involved (Ecaterina and Samuel). It is also the case when the decision to migrate is taken to support the family in the home country (Valentina).

Family and friends can have a prominent role in facilitating the entrance in the labour market as well when they can provide networks and contacts, particularly for

**Table 6.2** Typology of actors and factors

	Personal/friends/family (micro)	Civil society support (meso)	Educational/training institutions (meso)	Professional contacts/employers (meso)	State policies/support (macro)
Interviewee 1 (Ecaterina)	Original family (+) Husband (Italian native) (+) Personal resilience (++) Self-employment (+) Personal exhaustion (-)		Italian language (+)	Recruiters/HR (-) Discrimination (-)	Italian labour market (-)
Interviewee 2 (Samuel)	Mother (+) Close friends (+) Personal resilience (++) Personal exhaustion (-) Ethnic community (+)	Volunteering work (+) Ethnic association (+)	School (+) University (+)	Discrimination (-)	
Interviewee 3 (Valentina)	Friends (+) Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion (-) Ethnic community (+)	Religious charities (+)	Italian language (learning) (+)	Employers (+)	Regularisation/secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 4 (Mariam)	Friends (+) Ethnic community (+) Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion (-)		Italian language (learning) (+)	Employers (+)	Regularization/secure immigration status (+)
Interviewee 5 (Franck)	Friends (+) Personal resilience (+)	Volunteering (+)	Skills recognition (lack of) (-) School (+) Italian language (learning) (+) Professional training (+)		Reception Centre (-)

(continued)

Table 6.2 (continued)

	Personal/friends/family (micro)	Civil society support (meso)	Educational/training institutions (meso)	Professional contacts/employers (meso)	State policies/support (macro)
Interviewee 6 (Patricia)	Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion (--)			Employers (-) Discrimination/exploitation (-)	Italian labour market (-)
Interviewee 7 (Moussa)	Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion (-) Nostalgia/melancholy (-)	Connections made through a CSO managing the reception Centre (+)	Italian language (learning) (+) Professional training (+)	Exploitation (-)	
Interviewee 8 (Jean)	Family (+) Friends (+) Personal resilience (+) Personal exhaustion (-)	Volunteering (+)	Professional training (+)	Employers (-)	Italian labour market (-) Regularisation (+)
Interviewee 9 (Abdoulaye)	Personal resilience (+)	Reception Centre (+)	Language skills (+) Professional training (+)	Networking (+) Employers (+)	
Interviewee 10 (Andres)	Family (+) Extended family (+) Friends (+) Ethnic community (+)			Employers (+)	Italian labour market (-)



economic migrants who are reaching family members already present in Italy (Jean, Andres) or when they provide references and contacts to rely on upon arrival (Mariam). Family, particularly when created anew in the host country, can be a crucial turning point – the most relevant reason that keeps a migrant in place after repeated disillusionment (Ecaterina).

Friends are also widely recognised by our interviewees as a major source of support, including for facilitating entry into the labour market. They are particularly important at the beginning of the migrants' new life, but also in finding new jobs later, given the importance of informal contacts and word of mouth for employability in Italy. The role of friends as part of the resilience process is extremely relevant as well, and can be found as both specific events, words, or suggestions, or, more often, as a continuous presence that helped interviewees in both personal and professional integration.

What have changed my life here in Italy is friendship. I do not have friends in name only. My friends are special friends. *Moussa*

Furthermore, professional contacts may well become friends and vice versa. The same could apply for persons who provided services or counselling through civil society organisations.

Ethnic communities have played a particularly relevant role for economic migrants and family reunifications, where some of our informants even actively participated in creating and expanding ethnic networks.

After a few years I somewhat became a reference point for the Moldavan community...personally helping several other women to find jobs as a *badante* or housekeeper. . . It is very important that we care and help with each other. *Valentina*

The latter in particular means reaching a sense of achievement and rooting in the local society and in the labour market. A similar experience can be also found in the story of Andres:

Later on I found most of my jobs [mostly informal] through the [Peruvian] community. . . Now I work together with friends and family. We also helped many relatives coming here.

Alongside family (and friends), ethnic networks act as facilitators for entering the labour market (formal or informal). In some cases, for economic migrants such as Andres, ethnic communities also tend to blend in with family and friends as well as professional networks. On the other hand, their prominence is far less for asylum seekers and refugees hosted in the national reception system, although in some cases they can still be useful for finding a job or providing support after the permanence in the first-line reception system.

Thanks to a Nigerian man who works with me, I found a bed. The bedroom has no windows. But what should I do? I deem myself lucky, life is hard! *Moussa*

### 6.5.2 *Professional Contacts and Networks*

Professional contacts feature in several of our migrants' narratives and can be related to various epiphanies experienced by engaging with either a specific individual or group. The role of professional contacts can result in both emotional and instrumental turning points in the newcomer's search for a job and to the integration path in general. Their role, however, is more ambivalent than that of other actors.

On the one hand, we have been presented with the very positive role of good employers, who were instrumental for a successful integration, particularly when associated with entry into the labour market (Valentina, Mariam, Abdoulaye, Andres). In some cases, the relationship between employees and employer grew towards real friendships, lasting after the interviewee had moved to a new job (Valentina, Mariam, Abdoulaye).

I [realised I] was so lucky to have been employed by this family...they really helped me with everything... they basically adopted me...It's largely thanks to them I managed to integrate. *Mariam*

Developing skills and networking capabilities were fundamental for Abdoulaye, whose experience as cultural mediator and operator in reception centres allowed him to find several jobs in the sector:

I managed to find most of my recent jobs [as a cultural mediator and reception centre operator] through my [professional] contacts working in the reception system I developed over the years...They value me...This even saved me during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the interaction with professional contacts can also present a barrier, with negative turning points associated with discriminatory attitudes witnessed in the workplace, such as specific words or phrases used by colleagues and employers or perspective employers (Ecaterina, Samuel, Franck, Patricia, Moussa, Jean, Abdoulaye) or exploitation (Patricia, Moussa). Nonetheless, in most instances this resulted in a positive outcome in terms of understanding the nature of the Italian labour market, self-realisation, and self-esteem, thus generating resilience strategies.

### 6.5.3 *The Role of CSOs and State Policies and Support*

The roles of civil service organisations and the State are generally dependent on the type of migrants as both are present mostly in the cases of asylum seekers and refugees but almost absent for economic migrants and family reunifications. A partial exception was Valentina, who recognised the help of a religious charity as instrumental in finding accommodation and work when she arrived as an irregular migrant in the early 2000s:

At the beginning I had no one, I was alone. . . I was helped by [name of the association] who hosted me, helped me. . . Thanks to them I also found my first [informal] job as a housekeeper after a few weeks.

Volunteering or participating in CSO activities can trigger significant turning points in the integration process that may also result in direct consequences regarding labour market integration.

A woman heading a local association was crucial [in his life course]. She managed to organize an event in the secondary school of the closest village where the asylum seekers met the children and other locals. There I played the drums. This gave me the opportunity [to build a network]. I also started to teach music as a volunteer in the secondary school.

*Moussa*

For those involved in the SPRAR system, the support process was also recognised as more effective in terms of job placement, although not always resulting in a quality job, as was the case of Moussa (although this seems more dependent on the employers). This is not the case for CAS guests, as we have seen for Abdoulaye, who at the beginning had to rely almost exclusively on himself. In general, the role of CSO and State support is seen as instrumental or as a process they have undergone, but it becomes particularly relevant when it translates into specific actions or words (suggestions) performed or received by the operators – in other words, turning points capable of generating epiphanies and stimulating the agency of our interviewees.

I received a very good advice when I was in the reception system and following it has been one of the most intelligent things I did in my entire life. *Abdoulaye*

### **6.5.4 Education and Training Institutions**

Education and training institutions do not feature prominently in the stories of our informants, but mostly indirectly. However, refugees and asylum seekers seem particularly aware of the importance of receiving a basic education and professional training (Franck, Moussa, Abdoulaye). Attending skills or language training programmes provided valuable experiences that many interviewees recognised as important for increasing their employability. Above all, the most important skill to be acquired is command of the Italian language. Indeed, learning the language can be considered a fundamental turning point acknowledged by almost all our interviewees, many of whom managed to learn Italian with the help of language schools or programmes.

Such is the importance attributed to language that Valentina recalls a small pocket dictionary being one of the dearest things she had with herself once arrived in Italy:

When I arrived in Italy, I was scared; I only had a phrasebook in my pocket to help me with the language.

In parallel, attending school is also indicated as a major turning point in the integration paths, which later resulted in better opportunities for employment.

I immediately started learning Italian, I was good at it...I passed all the levels A1, B1...Then I could even skip the middle school degree test and take directly high school courses. *Franck*

Following the advice to learn Italian and commit myself to do it was one of the most important things he could do to integrate in Italy...In the end I did not do the A1 or B2 courses, but I did directly to the middle school final exam, and I passed it. *Abdoulaye*.

Our interviewees' stories presented a plurality of turning points that led to generative and withdrawing epiphanies shaping both their lives as migrants in Italy and their integration into the Italian labour market. However, if we look in more detail at the structure of turning points and epiphanies, an important element that emerges is the presence of turning point clusters. Indeed, several of our narratives present a series of consecutive turning points that lead to an accumulation of experiences and epiphanies. This accumulation seems to play a particularly significant role in shaping the integration path of several of our migrants, their capacity to learn and build from these, making them both more resilient and more adaptive. In some cases, we can also observe how some epiphanies could generate other epiphanies in later stages of a migrant's life.

## 6.6 Concluding Remarks

Our research allowed us to delve into the lives of MRAs seeking to integrate into the Italian labour market and shed light on the dynamic interactions between individual perspectives and actions (i.e., the agency) and the context in which they live (i.e., the superstructure, formed by the legal framework, structure of the labour market, and culture). The study focused on the interplay between the experiences of cognitive and emotional aspects (turning points or epiphanies) that migrants had during the process and the subsequent actions and consequences on their lives and professional perspectives in Italy. Such knowledge could only emerge through the specific methods and techniques used for the analysis of our data: in-depth biographical interviews. The study confirms patterns documented in the relevant academic literature and policy analyses.

Sifting through the various narratives examined, how and when a migrant arrived influences the perspectives of MRAs across many aspects regarding their legal status, potential networks, support, and the actors involved in their path to integration. Macro level (f)actors such as immigration policy played an important role in affecting employment opportunities as well as this is associated with immigration status: entrance into the labour market is linked to the migration channels and legal status. In this case, we can identify different patterns according to regular/irregular entries and between economic migrants and asylum seekers/refugees who, on arrival, are placed into the national reception system where the latter can benefit from (limited) institutional integration support. Unless they can count on ethnic networks or local contacts, economic (regular) migrants and family reunifications are

largely left ‘on their own’, with few services beyond those provided to the general resident population such as welfare provisions, job placement and orientation, and training.

The structure of the Italian labour market and its shortcomings and opportunities also emerge from our stories, notably the presence of large informal economy. However, this did not necessarily lead to negative experiences as it became a normalised non-issue for several migrants, who either expected or rather easily adapted to it. Expectations can influence the degree of satisfaction with regards to the level of integration or their experiences. Indeed, there is often a discrepancy between expectations and the actual integration process caused by structural factors – something that is more prominent for highly skilled economic migrants and family reunifications. Negative or challenging experiences associated with unrecognised skills, discrimination, and a general sense of being unwelcome, are all domains where contextual factors have played a role restricting MRAs’ abilities to access employment opportunities. Very few of those migrants actually find work in areas that are related to the skills acquired before their arrival in Italy.

Thus, the path towards integration in the Italian labour market is a challenging journey where the desired outcome is not always achieved. While most interviewees were able to turn integration barriers into enablers, others were not able to fulfil their aspirations. Structural factors related to the prevailing policy paradigm and latent biases and prejudice effectively constrained migrants’ capacity to realise their potential, presenting a clash between actors’ needs and structures that can lead to negative epiphanies. On the other hand, several actors – either individuals or networks – emerged as facilitators who mediated the labour market integration process, with the most relevant being family and friends as well as professional contacts and CSOs, which also tended to overlap.

The agency nexus is crucial in relation to resilience strategies against adversities. Indeed, MRAs proved to be extremely resilient actors, capable of facing extremely dire situations, enduring while often maintaining their dignity and self-esteem, which is underlined by several epiphanies recalled by our informants. Questions of self-confidence generated epiphanies, which led almost all of our respondents to make them feel they have agency to challenge the barriers to labour market integration. In parallel, the role of agency emerged as crucial, including when they were able to exploit what they attribute to ‘luck’ or ‘fate’, which can be considered a peculiar form of agency in itself.

The picture that emerges from our research is of a mostly unfavourable ground for a quality integration where, nonetheless, success is still possible. This can be linked mostly to structural factors such as migration policies and the Italian labour market, leaving much to the resilience and agency of migrants to overcome the most prominent barriers, often exploiting loopholes or informal solutions. In other words, through the various experiences of our interviewees, we saw how structure shapes agency and resilience strategies. Finally, a very interesting element we could observe, is the presence of turning points’ clusters throughout several narratives, which result in accumulated epiphanies. This is indeed an element to consider in further research.

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# Chapter 7

## Resistance Is Useless! (And So Are Resilience and Reworking): Migrants in the Finnish Labour Market



Quivine Ndomo and Nathan Lillie

### 7.1 Introduction

Integration theory regards host countries as novel environments into which migrants immerse themselves and adapt to a new culture and labour market. In Finland, integration is discussed in terms of labour market success (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). Finding work tends to occur in the ‘secondary’ labour market as migrants have difficulty accessing the more secure jobs of the ‘primary’ labour market. In other words, they face a segmented labour market. Segmented labour markets are split into non-competing segments sustained by institutional barriers (Leontaridi, 1998). Doeringer and Piore (1971) argue that labour markets tend to dualise into two separate and virtually independent primary and secondary sectors, in which different labour market structures prevail. This segmentation ‘allows’ the labour market to treat its participants with an uneven hand, according different opportunities to otherwise comparable people and thus entrenching exclusive labour market practices that impact marginal groups first (Ryan, 1981). The Finnish labour market, as far as Finnish natives are concerned, is characterised by a relatively low level of dualisation and precarity, largely due to wage compression and a high level of collective agreement coverage. This equality and security, however, does not apply to the same extent to specific sectors, firms, and positions where migrants tend to find work (Danaj et al., 2018).

Occupational discrimination is common in Finland (Liebkind et al., 2016), despite overall wage compression in lower status positions due to their being unionised and well regulated. Empirical evidence shows that occupational integration of migrants in Finland is hierarchised by nationality, resulting in the

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disproportionate concentration of migrants in the less desirable secondary sector of the labour market, especially in less skilled jobs (Ahmad, 2015; Heikkilä, 2005). This is true even of highly skilled immigrants to Finland, who often end up working in unskilled or low skilled jobs despite their qualifications (Heikkilä, 2005; Jaakkola, 2000). This segmentation is based on ethnicity and national origin, which structures who is perceived as an appropriate candidate for a skilled job (Chang, 2014). Dual labour market theorists further predict that social reproduction within class systems enforces relative immobility between the two sectors (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, 180). Integration for migrants and refugees in Finland is for many a dual challenge – initially of entering the labour market at all and then crossing over from one occupation to an occupation more appropriate for that individual’s capabilities and aspirations.

Roughly 458,000 foreign language speakers<sup>1</sup> lived in Finland at the end of 2021, about 8 per cent of Finland’s population (OSF, 2022). The migrant and refugee population in Finland consists of third-country nationals from all around the globe. The largest migrant groups come from Russia, Ukraine, and India. Other countries in the top 20 include Iraq, Vietnam, Somalia, Syria, and Nigeria. Asylum seekers differ slightly, with Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and Russia as the top five origin countries up to 2021 (Finnish Immigration Services, 2022). In 2022, most asylum seekers and temporary protection applicants are Ukrainian citizens. Including Ukrainian migrations in 2022, the largest age group for both arriving migrants and refugees is 18–34 years, followed by 35–64 (ibid.). These are prime labour market activity years, cementing the prominence of work and labour market training as an integration pathway for both groups in Finland. Recent migrations from Ukraine has the potential to alter the gender dynamics of the migrant population in Finland, which might in turn affect the migrant division of labour, and is therefore a phenomenon to watch in future research.

In Finland there is a strong government-supported integration policy. Overall, integration services are well-funded and perceived as being of high quality (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). Civil society organisations also offer integration services (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2021). The assumption behind integration is to change the migrant’s profile and skills to better fit Finnish society and the local labour market; in general, when the migrant’s career ambitions and perceived needs of Finnish society conflict, it is the migrant who must compromise. The structure of segmentation pushes migrants toward the secondary labour market, while integration policies encourage reskilling into low- or mid-skilled occupations that hire migrants; for many migrants this thwarts their ambitions. Consequently, migrant agency, as an innate ability to survive (resilience), reconfigure (reworking), or seek redress (resistance) in oppressive situations is crucial to migrant integration, playing different roles with consequences in different integration contexts (Berntsen, 2016; Katz, 2004). This adaptation has a personal price for the migrant however: survival at

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<sup>1</sup>In Finland, this is a good proxy for foreign-born.

the cost of limiting personal ambitions. This chapter looks at how labour market structures force migrants to refocus and limit career goals.

Drawing on Katz's (2004) disaggregated conceptualisation of agency as resilience, reworking, and resistance, this chapter explores how agency manifests in the labour market integration of migrants and refugees to illuminate the counterintuitive role that migrant agency can play in reinforcing exclusive integration practices in the Finnish labour market. We do not mean to imply that migrant agency is necessarily a negative force in migrant integration; it is of course essential to adapting to a new context. We do, however, want to point out that in some cases, structural factors ensure migrants are caught in a rigged game that they cannot win. In such cases, emphasis on agency shifts attention away from fixing the structural factors that prevent migrants from succeeding.

We use the concept of disaggregated agency to highlight the nuanced responses of a biographically diverse group of migrants to integration challenges. We analyse biographical narratives of 11 migrants, four of whom are refugees, living in Finland, who are employed or actively seeking employment. Our interviewees engage most in resilience and reworking, with very rare instances of individual indirect acts of resistance consistent with prior studies (Berntsen, 2016; Katz, 2004). We also find that the availability or non-availability of integration support affects the forms of migrant agency used, with implications for integration programme planning. Finally, linking agency and unequal labour market power relations, the chapter shows how migrants' overreliance on resilience and reworking – and rarity of resistance – favours the continuation of discriminative labour market practices such as statistical discrimination, labour exploitation, and labour market segmentation.

## 7.2 Theoretical Background: Unpacking Labour Market Integration in Finland and Migrant Agency

Meta-analysis of literature on migrant labour market integration in Finland identifies key integration barriers as structural and cultural discrimination; local language incompetence; and poor coordination of integration policies (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019, 251; Petry & Sommaribas, 2018; Martin & Prokkola, 2017; OECD, 2017). Migrant job seekers in Finland face a market segmented by skill requirements and discrimination (Ahmad, 2015, 2020; Valtonen, 2001). In attempting to integrate and find work, the emphasis of policy and of migrant individual agency is on resolving the first issue – skill requirements – while neglecting the second – discrimination. Our analysis of the biographies suggests that the two are intertwined; 'skills and qualifications' present an incontestably legitimate and necessary way to sort job applicants. However, sometimes the amorphous and subjective nature of skill acquisition and recognition, as well as roles for which certain people are deemed suitable and others not, ensure that skill recognition in practice is not free of discrimination (Esses et al., 2014).

High skill requirements for jobs in Finland's primary sector (Heikkilä, 2005) – coupled with a Finnish Nordic labour market model that excludes the possibility of low-wage/low-productivity work through the generous social safety net, high union density, and centralised collective wage bargaining – sustain high and stable wage levels (Ho & Shirono, 2015, 17–25). The primary labour market consists of well-regulated jobs with a career perspective. Special internal labour market rules follow the human resource requirements of the dominant firms in the primary job market instead of open market mechanisms. Access to these primary market jobs is regulated by gatekeepers with a high level of discretion about whom to hire, which among other things, makes hiring discrimination possible (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). Finnish labour market institutions tend to level out wage differences between the primary and secondary sectors and ensure that the secondary sector is relatively smaller than in other countries; nonetheless, migrants tend to be pushed toward secondary sector jobs. The role of discrimination in sorting workers by ethnicity in the Finnish job market is well documented. Two recent studies based on fictitious responses to real job applications using Finnish and non-Finnish names to determine whether an interview would be offered to applicants with identical qualifications found that employers preferred candidates with Finnish surnames, while ethnic candidates were further ranked according to perceived cultural closeness (Ahmad, 2020; Koskela, 2019).

Active labour market policies play a strong supportive role in migrants' labour market integration, but also restricts and channels migrants in sorting their available options. In Finland, the state delivers labour market integration services through local and municipal employment offices (TE-offices). Official integration services are provided free of charge to migrants registered as unemployed job seekers within 3 years of arrival in Finland. The official integration programme is a package of services that includes an initial assessment, individual integration plan, Finnish and Swedish language courses, and labour market skills training. Integration training runs for up to 3 or 5 years (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). Asylum seekers and migrants with a temporary residential status such as students and seasonal workers do not have access to official integration services even when most eventually join the labour market (Ndomo, 2020; Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019; Maury, 2017). Nonetheless, despite the top-down policy assumption that migrants are subjects to '*be integrated*', our analysis suggests that the central actor is the migrant, who strategises around labour market opportunities presented by the labour market and by state integration services.

Generally, agency is the capability to exert some degree of control over the conditions and circumstances of one's life, exploit available opportunities, and open new possibilities (Barnes, 2000; Sewell, 1992). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have argued that a nuanced take on agency focusing on its discrete components allows for a better understanding of agency-structure interplay, coining the term disaggregated agency. In their seminal work Emirbayer and Mische (1998) focus on the temporal embeddedness of agency, disaggregating three temporal orientations: the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative (*ibid.*, 971). However, in this chapter we apply Cindi Katz's framework of 'disaggregated agency', which is

based on a three-step typology of material social responses to perceived oppressive and unequal power relations (Katz, 2004). In Katz, the three broad forms of social action – resilience, reworking, and resistance – are treated as different manifestations of human agency. Katz’s theory of disaggregated agency links concrete social practices to varying degrees of consciousness of prevailing life conditions. Thus, every agentic response derives from the actor’s level of awareness of their life conditions and the power relations that shape their life. These range from limited consciousness for resilience, on one hand, and oppositional counterhegemonic consciousness for resistance, on the other, while reworking falls in the middle (*ibid.*, 250).

This framework underscores the possibility for differential responses by individuals exposed to similar structural contexts of hegemonic power relations e.g. migrants in a host country labour market. Katz’s theory also spotlights the diverse outcomes of agentic social action, which include survival (resilience), reconfiguration (reworking), and subversion (resistance) (2004, 242). Katz defines resilience as a determination to survive within oppressive conditions, enforced through a myriad of tactics on a daily basis. Datta et al. (2007) identify resilience tactics among migrants, such as working two jobs in low wage occupations in the UK. Reworking practices are strategies for reconfiguring the self and rerouting resources to favour one’s position and make living conditions more comfortable, albeit within the confines of oppressive power relations. Lastly, resistance describes strongly oppositional practices whose goal is to re-imagine and reconstruct unequal and oppressive power relations (Katz, 2004).

We assert that while agency is analytically useful, there is a danger in the normative tendency of migration research to celebrate ‘granting’ agency to migrant workers. Agency does not, in itself, contest or remove unequal power relations and can, as our analysis shows, just as well serve to reinforce them. Classical migration theories focus on rationality in decision-making as an exercise of agency (Massey, 1999). Neoclassical labour migration theories expand this view by including the collective role of the family in the decision-making process (Abrego, 2014), while critical migration theories develop the idea of ‘constrained agency’ mediated by social networks and structure (Hellman, 2008). The idea that agency also allows resilience, and resistance in the face of unequal, oppressive, and contingent labour market relations further helps us understand migrants’ coping strategies and survival tactics – understood though as acts of ‘*resistance*’ (see; Datta et al., 2007; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). Finally, there is the idea of collective resistance that offers the possibility to change economic and social relations and redefine migrants’ structural position in the labour market through collective action (Paret & Gleeson, 2016). Agency is in itself value-neutral; Katz’s resilience, reworking, and resistance are as likely to buttress, mediate, or mitigate systems of unequal power relations as to challenge them (Berntsen, 2016). We regard migrant agency as both an enabler and a barrier to the labour market integration processes of biographically-diverse migrant groups to the growing field of research on migrant agency and migrant integration.

## 7.3 Methodology

### 7.3.1 Data and Methods

The chapter is based on 11 biographical narrative accounts of four refugees and seven other migrants who arrived in Finland between 2010 and 2015 and were still living in Finland at the time of the interview. All participants are actively involved with the Finnish labour market as employed workers, unemployed job seekers, or vocational trainees with intermittent short-term employment. The interviews were conducted between January and May 2020 and as a result, our data does not reflect COVID related impacts on migrant labour. The study was part of a larger multidimensional empirical research project on the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum applicants in European labour markets implemented between January 2018 and July 2021. The project includes six separate but interrelated qualitative research studies, involving key migration stakeholders in Finland. All six studies have focused on the labour market integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum applicants in Finland. Each study approaches the topic from a different standpoint, namely: labour market structure, legal, policy, civil society, social partners, and migrants' perspective. The analysis and findings of this chapter are grounded in this larger body of data and multi-sectoral analysis of migrant labour market integration in Finland.

Seven of the interviewees were men and four were women. Interview respondents were of Ghanaian, Nigerian, Russian, Somali, Syrian, and Indian nationalities, satisfactorily covering the main third-country national migrant groups living in Finland. The youngest had migrated to Finland at the age of 17 and the oldest at 50. All participants had at least secondary education, and seven held university-level degrees. Respondents were recruited in Helsinki, the Finnish capital, and Jyväskylä, a small city in central Finland, through selective sampling and snowball techniques. Participant recruitment, interviews, and data storage and management followed the ethical guidelines of the University of Jyväskylä, and the ethical board of the SIRIUS project. QDA Miner qualitative data analysis software was used to organise, code, and thematically categorise data. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants.

The biographical research approach (BRA) as a form of social enquiry foregrounds social action and the role of human agency in social life, thus allowing a reading into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, and the inner and outer worlds (Merrill & West, 2009, 17). In this research, BRA allowed combining 'agency' and 'biography' as key theoretical and analytical constructs in the study of human lives. The main interest of the interviews were the critical events (*turning points*) in the migrant's life course that influenced current decisions made (*epiphanies*) regarding work and labour market integration in general (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We thematically analysed critical life-changing events tied to labour market entry and work life using the three dimensions of agency. This research is grounded in a theoretical frame that uses a combination of the

**Table 7.1** Profiles of interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Year of migration
Ahmad	36	Male	Syria	2015
Elvis	40	Male	Ghana	2013
Fred	35	Male	India	2013
Gordon	30	Male	Nigeria	2014
Ismail	22	Male	Somali	2015
Jeff	37	Male	Ghana	2014
Judith	56	Female	Russia	2014
Kadar	28	Male	Somali	2015
Marina	35	Female	Russia	2010
Melina	45	Female	Russia	2015
Rahaf	28	Female	Syria	2015

biographical interpretive concepts of life-changing events (turning points), embedded life lessons (epiphanies), and disaggregated agency as interpretive lenses.

In the dialogical process of research, a researcher is positioned by their biography, and that position can enable or inhibit the research through power dynamics (England, 1994, 248). Our research design carefully considered both positionality and power relations especially in data collection and reflexivity in analysis. Therefore, a team of five conducted the research: the authors and three research assistants of migrant backgrounds, recruited from a higher education integration programme (INTEGRA) at the University of Jyväskylä. This combination of ‘experienced knowledge’ and ‘expert knowledge’ was seen as useful especially for interpretation and for intersubjective interaction in data collection (Denzin, 1998, 325) (Table 7.1).

### 7.3.2 *Integration Actors in Focus*

Besides participants’ biographical narratives, this research is grounded in a large body of empirical data that includes other central actors shaping the integration process as resources that cut across the micro, meso, and macro dimensions of migrant integration. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on a narrow set of actors including the individual migrants, immediate family, friends and ethnic community members, educational and training institutions, and state-level policies or integration support mechanisms. Availability, access, and utility of these resources differ across participants.

At the micro level, personal resilience applies to all 11 participants. However, participants rely on family, friends, and ethnic community members differentially based on whether that resource exists at all and whether that resource is present in Finland or absent. Where participants do not refer to family, friends, or ethnic communities as a resource, the category is excluded. At the meso level, we focus on education and training institutions due to their central role in integration of

migrants in Finland, including provision of labour market-targeted skills and a link between migrants and employers or the labour market at large. Participants experience this resource differently based largely on structural variations such as type of institution, access to institution, and specific institutional migrant integration practices. As at the interview time, four participants attended research universities and another four attend vocational training institutes. Vocational training institutes provide more industry-targeted skills as well as links to labour market as compared to research universities. Lastly, at the macro level, we focus on the state-sponsored integration programme and nationwide skill profiling through allocation of resources for these programmes. Table 7.2 summarises the contribution of policies, educational programmes, and personal relationships to each participant's integration experience.

### **7.3.3 *Structure of the Paper***

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. The next section presents a three-part data analysis, illuminating how migrant agency manifests in the labour market integration processes of 11 migrants (including four refugees). The analysis explores key life events and lessons that shape participants' insertion in the Finnish labour market within the first 10 years. Analysis is divided into three phases, each using one dimension of agency as the analytical lens. Phase 1 addresses seeking and finding the first job using resilience as the analytical lens. Phase 2 looks at attempts towards work and career mobility through the analytical lens of reworking. Phase 3 explores participants' future career plans through the analytical lens of resistance. The final section presents a summary of research findings and ends the chapter with concluding remarks.

## **7.4 Migrants in the Finnish Job Market**

The time of initial entry into a host country labour market typically coincides with multiple inescapable changes in the lives of migrants. Changes in legal status, family composition, social networks, and other changes in the life course affect migrants' labour market integration experience and trajectory directly or indirectly. Further, migrants must also contend with the effects of the new labour market structures on their job search and career progression. In Finland, this includes contending with labour market segmentation practices that steer migrants toward secondary market jobs, while discouraging and obstructing primary market job ambitions (cf. Ahmad, 2015). For instance, eight of 11 participants initially entered the Finnish labour market through low status occupations as drivers, postal workers, and caterers. Considering participants' biographical diversity, we ask how participants cope with unequal and oppressive labour market practices and how such practices impact



**Table 7.2** Typology of actors and factors

Research participants	Personal/friends/family (micro)	Educational/ raining institutions (meso)	State policies/support (macro)
Ahmad	Personal resilience (+)/friends (+).	Targeted skill training (+) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (+)
Elvis	Personal resilience (+)/friends (-)/wife & children (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Fred	Personal resilience(+)/friends (-)/wife & child (+)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Gordon	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (-)/ friends (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (+)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Ismail	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (-)/ friends (-)	Targeted skill training (+) Link to job market (+)	Official integration Programme (+)
Jeff	Personal resilience (+)/friends (-)/wife (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Judith	Personal resilience (+)/friends (+)/husband (-)		Official integration Programme (+). Skill profiling mechanism (+)
Kadar	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (-)/ friends (+)	Targeted skill training (+) Link to job market (+)	Official integration Programme (+)
Marina	Personal resilience (+)/husband & children (-)		Official integration Programme (+). Skill profiling mechanism (+)
Melina	Personal resilience (+)/husband (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (+). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Rahaf	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (+)/friends (+)/husband & children (+)		Official integration Programme (+). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)

their labour market insertion. Drawing on Katz (2004), we explore the variety of material social practices participants draw on to cope with entering and working in an unequal, segmented labour market whilst adjusting to other changes related to migration.

### 7.4.1 *Phase 1: Resilience – Finding and Keeping the First Job*

The first job is crucial to a migrant's labour market integration trajectory, especially in a segmented labour market. Early research has shown that finding a first job presents a bigger challenge for women and non-EU migrants in EU labour markets compared to maintaining a job (Ouali & Rea, 1999). Participants experienced seeking and executing the first job in Finland very differently, mainly because of biographical differences and also individual legal status and the consequential access or lack of access to official integration services. Our analysis does not show that the integration outcomes of those who participated in the official integration programme was better than those who did not. However, the official integration programs clearly patterned participants' degree of reliance on resilience tactics and reworking strategies as explored in this phase and Phase 2 of the data analysis. Age differences, civil status, level of education, legal status, prior work experience, and career advancement influenced participants' experience with the first job in Finland. Nonetheless, the first jobs of both participant groups relied on official integration services, while those integrating individually were disproportionately concentrated in archetypical migrant work in elementary occupations and the service industry. Specifically, eight of 11 participants secured their first job in Finland in elementary occupations including driving and delivering goods, distributing newspapers, and assisting in food preparation. Further, for a majority of eight participants, the first job engendered downward career and social mobility, exacerbated by labour market segmentation practices. An emergent pattern of response by the group of eight to the first job was to '*accept and rationalise*', while individual participants adopted more nuanced coping tactics such as instrumental rationalisation and dual-frame referencing.

***Instrumental Rationalisation: Accepting 'the Bad First Job'*** For eight participants, the first job in Finland was degrading, challenging, and unsustainable. It also served as the first turning point event of participants' labour market integration journey, which began with job seeking. Based on their first job, participants immediately learnt a key lesson about migrant labour market integration in Finland: that there are specific jobs migrants can access and they must accept that. As a result, participants constructed the reality of '*the bad first job*' as the inevitable first step towards realising their migration objective. Participants employed diverse instrumental reasons to aid acceptance of '*the bad first job*'. We classify them into two categories: one, practical (economic) reasons; and, two, strategic reasons tied to individual migration and integration agenda. On practical economic reasons, participants without access to welfare support (for instance, international students) explained that the first job was only a way to make ends meet. Others with access to welfare support accepted jobs for reasons such as compliance with the individual integration plan, which is enforced partly by the unemployment office and is therefore tied to welfare support administration.

I did a mini job – I don't know what to call it – distributing adverts and newspapers. That was my first job in Finland. . . I needed money. It's always money, right? I needed money for upkeep and survival, for food and stuff like that. So, I needed a job and that was the easiest job you could find at that time. *Gordon (migrant)*

Participants accepted the 'the bad first job' as a means to an end and a 'normal' step in the integration process. However, we argue that the inevitability of these jobs was partly socially constructed by participants who sometimes specifically sought these types of jobs or accepted them as a manoeuvre tactic in response to experienced labour market integration challenges. Acceptance of 'the bad first job' is seen as 'epiphanic' because the decision is preceded by concrete lived experiences through which participants understood the operations of the Finnish labour market, as well as their realistic integration potential within Finland. Accepting 'the bad first job' is a compromise resulting from weighting alternative realities, guided by the logic of instrumental rationalisation. Still, instrumental rationalisation processes vary among participants according to biographical characteristics such as legal status and age. Following the instrumental rationalisation logic, we argue that accepting the first job is a tactic that affords participants the resources of money, time, networks, and awareness/consciousness. When combined these resources can enable participants to cognitively validate and accept their present experiences in a bad job and also provide a springboard for some to move from the first job into a different, preferably better, job. The following excerpt tracks the initial agentic social response process of a single participant in the context of migrant labour market insertion.

*Start:* 'Coming to Finland, I knew that I had good capabilities, a good CV and my international certifications – PMP and CISA which was quite a force. I also read from *'this is Finland'* and other websites that many companies in Finland operate in English as well and many people in Finland spoke English. So, I was quite confident that I could continue practicing in Finland as I did in Ghana. So, I got my tools and came to Finland expecting to continue from where I stopped in Ghana'.

*Turning point:* 'I went around visiting companies looking for contracts and could not find a job. Because most of the companies mentioned the language limitation as the reason for not employing me, I decided to stop trying to find employment and instead find a professional development unit (PDU) to join to keep my certifications valid. So, I contacted my university, and they did not have any project to involve me in. I also contacted some IT companies LINKI and NAVA and explained that I was just looking for a chance to keep using my CISA'.

*Epiphany:* 'Then after walking around for a while without finding the work I wanted, also not getting a PDU, I decided to take any work available. Trying to take care of my family with small kids and trying to avoid depleting my savings, I decided to take on any job I could get here. I started distributing papers. Whilst doing this, I was also thinking about trying to develop as good a transcript and as good skill as possible so that by chance I finish my masters and the Finnish companies see my school performance and the skills I have developed, they could reconsider and give me something to do'. *Elvis (migrant)*

***Dual Frame of Reference: Accepting 'the Bad First Job'*** As has been seen elsewhere (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003; Piore, 1979), some of our participants employed a dual frame of reference as a rationalisation technique. They compared wages, working conditions, precarity, and formal institutional labour relations and their implementation in Finland to those in their country of origin. Several

participants made general references to work in Finland and at the country of origin in their narratives; however, only two evaluated work in Finland as generally better than work at the country of origin with regard to ‘the bad first job’. Our findings show that age and past work experience influenced who applied the dual frame of reference and not the relative socio-economic status of the compared countries, underscoring the emphasis of the biographical approach on agency’s role in social action. Of all participants, eight are from Global South countries, yet only two notably young participants without established careers prior to migration employed the dual frame of reference tactically to accept ‘the bad first job’.

For instance, Kadar works in the Finnish restaurant sector, where his own experience, as well as prior research, document informal market practices and segmentation, especially in reference to migrant workers. Kadar’s dual frame rationalisation is notably general.

Working in [Somalia] Africa is different, there; your employer pays you what he wants. Sometimes you work for about 18 hours and are paid only 150 dollars a month. Working in Finland is different; it is good to work here. They pay good salaries. If everything is okay, working here is really good. *Kadar (refugee)*

#### **7.4.2 Phase 2: Reworking for Career and Work Mobility**

Consciousness of our daily condition and the underlying power relations develops over time and variably among people (Katz, 2004). Individuals facing similar problems can develop varying degrees of consciousness and engage in varying responses as well. Levels of consciousness, which can range from limited recognition of oppressive power relations to critical oppositional consciousness, determine individuals’ practical responses. Reworking as an agentic social act among our research participants is epiphanic since the awareness that a particular condition limits integration derives from experience, as does knowledge of suitable strategies to manoeuvre such barriers. The need to rework is learnt from experience. After searching, finding, and doing their first jobs, participants understood the Finnish labour market to a degree, especially the barriers and enablers to integration. Here, differences in understanding can be attributed partly to the involvement of the employment office in the integration processes of some participants.

‘The bad first job’ experience cultivated a critical consciousness among participants and motivated them to adjust their (power) position as workers in Finland. Reworking involves making one’s life liveable with reasonable comfort despite oppressive and unequal underlying power relations. As such, reworking strategies often involve reforming one’s own capacities to leverage prevailing conditions rather than changing the ‘system’. Participants’ growing and urgent need to escape difficult and unsustainable jobs and downward mobility marked a key turning point. In response, they designed and executed strategies to improve their status as prospective employees for various fields of expertise. Influenced by biographical

differences, participants employed reworking strategies in three focal areas: reskilling, skill repackaging, and skill showcasing. Our analysis finds that participants engaged in reworking to reclaim control of their migration and integration trajectories after a perceived threat during the initial labour market insertion. In their reworking strategies, a dichotomy emerges between the practices of the group receiving official integration assistance and the group receiving no assistance, with the former focusing more on reworking for horizontal mobility, while the latter sought upward cross-sector mobility.

***Reskilling: Targeted Education and Education*** Skill training is a key reworking strategy for upward career mobility among our participants. This finding is consistent with migration policy discourses that highlight the significance of skills in labour market integration in Finland (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019) and corroborates Heikkilä's (2005) account of the highly educated Finnish workforce. However, concrete differences emerge in the ways that participants with access to official integration services and those who are individually integrating engage in reskilling. Individually-integrating participants operate freely within and across fields of expertise to reinforce their skillsets, constrained only by legal status limitations and individual capabilities. On the other hand, the TE office guides the skill training choices of those participating in the official integration programme. For young refugees undergoing secondary and higher education in Finland such as Rahaf, language barriers limit career, vocational training, and tertiary education options further as Rahaf explains below.

The labour office must work out an integrated settlement plan for the immigrant from the moment they enter Finland to include language proficiency level, study area etc. As at now, they have a plan, but it is too simple. If a person wants to work in their profession, they have no place because they [TE office] decide the opportunities that a migrant can access. Even the Finnish language courses we attend cannot qualify the immigrant to enter the university or to complete their dream courses. *Rahaf (refugee)*

Participants engaged robust reworking strategies through skill training to manoeuvre the barriers between the primary and secondary Finnish labour markets. One such strategy is training specifically in high-demand skills. Using this method, a migrant first studies the labour market skill demands and the hiring patterns of specific industries, then trains in the identified skills. Such training is often supplementary to previous studies – or entirely different from initial field of expertise. According to two of our participants, training is pursued outside conventional academic institutions because of a perceived mismatch between academic institutions' curricula vis à vis labour market skill needs. Skill training organised by companies match industrial demands, and are better, shorter, and less bureaucratic.

Jeff is the poster child of this reworking strategy. Failure to secure a job in his area of expertise in Finland based on experience and training in Ghana and a master's degree in IT from Finland marked a turning point. An epiphany followed. Finnish academia is at odds with Finnish industry and academic institutions do not produce the skills employers demand, resulting in poor employment outcomes. Thus, to move from a newspaper delivery job to a data engineer job, Jeff designed his own

integration strategy, which spanned 2 years and was self-funded and thus implemented alongside menial jobs for material support. He modelled his skill training around Finnish IT companies' skill portfolios and hiring trends. When relevant courses were not available in Finland, he pursued international professional certification programmes online at his own cost. Today, after more than 5 years, Jeff finally made the transition to a primary labour market job as a data engineer for an IT company in Finland. However, the success and the 'ease' of Jeff's implementation of this reworking model is misleading as it glosses over issues central to its success, such as continuous learning opportunities specific to Finland.

...at the end of the day, it all depends on your personal preparation for the job. Preparing yourself for the technology that whichever company you are targeting uses at the time. So, the thing is that probably while still studying you have to start preparing yourself for the processes that the companies go through, the things that they produce, instead of depending on school because the sad thing is that you get your tuition from school, but they don't teach practical things that the companies' need. . .There is a huge gap between what is taught in the university and what the companies are actually practicing'. Jeff (migrant)

Paradoxically, while migrants such as Jeff who do not receive official integration assistance may manage significant leaps across sectors, refugees like Kadar, a young Somali, are limited by the official integration programme and can apply only moderate strategies for horizontal work mobility. The integration practices and systems of the TE office and secondary educational and vocational institutions in Finland restrain Kadar's integration pathways (cf. Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). He follows an integration plan, which is based on an assessment of his academic abilities, language, and labour market skill needs. As part of the integration plan, Kadar completed a six-month internship as a food preparation assistant at a restaurant and has worked at the same restaurant for another year. At work, Kadar faces discrimination and worker exploitation, marking a turning point in his integration journey. However, Kadar's room for reskilling manoeuvre differs from Jeff's. Kadar must rework within the scope of his individual integration plan, developed at the beginning of his integration. Already placed in the restaurant sector by his integration plan, his goal is to transition from working in immigrant-owned restaurants with poor working conditions to Finnish-owned restaurants, which require professional qualification obtained in Finland as he explains below. Thus training to be a chef, Kadar's strategy is to be able to work in a restaurant of his own choosing, not limited by his formal qualifications and the associated politics of recognition.

I have worked in many foreigner-owned restaurants and in pizza delivery services. They still call me for more work, but I am tired of working long hours with little payments. I have worked for long hours, which Kela cannot know because it is hidden in opening and closing time. I have worked 12 or 13 hours to earn an insignificant amount of salary. You get very tired; you cannot do anything; you cannot manage to go to school the next morning. But in Finnish firm you are required to work for 8 hours. Now I am waiting to finish my school, then I find a good job with a good salary. *Kadar (refugee)*

***Skill Repackaging: Certification/Authorisation*** As a reworking strategy, certification focuses on redirecting and rebranding the resources that an individual already has in line with the normative expectations of the host country labour market. It

includes following formal procedures to acquire recognised qualification in the host country in a specific field of practice. It also includes authorising foreign qualifications. Certification/authorisation provides a way to work around statistical discrimination in recruitment. In Finland, certification procedures that involve taking tests in the Finnish language present an obstacle for migrants seeking to have qualifications officialised in specific fields. Of all 11 participants, two directly engaged in the certification process, while a third considered undertaking the process. Judith completed the recognition process of her teaching qualifications obtained in Russia and should be able to use the qualifications for future job-seeking. Like Judith, Marina attempted to authorise her foreign professional qualification for use in Finland. Foreigners qualified as doctors outside the EU/EEA must authorise their foreign qualifications through a procedure outlined by the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira). Conditions for licensing include a combination of internship, clinical practice, Finnish language proficiency, and a licensing exam in Finnish.

After completing and passing the Finnish language course of the TE office, Marina began work practice at a local hospital as the first step towards her licensing. Insufficient discipline-specific Finnish proficiency, coupled with family responsibilities, led to a catastrophic internship experience and inability to take the licensing exam. Unlike Judith, Marina did not succeed in becoming a licenced and practicing doctor in Finland.

It was too difficult to combine work, study, and home. The children were quite small, three- and seven-year-olds. I tried to concentrate on the exam so that after passing it I could have my diploma confirmed but didn't feel confident. *Marina (migrant)*

Although her first reworking attempt – to have her foreign certificates recognised – was unsuccessful, Marina pursued an additional reworking strategy successfully. Trained in a high-demand skill in Finland, Marina is one of three participants who did not undergo ‘the first bad job’ experience in the secondary sector. The failed internship experience became the turning point in her integration journey. Her experience taught her that she simply could not practice as a doctor in Finland. Therefore, considering the magnitude of the language and commitment demands of the medical licensing procedure, Marina pursued an alternative reworking path: re-skilling (epiphany). A career demotion to a practical nursing position allowed her to practice in her field of interest with significantly lower language demands and simultaneously manage her family responsibilities. The strategy of self-demotion allows Marina to redirect her resources as a healthcare professional, with manageable conditions both at work and at home.

I decided to work as a nurse, as I cannot imagine how one can work as a doctor not knowing the language on a good level, not even good, on an excellent level. A patient can lose his trust if his doctor's speech is a kind of illogical. Then I was too afraid when working in hospital to miss some important information and make a mistake. It happened a few times that I thought I understood something well, but I didn't, as a result I gave wrong information and all such cases made me nervous and non-confident, so I decided to try myself in the sphere of caring. *Marina (migrant)*

***Skill Showcasing*** The bulk of the reworking strategies of participants seeking to change or modify fields of expertise (such as Marina) and those seeking to acquire professional qualifications for the first time (such as Kadar) consist of learning, training, or authorisation exams – or all. However, three participants seeking only the chance to continue practicing in their professional fields of expertise based on prior education and work experience used reworking strategies to showcase their skills and capabilities. Finnish employers, like employers around the globe, use internships and short fixed-term employment contracts to access, evaluate, and recruit skilled workers. However, migrants’ access to such opportunities in Finland is limited. The epiphany of the need to creatively show Finnish employers their skills and capabilities derived from the three participants’ futile experiences of seeking a first job in their fields of expertise.

To gain initial access to Finnish employers in their respective fields, Elvis, Fred, and Gordon sought to improve the visibility of their skills and capabilities as experts to Finnish employers. Central to their strategies was negotiation, where the migrant takes on an onerous, and sometimes financially costly, initiative to ensure that potential employers see their skills, unobstructed by structural or cultural barriers. In 2014, a leading IT consultancy in Finland declined to hire Elvis as an intern because of poor Finnish language skills. A few months later, the company offered him the same opportunity on different terms: do the same work, without pay, as a master’s thesis project in English. Seeing an opportunity to demonstrate his capabilities to a potential future employer, Elvis accepted the job.

Fred was frustrated with his precarious employment consisting of a series of two-month contracts and sought employment security when he signed up for a hackathon in his field of expertise. It presented an opportunity to show his skills to target employers or investors. Although he won the hackathon, Fred was unable to reach an employment or sale agreement with an interested company in a process that was complicated by legal status limitations and potentially exploitative unequal power relations of industry negotiations, patents, and copyrights. Lastly, Gordon, a Nigerian international student in Finland, developed a portfolio of freelance online work completed for clients based in Western countries such as the US, referencing that in job applications and at interviews to showcase his skills and abilities.

Before my current job, I had worked as freelance software developer online, with clients from the US. So that was the work experience which I used to get jobs, even though I had no real physical workplace experience. I did the freelance work on the side during the time I did the newspaper delivery work because... I wasn’t satisfied with where I was then, so I kept looking and searching for work. *Gordon (migrant)*

By accepting unpaid work for a target employer, developing a prototype in the presence of potential employers at a hackathon, and building a portfolio through freelance work online, participants directly and indirectly attempted to reconfigure their labour market conditions by showcasing their skills and capabilities to overcome statistical discrimination. However, there is also a strong potential for such strategies to result in exploitation by employers who find they can get job seekers to do useful work without having to pay them for it. This underscores the self-



reinforcing nature of precariousness and vulnerability among migrants in the labour market and the potential of migrant agency to reinforce unequal and exploitative labour relations in an environment where the employer has a strong power advantage.

Determining the success of reworking among our research participants is challenging especially because the common reworking strategy involves reskilling, which spans long and variable periods among individuals. Participants may also alter and revise reworking strategies mid-process, making it difficult to demarcate the beginning and end of reworking or tangibly evaluate such processes. However, below, we analyse Elvis's encounter with reworking further, as it illustrates plausible progression from reworking to resistance on the grounds of re-imagining and reconstructing one's migration trajectory through outmigration.

### ***7.4.3 Phase 3: Resistance – Where Do Migrants Draw the Line?***

Our interviewees' stories emphasise the need to endure and adapt, but for some comes a revelation that the sacrifices they make do not necessarily lead anywhere they want to go; a first bad job is one thing, but a lifetime of them another. Realisation of the structural factors inhibiting labour market success arrives slowly because of the normative seductiveness of the ideology of adaptation and resilience. One interviewee used the parable of the toad in boiling water to explain how the system itself undermines resistance since by the time the migrant realises the situation, it is too late, as all his or her energy has gone into adapting and being resilient.

Once upon a time lived a toad with a special yet tricky ability to adapt to life threatening change. When in danger, the toad could transform its outer skin into a hard shell for protection while buying time for escape. However, to use the special ability effectively, the toad needed full understanding of the situation and incisive decision-making. One hot afternoon, the toad leapt into a pond to cool off; except the pond was not a pond, but a pot half filled with water for someone's afternoon tea. The pot was put on fire and soon the toad noticed that the pond was heating up. Aware of its special ability, the toad decided to wait it out while assessing the situation, hoping that the pond would cool down again soon. However, the toad's special ability is only an emergency survival mechanism that is unsustainable for long periods. To turn its skin into a hard shell and sustain it that way, the toad uses up a lot of its energy, and if it sustains the mechanism for a long time, it eventually runs out of energy, becomes unable to jump out of the pond into safety, or sustain the hard-shell protection. After about seven minutes, the toad started feeling the heat from the water meaning that it could no longer sustain the hard shell. Paradoxically, the moment the toad realised that the only solution was to jump out of the pond, was also the time it did not have any energy left in it. In the end, the toad died inside the pot. But what killed the toad? *Elvis (migrant)*

The toad parable makes clear why resistance is the rarest of the three material social practices of agency (Katz, 2004, 251); our findings also reflect this. For the purpose

of this analysis, we define resistance narrowly as strategic acts of individual migrants aimed at reconstructing or re-imagining the migrant's world, potential, and possibilities. Our definition waters down the counterhegemonic and strong oppositional elements of conventional resistance as practiced in industrial relations to reflect the limitations within which participants operate, without entirely excluding their potential for resistance. To understand how certain acts by migrants and refugees qualify as resistance, we begin by demarcating the additional boundaries within which migrants operate in the labour market and how those configure their potential for acts of resistance.

Industrial relations overemphasise the role of unions and organised class-based resistance to migrants (Penninx & Roosblad, 2000). Union membership and the protection it offers through workplace regulation are important to migrants' ability to resist exploitive conditions, but collective organised resistance of migrants *as migrant workers* is completely absent from our data – and almost unknown in the Finnish context. Finnish unions, which are almost entirely staffed and run by Finns, dominate the space of organised workplace resistance, channelling it in a class- or profession-based way, as defined by their Finnish staff and members (Baglioni et al., 2020). In any case, most of our interviewees' grievances were about not getting the jobs they wanted in the first place. Unions recognise the problem that migrants are often under-employed, but structurally do not see themselves as positioned to address this issue (Baglioni et al., 2020). A cleaner's trade union, for example, can represent a migrant cleaner to receive his fair salary as a cleaner, but has no standing to fight for his fair chance to be hired as a computer programmer. In the Finnish context, unlike in many countries, the former problem is less acute for most migrants (admittedly this is because of the omnipresent union organisation), while the latter problem is experienced to a greater or lesser degree by every one of our interviewees.

Nine participants were either unemployed or in short-term precarious employment in sectors outside their areas of expertise, which also undermined the extent of their organisation through trade unions. Similar to Berntsen (2016), we find that individual migrants can, and do, engage in resistance, albeit rarely and in muted variations. Drawing on the evolution of Elvis's reworking trajectory and Rahaf's oppositional stance on acculturation, we illustrate how migrants mount individual opposition against hegemonic labour market recruitment and employer practices.

***Outmigration or Staying: Acting on Own Terms?*** Focused on leveraging his professional capabilities, skills, and potential as an expert in information systems, Elvis constantly searched for employment that matched his qualifications with limited success. In 2014, Elvis had a major epiphanic turning point experience that would later shape his critical stance on migrant labour market integration in Finland and his decision to seek outward migration. Elvis recognised the internship opportunity mentioned earlier as an unequal and exploitive powerplay by the company, but thinking he could reroute circumstances in his favour, nonetheless accepted the offer and completed the assignment. Five years later, however, Elvis's employment trajectory still falls short of his expectations, triggering the following revelation: the Finnish labour market operates on an underlying structure of unequal exclusive

power relations between Finnish employers and institutions, on the one hand, and ethnic migrants, on the other. Thus, in others' footsteps, Elvis has decided to join a growing group of highly skilled migrants leaving Finland because of lack of professional opportunities. Prior research shows a growing trend of European brain drain through outmigration by highly educated persons (Panagiotakopoulos, 2020). Although migrating out of a host country may not directly change the existing unequal labour market power relations, it represents the strongest oppositional statement a migrant can make against the backdrop of a 'staying' tendency. Further, reference to acts of previous actors implies the element of 'a movement' and its accumulative potential to influence direct and large-scale change in the future.

I want to complete my PhD this year and move on. My first choice would be to have a post doc position outside Finland in an English-speaking country since, first, I think the language and, two, the perception about migrants, or I think – my ability to deliver or be in a skilled job e.g., at a manager level or a mid-management position won't happen here. So, I would rather look for places where I have seen black people in managerial positions in consultancies. Because then I know that I could have a levelled ground to be what I want to be. Another reason why I want to move away from Finland is that I have seen friends with families, with children here. Children born to migrants here do not get to live to be what they want to be. It's either you do nursing or some vocation, which you do not even get to practice. So, as a father, I would not want to limit the options available to my kids. *Elvis (migrant)*

Rahaf's case of resistance against acculturation is similarly subtle, showing only the potential to affect the object of resistance indirectly at a future time. At present, Rahaf is undergoing the official integration programme's language training prior to vocational training, while previously she worked briefly as an Arabic teacher. Although her labour market experience is scarce, she gleans from the integration experiences of her husband and peers in skill training and employment that her future labour market integration prospects are dubious. She understands that refugees in Finland tend to work in the secondary sector as cleaners and chefs and train in limited vocational skill areas, guided by integration officials into specific occupations. Further, public discourse, and past studies (Ahmad, 2015, 2020) have shown that ethnicity influences migrant recruitment and employability in Finland, where potential employers negatively evaluate significantly distant cultural groups such as Rahaf's. Although conscious of this reality, Rahaf strongly rejects the suggestion to change her name to a Finnish-sounding one to improve her employability.

Many people advised us to change our names or some of our culture because our names are strange and that makes employers to not accept us. But no, we will not change and it's not only us...Is it reasonable to change my name in order to get a job when in my country I had a job that was better than good?...We may live here all our lives and the fact that our children will be raised here, we want to teach them a little from our culture, and during their living here, they will certainly learn from the Finnish culture. *Rahaf (refugee)*

Our analysis classifies this practice of social reproduction as resistance because it indirectly challenges a system that encourages discriminative employer practices based on ethnicity. Her stance indirectly opposes discrimination in the Finnish labour market. Although individually implemented, it has the potential for collective

impact. Both the anticipated and declared acts of the two participants show that although limited by their contingent existence, narrow set of rights, and precarious labour market position, migrants can and do engage in acts of resistance – albeit indirect, accumulative, and only as variations of normatively-defined resistance. As the parable about the toad makes clear, the reason why epiphanies resulting in resistance occur rarely, and after long experience, is the myth of possibilities for advancement held out by the idea of labour market integration through adaptability and resilience.

## 7.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter aimed at one goal; to problematise theorisation of the role of human agency in migration and migrant integration processes. To do this, the chapter focused on a specific case, unpacking how agency manifests in the labour market integration of 11 migrants (including four refugees) currently living in Finland and actively engaging the Finnish labour market as employed workers or unemployed job seekers. Theoretically, the chapter drew on a theory of agency as social action and used a dual framework combining agency and biography as drivers of integration as social action. The analysis used both thematic analysis and narrative analysis to look for alternative and counter narratives of agency and migrant integration. The analysis classified participants' integration into three phases – resilience, reworking, and resistance – based on both the dominant material social practice employed and the temporal phase of the integration process.

The key argument made, based on analysis, is that migrant agency can play a counterintuitive role in reinforcing exclusive integration practices in the Finnish labour market. Our analysis supports this argument by showing scenarios where overreliance on agency allows a shift of attention away from the structural factors that prevent migrants from succeeding in the labour market. For instance, we show that migrants draw most on restorative material social practices of resilience and not oppositional and disruptive acts of resistance. All participants engaged in acts of resilience such as accepting '*the bad first job*'; most reworked their circumstances through reskilling, for example, and at least two engaged in indirect, individual acts of resistance. This disaggregation of agentic social action allows us to show the link between agency and unequal power relations and make clear the implicit limitations of agency in challenging structurally-rooted barriers to labour integration. Reflecting on the nature of migrant agency, and on how agency allows migrants to adapt to the labour market of Finland, the chapter shows the dangers of reifying agency. Overemphasis obscures shortcomings of Finnish labour market practices and official integration services by assigning migrants responsibility for their own integration, which they only have limited ability to influence. Furthermore, in exercising their resilience and reworking strategies, migrants reinforce their own exclusion and precarity by indirectly reinforcing discriminatory labour market practices and structures.

A key sub-finding concerns how structure can mediate the function of migrant agency in the integration process. The chapter finds that the availability or non-availability of integration support affects the level of agency drawn on – for example, resilience, reworking, or resistance – and breaks down the implications for integration programme planning. The material social responses of the group participating in the official integration programme were bounded by its practices and discourses, making those acts final rather than instrumental. Conversely, non-participants who engaged instrumentally (in terms of means rather than ends) and freely, were limited only by individual capabilities. The latter group's strategies diverged from official integration discourse, for instance on reskilling and the importance of Finnish language skills. The dichotomy underscores three things: first, the significance of biography in migrant integration; second, the need to (re)-evaluate the match between migrants' integration objectives and official integration programmes; and third, the need to align the integration opportunities and paths of both groups.

Migrant 'agency' is increasingly put forward to emphasise the migrants' own role in shaping their own mobility and integration process. This helps us understand their ability to find their way through the dangers and barriers put in their way and avoid seeing them solely as passive victims of forces beyond their control. On the other hand, there is a danger in celebrating the presumed (and observed) migrant characteristics of adapting to and tolerating difficult conditions. We argue that as in the parable of the toad and the boiling water, the 'heating water' sector is where you will find most employed third-country nationals or where most will have their first job. The 'safe exterior of the pot' represents the other sector where natives tend to be employed and to which migrants aspire to escape. The danger is that they become used to the hot water. Accepting the need to be adaptive and tolerate difficult and unfair conditions is perhaps the only viable strategy for individual migrants, but this comes at a high cost to the individual migrant. Accepting a 'bad first job' is often a necessary and useful step in labour market integration, but even with this experience, the barriers segregating the Finnish labour market are high, and there is a danger of getting used to poor conditions of the secondary market – i.e., to stay in the heating water too long.

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# Chapter 8

## Migration to the Czech Republic: Personal Stories About Running *from* and Running *Towards*



Olga Gheorghiev and Dino Numerato

### 8.1 Labour Migration as a National Policy: An Introduction to the Czech Context

As a receiving country, the Czech Republic perfectly illustrates the model of international migration based on a set of push and pull factors linked to the economic disparity between itself and sending countries (Sassen-Koob, 1981). Given the significant labour shortage in the Czech market and the alleged demand of Czech companies for a foreign cheap labour force, economic migration, particularly from eastern European countries, is on the rise, thus creating conditions for economic exploitation (Mezzadra, 2011).

Studying the Czech Republic in the context of migration reveals important insights into how the state introduced mechanisms designed primarily to encourage an influx of cheap foreign labour, failing to account for migrants' broader societal integration and take into consideration basic needs such as access to healthcare services, schooling, and so on. Given the often-temporary nature of employment, the migrant contract worker is excluded from pathways towards citizenship or the benefits of permanent residence, while refugees and asylum seekers are confronted with various barriers in their attempts to integrate in the labour market. In this regard, it is important to mention that the analysis was conducted before the Russian war in Ukraine and it does not reflect potential long-lasting changes in migration governance resulting from current institutional responses to the new wave of refugees.

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The focus of this chapter is to highlight barriers as experienced by migrants themselves rather than to evaluate the efficiency or nature of integration policies. In this sense, the chapter dwells upon literature that does not necessarily focus on the normative dimension of integration policies that reflect an idealised projection of society or version of an integration process (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Instead, by taking the perspective of interviewed migrants as fundamental, it perceives integration as a process defined by a continuous assessment of barriers and opportunities.

The chapter's focus are micro perspectives expressed in individual trajectories within the context of meso- and macro-level structural conditions. Drawing on 14 in-depth biographic interviews with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (MRAs) conducted in the spring of 2020 in the Czech Republic, the chapter analyses biographies of integration in the labour market. Particular attention is given to critical moments or those critical life junctures we name turning points that generate epiphanic, life-changing experiences. This approach is inspired by Denzin's conceptualisation of epiphanies as 'moments of crisis' that 'alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life' (1989, 70).

The chapter is structured as follows. We first provide background information on barriers to labour market integration at *macro*, *meso*, and *micro* levels. Next, the chapter introduces the methodological approach and elaborates on the process of recruitment and interviewing. We then follow by discussing the various contexts in which turning points and epiphanic experiences were described by the interviewed migrants. More specifically, we explore the critical junctures that led our participants to the decision of migrating. Then, we focus on epiphanies related to positioning in terms of social status and professional aspirations and, finally, we look at the transformative impacts of social interactions structured by discrimination.

## 8.2 Socio-economic and Political Context: Integration Barriers at the *Macro*, *Meso*, and *Micro* Levels

Since 1990, the Czech Republic has been an immigration country with the main routes of immigration being from post-socialist countries and Vietnam (Drbohlav, 2016; Freidingerová, 2014). The country's little historical experience with migration coupled with historically record low unemployment rates<sup>1</sup> and significant labour shortages lead to a high predominance of economic migrants rather than refugees or asylum seekers. In a context in which a large number of businesses rely on an inflow of foreign workers, government policies promote a vision of migration as being primarily short-term and regulated according to the country's economic needs (see Czech Government, 2015). For comparison, at the end of 2019, before pandemic restrictions were implemented, the Czech government approved 9.6% of the 1400

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<sup>1</sup>Unemployment in the Czech Republic was 2.4 per cent in April 2022, the lowest among the EU-28 (Eurostat, 2022)

applications for international protection it received while having issued almost 130,000 work visas for third-country nationals. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the demand for foreign labour force remained high: at the end of 2020, the shortage of labour was expressed in the 337,453 job vacancies officially announced. Of these, 80 per cent were made available to workers from third countries with a focus on jobs requiring only low qualifications. In the case of 57.7 per cent of available jobs, employers asked only for primary education (Ministry of Industry and Commerce, 2020) and over 30 per cent of available vacancies referred to the occupational category of plant and machine operators and assemblers (*ibid.*). The nationals of Ukraine, Vietnam, and Russia accounted for almost three-quarters of all foreigners living in the Czech Republic (Czech Statistical Office, 2021).

Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and due to the size of Ukrainian diaspora, the Czech Republic ranks among the main countries of destination for fleeing persons. As a result of European's Commission decision to activate the Temporary Protection Directive, the Czech Republic implemented the directive into Act No. 65/2022 Coll. (the so-called *lex Ukraine*), which entered into force on 21 March 2022. Temporary protection allows its holders access to health insurance, access to the labour market, education, social support. As of June 2022, the Czech government granted temporary protection to 380,965 persons (Ministry of Interior, 2022). It remains difficult to assess the extent to which the welcoming response to the refugee wave from Ukraine will affect the Czech Republic's approach to migration governance and whether the positive shift in the public discourse will be permanent.

As of now, the integration of migrants in the Czech Republic remains hindered at macro, meso, and micro levels.

From a *macro* perspective, barriers to integration result from an instrumentalisation of economic migrants through technocratic and economic discourses that view migration as an opportunity to access cheap labour. This viewpoint has been commonly shared among employers and emerged as part of official policy documents, reproduced by most political parties as well as by some social partners in the Czech Republic (Hoření, 2019). At the same time, the social, personal, and familial needs of migrants are marginalised. Instead, state regulations adhere to the principles of routinisation and institutionalisation (see Aguilar, 1999) of international labour migration through specific visa regimes in place that are meant to supply businesses with workers on a fast track. This 'managed migration' (Waite, 2009) strategy directs migrants to sectors that are lacking workforce the most, such as manufacturing, which are often low-paid/low-status jobs where they will usually stay only for a limited period given the short-term nature of the visas they are offered. This routinisation is furthermore maintained by recruitment and temporary agencies, which managed to carve an important market niche and capitalise on immigrant labour (e.g. Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017).

Although the Czech Republic was little affected by it, the 2015 migration crisis animated a xenophobic discourse that framed migration in terms of national security (Čada & Frantová, 2019; Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, 2020). This discourse of hostility was reproduced in the programmes of certain political parties

and, furthermore, was reflected at the institutional level. Integration policy practices have often been based on the assumption that foreigners represent a potential threat to the Czech population and their presence should be strictly monitored (Čaněk, 2017). Although the institutional response to the migration wave from Ukraine was largely informed by a discourse defined by acts of solidarity, it remains unclear whether this shift in public opinion is long-lasting.

Barriers to labour market integration are further deepened due to the low accessibility of social and healthcare services as well as schooling (Hoření, 2019).

At the *organisational and institutional meso* level, MRAs encounter a number of administrative and bureaucratic barriers. First, although NGOs are key actors in MRAs' broader societal integration (Hoření et al., 2019), providing administrative, linguistic, legal, social, and employment counselling, their efforts are often dependent on limited funding schemes from the public administration and high demand for services beyond their capacities (Leontiyeva, 2020; Hoření et al., 2019). As a result, their counselling is primarily focused on basic material needs rather than on career development. Entrance to the labour market is also hindered by the complicated and costly process of skills or degree recognition, delegated mainly to universities or regional governments (Čada et al., 2018).

Second, in order to bypass certain legal and bureaucratic barriers, employers turn to specialised agencies and intermediaries to recruit migrant workers. While employers save time and effort on the paperwork, these strategies may have significant consequences on the financial and legal situation of migrants who find themselves in a vulnerable position. The narratives provided by migrants suggest a risk of exploitation by these agencies, initiated even in the pre-migrant stages and not occasionally resulting in indebtedness and dependency. Most recruitment agencies that migrants from eastern Europe contact are managed by their co-nationals. Their contact is almost always provided by someone in the migrant's social networks. Alternatively, they search for contacts and work offers on social media, in groups used for sharing information and exchanging experiences (see, for example, the group 'Moldovans in the Czech Republic' on Facebook).

The role played by communities reveals barriers to labour market integration at the *micro* level. Recruiters are found in the migrants' own communities and such informal transactions of money and job opportunities prevent any official bodies, such as labour inspectorates, from intervening when abuses occur (Gheorghiev et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, faced with challenges resulting in particular from a non-immediate applicability of language skills and a weakening of cultural and human capital in the country of destination, MRAs are often forced to rely on community networks. Although this happens in particular during the first stages of settlement, the structural and cultural dependence on ethnic communities can become permanent and lead to ethnic enclaves and limited integration (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Mazzucato, 2008). At the same time, although they represent an important source of information and reassurance in situations of uncertainty, copying the strategies of more 'experienced' migrants can often result in following the same path that leads to precarious employment. In a context determined by structural constraints, however, the reliance on one's community for work opportunities is a risk many are willing to take.

### 8.3 In-Depth Interviews: The Methodological Approach

This chapter relies on the analytical tools of biographical analysis and adopts the migrants' perspective when identifying the crucial moments that led them to changes of course in their journey. The analysis focuses on subjective experiences, aspirations, expectations, and behaviours of interviewed MRAs.

The recruitment process began with contacting various gatekeepers who come into contact with migrants through Czech language classes, legal assistance, or more complex asylum services. Among the contacted organisations were the Multicultural Centre Prague, the Integration Centre in Prague, the Integration Centre in Brno, the CMAO, La Strada, Diaconia, and the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Czech Ministry of the Interior (RFA). Given the specificities of the Czech Republic as a host country, the sample we targeted was expected to include a significant number of economic migrants from third countries and complemented by refugees and asylum seekers.

In total, 14 interviews (see Table 8.1) were conducted (seven women and seven men) in the spring of 2020, of whom three participants are asylum seekers (one from Venezuela, one from Syria, and one from Russia); the rest are generally referred to as economic migrants. Among the latter, four are from Moldova (two Russian speakers and two Romanian speakers), four are from Ukraine, one from Russia, one from Colombia, and one from Venezuela. In terms of participants' nationality, it is important to mention that two of the interviewed participants hold dual citizenship (Venezuelan-Spanish and Moldovan-Bulgarian). Although the initial decision was to exclude European citizens, we finally decided to include these participants as their experience opens a particular case study for 'second grade' (as one of the participants put it) EU citizens. The participants' age group was quite broad, with the youngest person being 21 at the time of the interview (an asylum seeker from Russia) and the oldest being in his mid-60s (an asylum seeker from Venezuela). All participants came to the Czech Republic within the last 6 years, with the exception of a woman from Ukraine who arrived considerably earlier. Her story was still important to include as she gave a retrospective of her experience as an undocumented migrant at the time of her arrival. Among the economic migrants, we gave further attention to two participants who work in highly-skilled jobs (from Colombia and Russia).

The interviews were conducted in languages with which the participants were most comfortable (Russian, Romanian, English, Czech). One participant from Ukraine required that the interview be conducted in Czech while those who opted for English had a perfect command of the language. Language, therefore, did not constitute a barrier in any of the cases. All participants gave consent for the interviews to be recorded (on a mobile phone, in most cases). Given the lockdown and the Covid-19 restrictions that came into force in the Czech Republic, eight of these interviews were conducted online. Connecting with participants on online platforms did not pose any significant constraints to the course of the interview,

**Table 8.1** Profiles of Interviewees

	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Migration year	Education (primary, secondary, tertiary)	Current occupation in the host country	Occupation in the country of origin
Interview 1, (Victor)	Mid-30s	M	Colombia	2014	Tertiary	Working in IT	n/s
Interview 2, (Anna)	Mid-30s	F	Ukraine	2016	Tertiary	Unemployed	Pharmacist
Interview 3, (Lena)	Late 20s	F	Ukraine	2017	Tertiary	Barista	Police forces
Interview 4, (Alvaro)	Mid-20s	M	Venezuela	2018	Tertiary	PhD student	Student
Interview 5, (Ion)	Late 30s	M	Moldova	2019	Secondary	Warehouse worker	Working in the military abroad
Interview 6, (Ina)	Mid-40s	F	Moldova	2017	Primary	Unemployed	Director of marketing cosmetics department
Interview 7, (Lida)	Late 30s	F	Moldova	2018	Primary	Cook	Unemployed
Interview 8, (Vasilij)	Late 30s	M	Ukraine	2017	Tertiary	Warehouse worker	Various odd jobs abroad in Russia, then Italy
Interview 9, (Leonid)	Early 20s	M	Russia	2019	Secondary	Unemployed	Student
Interview 10, (Sofia)	Mid-30s	F	Russia	2019	Tertiary	Marketing (junior)	Marketing (senior)
Interview 11, (Daniel)	Early 40s	M	Moldova	2017	Tertiary	Printing company (factory worker)	Graphic designer (newspaper)
Interview 12, (Naz)	Mid-30s	F	Syria	2015	Tertiary	IT	Translator (English)
Interview 13, (Maria)	Mid-40s	F	Ukraine	2000	Tertiary (recently graduated in the CR)	NGO worker (assistance to migrants)	Unemployed
Interview 14, (Gael)	Mid-60s	M	Venezuela	2018	Tertiary	Unemployed	University teacher

with the exception of one participant (a woman from Moldova) who seemed to be intimidated by what could have been another person in her room.

The topics of trauma, abuse, and violence were particularly relevant in the interviews with refugees, such as Gael from Venezuela and Leonid from Russia. When talking about their experiences, they led the interview at their own pace, with the interviewer intervening only when there was a need for clarification. It is important to mention that, prior to the interview, they had already told their story and described their traumatic experiences in detail to the authorities processing their applications for asylum. As a result, they were able to talk about their experiences in a more detached, but also well-structured manner.

During interviews, particular attention was paid to moments and testimonies that could be qualified as turning points or epiphanies in migrants' life trajectories. In the narrative-biographical inquiry, the interviewer was searching for recalled experiences that had a transformative effect on participants, marking a profound change in their relationship with themselves and the world. Instances of angst, depression, self-doubt, or disillusionment, but also memories of regaining hope and setting new plans served as important indicators.

Finally, this analysis offered an opportunity to reflect on the notion of positionality. The interviews were conducted by a researcher who is a migrant herself, which proved an advantage during both the recruitment process and interviews. The position of an insider with similar cultural, linguistic, or ethnic heritage created a distinct social dynamic between the researcher and the participants, with the main advantage being that most respondents were able to speak in a language they were most comfortable with, allowing for a more authentic expression of emotions and feelings. At the same time, ethno-nationality was not the only element that influenced the relationship between the researcher and the interviewees. The researcher was also a woman, a student, speaking both Romanian and Russian – all these identities redefined the notion of the insider and created context-specific dynamics. The only constant element that transcended different situations across all interviews was the shared experience of being a migrant, which gave the researcher an important insight into potential structural barriers that the respondents have encountered in their journey.

#### **8.4 Turning Points and Epiphanies in Migrants' Life Trajectories**

The research participants experienced epiphanies in life trajectories in relation to three major themes: decisive moments in taking the decision to migrate; experienced changes in terms of social status and professional aspirations; and life-changing understandings that resulted from interactions structured by one's identity, language, or nationality. Table 8.2 summarises the turning points that prompted epiphanic moments in our participants' subjective accounts.

**Table 8.2** Typology of Turning Points

	Pre-migration TPs	Social status and professional aspirations	Language, identity, and discrimination
Interview 1, (Victor)		Inability to pursue aspirations (–)	
Interview 2, (Anna)	Looking to make a change after a failed marriage (+)	Change of occupation (+)	
Interview 3, (Lena)	War (–) A violent work environment (–)	Downwards mobility (–) Change of occupation (+)	Hostile work environment (–)
Interview 4, (Alvaro)	Persecution (–), economic hardship (–)	Inability to pursue aspirations (–)	
Interview 5, (Ion)			Hostile work environment (–) Social stigma (+)
Interview 6, (Ina)		Learning about the social security in the Czech Republic (+) Downwards mobility (–)	Social stigma (+)
Interview 7, (Lida)	Economic hardship (–)		
Interview 8, (Vasilij)			Hostile work environment (–)
Interview 9, (Leonid)	Persecution (–)		
Interview 10, (Sofia)	Meeting her partner (+)		
Interview 11, (Daniel)			Hostile work environment (–)
Interview 12, (Naz)	War (–) Discrimination (–)		
Interview 13, (Maria)		Change of occupation (+)	
Interview 14, (Gael)	Persecution (–), economic hardship (–)		

### ***8.4.1 Turning Points and Expectations Prompting the Beginning of the Journey***

I resisted until it was impossible for me to cope. Gael, 65

Most of the conducted interviews pointed to the fact that there had never been one single factor at the root of the participants' decision to leave their place of origin in search of a better life. The interviewees did, however, reminisce about particular moments that played a crucial role in their decision. These moments can be



considered turning points in one's life as they generated the crucial understanding that leaving is the best, if not the only, option. At the same time, the nature of these moments varies across experiences. In the examined sample of interviews, only in a few cases moments like that arose from personal circumstances. These circumstances were present in the story of Anna (2), for whom the decision to leave was prompted by the end of an unhappy marriage. As she explains, 'having divorced him, I simply could not stay there anymore, I needed to change my life'. As she had some acquaintances working in Prague, she decided that leaving Ukraine for the Czech Republic was the best she could do at that moment. In a somewhat opposite story, Sofia (10) moved to Prague from Moscow after marrying her Slovak partner. In her case, she explained that 'meeting him changed my life. I loved Moscow, but now it is more important for us to be together, and I don't mind a smaller city anymore'.

While representing important turning points in the lives of some respondents, these examples related to the intimate personal relations of migrants are hardly representative of the largest part of experiences described in the biographical interviews. In most cases, turning points from which the decision to leave resulted were generated from strong structural factors upon which the participants had little control. In most cases, the understanding that leaving is the only option came under violent circumstances determined by war, persecution, or economic precarity – or all. For Naz (12), the war in Syria was a turning point that changed forever her relationship with the world. She, her husband, and their daughter were left with no option other than to escape Damascus; they chose Prague as Naz's brother was already living for some time in the Czech Republic. At the same time, Naz explained that she was not only escaping war. Her desire to leave was also supported by a personal understanding of the lack of opportunities for women in Damascus, determined by socio-cultural constraints: 'From the time I was small, I wanted to move away; the traditions, religion, treatment of women, I didn't want that for my daughter'. Despite facing social constraints her entire life, the breaking point that prompted the realisation about her prospects as a woman in Damascus came when she was not allowed to choose what to study at university. Instead, an application to study the English language was sent in her name. The beginning of the war and the lack of freedom in choosing to study what she desired constituted turning points as a result of which she could not imagine her future and the future of her daughter in Damascus.

Lena's (3) life was also forever changed by war, except in her case, it was the war in Eastern Ukraine. Before 2014, Lena and her parents lived in Donetsk and enjoyed, as she puts it, 'a comfortable life'. Her parents both had good jobs and Lena herself was looking at a promising career in the police force. After the war broke out, however, their lives changed abruptly. Her parents lost their jobs and decided to migrate to the Czech Republic, while for Lena the turning point came when, as a result of political changes in the region, separatist forces took control of the institution that had hired her. As a reaction to the takeover, she refrained to work for a self-proclaimed government. In that moment, she chose her integrity and safety

over a career in a politically unstable region and she joined her parents in the Czech Republic.

While at a first glance the stories of Naz and Lena seem quite different, a closer look reveals noteworthy parallels. While living in two very different parts of the world, the pre-migration lives of the two women share striking similarities: their decisions to give up their previous lives were not only prompted by the violence of the war, but also by less evident, but equally traumatising, structural circumstances that they experienced as women. Lena's decision to eventually settle in the Czech Republic was not only marked by the collapse of her dreams when war erupted in Eastern Ukraine. She described an equally traumatising experience related to her attempt to return to Ukraine after living in the Czech Republic for a year and try to pursue a career in a region unaffected by war. Her job interview with an all-male group of examiners turned into a violent interrogation, in which she faced deeply misogynistic questions. This traumatic experience not only marked the decision to leave Ukraine again and for good, but to also renounce any prospects of pursuing her dream job.

In other cases, the decision to escape was taken in a context defined by political oppression. Leonid (9) is a refugee from Russia, whose life changed completely in 2017 when the Russian government declared Jehovah's witnesses as an illegal religious group. This had an immediate effect on Leonid, a witness himself:

At first, they went after official entities, they closed down the organisation and confiscated all property, and it seemed for a moment that was that. But as I was finishing school in 2018 and turned 18, I applied for the Alternative Civil Service (ACS).<sup>2</sup> I wanted to be a law-abiding citizen, so I officially declared that my faith prevents me from joining the military. I also explained that I'm interested in going through the ACS and become an unlicensed assistive personnel and work in a retirement home. My application was denied, since Jehovah's witnesses are forbidden as a religion. This is when I understood that the illegality of this faith doesn't concern only official entities, it would impact me personally, since I don't even have the right to apply for the ACS, and it would only get worse.

Leonid understood that as a 21-year-old Jehovah's witness in Russia he faced either prosecution for extremism or severe physical abuse if he was accepted to join the army. The prospect of extreme violence changed the way he perceived his future and the future of his family, and a decision was made to escape.

On the other side of the world, a similar situation was faced by Gael, a university teacher persecuted in Venezuela for his political beliefs. Gael worked as a teacher for 32 years in art schools and universities

until it was impossible to cope with the political situation. They wouldn't give me any chance to improve my situation at the university, on the contrary, they started to cut benefits, like the health insurance for my daughter. I couldn't get any promotions, they wouldn't improve my salary or work conditions, I was threatened and followed.

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<sup>2</sup>Military service is obligatory in Russia with only a few exceptions allowed. At the same time, military service goes against the beliefs of Jehovah's witnesses.

The motivation to start his journey took a more complex form as Gael's intention to escape political oppression with his family was also motivated by the worsening economic situation they faced. His children's future and lack of opportunities played a crucial role in the decision to apply for asylum in the Czech Republic, considering that in addition to being terrorised and constantly under threat for his political views, he was also worried about the economic situation of his family: 'I was very worried about me and my family, because I know this chain of living. First, you don't find food, then you get sick, and then you die'. In his case, the urgency to leave the country was prompted by the worsening situation at the university, which was illustrative of both political oppression and economic precarity.

In a separate example, Alvaro (4), a young student who fled Venezuela, mentioned that, besides the immediate danger he faced for being an active member of a protest organisation, his decision to escape the country was prompted by a realisation of a total lack of opportunities there given the current situation. In a moment when the persecution of protest organisers intensified, Alvaro decided it was the time to leave.

These are important examples to note as they blur the distinctions between reasons to leave typically attributed to refugees and experiences usually associated with economic migrants. For example, although she falls under the category typically registered as labour migration, Lida's (7) pre-migration experience in Moldova is no less traumatising. After her husband died, she was left with two children and a lot of debt, with no other choice but to seek work abroad. She described the realisation caused by the loss of her partner and how it changed her:

I knew that I was going to a foreign country, among strangers, where I don't know the people or speak the language. But trouble and worries make you close your eyes and just go. And when you arrive, there's no warm welcome...like every person, I went through hardships and a lot of trouble.

While she wasn't fleeing war or political oppression, Lida found herself in a desperate, traumatic situation, out of which the only option to escape was migration. As Crawley and Skleparis (2018) also point out, a closer look at personal, individual stories reveals elements that defy categorisations – such as economic migrant and refugee – typically used in policymaking or academic research.

An analysis of lived experiences of interviewed participants points to a connection between the nature of circumstances that led to their decision to leave and personal aspirations and expectations in relation to the labour market. From this, it follows that prospects of labour market integration in the country of destination do not only depend on structural constraints and opportunities that new environments present. As Koikkalainen and Kyle (2016) pointed out, the chances at building a better life are strongly determined by pre-migration visions and personal aspirations, according to which expectations from the journey are set and plans are created. At the same time, these visions result from personal, life-changing moments of realisation, as presented above. Lida (7), the economic migrant from Moldova who was left with a lot of debt after her partner died, had no particular career aspirations in the Czech Republic; she was willing to compromise a lot and took any work the

recruitment agency had to offer. For her, career growth was not as much of a priority as was the mere fact of being able to work. The way in which Alvaro (4), the student from Venezuela, perceived the weight of his circumstances also influenced the expectations he had of his journey: his main priority was to escape both the possibility of being arrested and the lack of opportunities he was facing. Although he is currently doing a PhD at a Czech university, this was not a priority: ‘The situation was horrible, and I was ready to do here anything that I could – work, studies, whatever’. Similarly, Leonid’s (9) trauma and motivation to leave his country as a result of the persecution of Jehovah’s witnesses had a direct impact on his expectations and approach to labour market integration and resulted in him valuing his safety above all:

The [permanent residence] permit itself is not that important for me. What’s important is that receiving it would mean that I am safe. I’m not looking too much into career growth at the moment. I just want to have a calm life, not thinking about the police knocking on my door, have a place to myself, because I am a bit tired of living the life of someone waiting for asylum, and that’s all.

While there are clear differences between interviewed refugees and economic migrants in their motivations for starting the journey – which are then reflected in their expectations, priorities, and objectives – these experiences share in common the critical understanding that leaving their previous lives behind is the only viable option. Refugees and migrants often took their decisions amidst moments of personal or structural critical situations. These moments represent turning points; however, these could not be viewed as temporarily isolated, as the one and the only one moment. Frequently, the turning points accelerated decisions that had been triggered by a complex of critical moments accumulated in time.

### ***8.4.2 Social Status and Professional Aspirations***

I got the taste of this kind of living, actually doing what you are interested in. Anna, 36

As mentioned in the introduction, the growing presence of economic migrants in the Czech Republic is influenced by the acute labour shortage. From the migrants’ perspective, this means that while obtaining a work visa is not necessarily a challenge, the visa itself is issued for specific work positions within various programmes through which the Czech government directs foreign workers to sectors that lack workers the most. As these happen to be primarily low-skilled positions in manufacturing or agriculture, foreign workers are restricted in their choice of work opportunities. In practice, they would have to either repeat their visa application for a different position or find an obliging employer willing to go through all the necessary administrative procedures to facilitate the migrant’s transfer between jobs.

It has been already established that international migration does not only refer to a geographical mobility between countries. Its social dimension refers to navigating economic opportunities in the host country (Cederberg, 2017), following

professional aspirations and improving one's socioeconomic position. It can also refer to downward mobility, when the recognition of professional skills is not facilitated or when the condition of one's work visa restricts the migrants to a specific, usually low-skilled job, as it is often the case in the Czech Republic.

The notion of social status and socioeconomic position in the host country was a recurrent theme in the biographical interviews. In many instances, experienced transformations of social class were accompanied by epiphanic moments, in which participants reflected on their social position and how they viewed themselves. Before migrating to the Czech Republic, Ina (6) was managing the marketing department of a cosmetics store in Moldova. She lived with her two sons in Chisinau, while her husband was working in construction in the Czech Republic for over a decade. Although she often thought of joining him, the prospect of downward mobility was something that worried her deeply:

I also didn't want to move because I had a good job. Between us girls – I liked dressing up for my job, I liked the status, you know how it is... And I knew that if I came to work in the Czech Republic, I could only get a job as a cleaner, the choice would not be great.

Her perspective, however, changed completely after she came to visit her husband and learned about the Czech Republic from his acquaintances:

I was talking with this woman, and I asked her how much she paid for giving birth, and she says "Nothing, because I have insurance"! And I said, well in Moldova I have insurance too, but I still had to pay 400 euros for an intervention, but ok, for you the insurance covered it, but surely you must have paid the doctor something?! And she said again "Nothing!" In the evening, when my husband came back, I told him I want to live here. This changed my perspective completely, not paying anything for giving birth! I was shocked.

From this moment on, Ina imagined a new future for her and her family. Apart from introducing her to the prospect of a secure life and a reliable system of social support, the visit to the Czech Republic made her understand that she wanted to bring her family together, even if it meant that she needed to give up her job:

I understood that before, we lived in uncertainty, one of us here, the other one there, this is no way to live. I feel sorry for families who live like that, we need to aim at living together right from the beginning, and how many families are falling apart because of it.

Nevertheless, despite having found stable employment at a factory and reaching a more secure socioeconomic position, the notion of social status was something that never ceased to bother Ina.

Once she became eligible to be registered at the Employment Office, she recalled this particular episode when she attempted to change her job:

When I went to register at the Employment Office, I had to fill in a form on what jobs I was interested in or qualified for. I didn't know what to write because I didn't know what my opportunities were yet. The civil servant there then suggested examples like cleaner, housekeeper, and so on. This upset me and I told her "I'm not looking for a cleaning job, I wouldn't be here if I did! I could find that in 30 min by myself, I only cleaned at home!" She then felt uncomfortable and I don't think she really cared what I wrote. I understand that now, but at that moment, it upset me.

Despite a relative improvement in her socioeconomic condition, Ina was still affected by the fall in her social status. Parrenas (2000) introduces in this sense the notion of conflicting class mobility in reference to the increase of economic security as a result of migration combined with a sharp decline in occupational status.

Lena's (3) story, however, points to both a decline in economic security and to deskilling as a result of migration. As mentioned earlier, Lena fled the war in Ukraine. Upon migrating to the Czech Republic, her situation did not improve; she needed to find work urgently, at times illegally, in order to maintain the validity of her visa. She recalled a particularly painful moment while at a job in Prague:

I thought to myself, just look at me – a police officer, washing glasses in a strip bar. The truth was that my ego was so hurt, this was so humiliating. I felt extremely depressed. But I thought, screw it, it doesn't matter, at least I can make some money and my parents won't think I'm a total mess.

This crucial moment led to a strong sense of social immobility and to a negative epiphany about her lack of opportunities in the host country. As a result, she returned to Ukraine and attempted to enrol again in the police force, albeit unsuccessfully, as her story shows in the first part of this chapter. From here, however, her story takes another unexpected turn. After her attempt to return to Ukraine resulted in a traumatising experience when seeking to reintegrate in the police forces, Lena decided to forever give up at her career and come back to Prague, where she found a job as a barista. Working in a café brought upon an unexpected feeling of closure with her past life:

This job has a bit of a symbolic meaning for me. I used to hang out with friends in coffee shops a lot back in Ukraine, some of them were baristas, it's a culture that I am very familiar with. And I'm glad I found this here, I have friends stopping by to work on their laptops, or just to say hi, this is part of my social life.

Finding a job in a comfortable supportive social environment meant that Lena could calmly reconsider her plans and come up with new professional aspirations. While working as a barista, she has been slowly working towards becoming an illustrator. Her brand's Instagram account is gaining followers very quickly and at the time of the interview, Lena was again hopeful about her career.

Anna's (2) story highlights the fact that social status may also work as a motivating factor behind migration, as from her perspective leaving Ukraine was associated with a progression in terms of her social positioning. She was unhappy in her marriage in Ukraine, and after her divorce, she understood that she did not want to continue her life in the small town where she 'was born, raised and worked for 10 years in the same pharmacy'. Indeed, as Mapril (2014) indicates, migration also represents a way of (re)producing an economic position, which often leads to migrants distinguishing themselves from other members of society.

Anna's epiphany evoked her desire to change her social surroundings by moving to the EU. Her migration to the Czech Republic was not incidental, as she explained, 'the entire *Zakarpattia* is here, based on more or less illegal documents'. At the same

time, she explained wanting to distinguish herself from Ukrainian illegal migrants and she wanted to secure for herself a stable legal status:

I understood that I don't like this option, this semi-legal way, I didn't want to live like this. I want to be living here legally. Because otherwise, you are no one here, you won't be able to find any job other than washing dishes or cleaning.

Her desire for change was not only linked to her social surroundings; it also translated in her professional aspirations, which became obvious in another epiphanic experience. After having worked for 2 years in Prague and managing to save some money, she decided she wanted to try and pursue her lifelong dream of becoming a therapist – a decision that profoundly changed her perspective regarding her future:

As soon as I started to take the classes and go to this school, I got the taste of this kind of living, actually doing what you are interested in. I invested a lot of money, but I don't regret it for a second. I am trying to change my social surroundings.

The question of social mobility is thus one that strongly preoccupies migrants in the host country, even in cases where professional aspirations were not a central motivating factor for migration. Downward mobility is often accompanied by moments of disillusionment, disappointment, and doubt over the prospect of reaching previously set goals. When Alvaro fled Venezuela due to his involvement in student protests, he was hoping to be able to continue studying and working as a biologist, especially having obtained Spanish citizenship. Faced with the realities of the labour market in the Czech Republic, however, he had to readjust his plans:

Because I graduated in my country, I wanted to continue working in science here, I'm a biologist. I was looking for something here, maybe in the public sector, I thought it was possible since I'm a EU citizen. But for key positions in biology in the public sector here, you need to be Czech. In the private sector, there weren't many positions for scientists. I realised that although I studied science for seven years, that doesn't matter if you don't have an actual job in science. I started working in a kitchen, and then another one, then as a waiter.

The inability to find work in his field led to a reconsideration of priorities, with financial security overtaking whatever goals he had previously set for himself. As he had put it, 'if you don't work, you don't eat'. While supporting himself financially by working in restaurant kitchens or as a waiter, Alvaro did manage to eventually enrol in a PhD program that brought him closer to his field of interest. The choices he made upon being confronted with the realities of the Czech labour market highlights Alvaro's capacity to adapt and adjust his life trajectory while not entirely giving up on his aspirations.

In other cases, moments of disillusionment about following a path of self-fulfilment resulted in abandoning professional aspirations altogether. Victor (1) is a migrant from Colombia who studied architecture in Paris. However, the high living costs there did not allow him to pursue a career in his field. He hoped that if he moved to the Czech Republic, the possibility of becoming an architect would be more attainable. He first worked in a call centre, then in IT, before he finally

managed to find a job opportunity in an architecture studio. The turning point, however, came when the studio made him a final offer with a salary well below what he expected he would be making. When he was faced with the same financial insecurity that he was hoping he had escaped, he began to believe that his dream is out of reach:

I am getting older, I couldn't settle for offers like that. Even with that little money to offer, that job in architecture was very difficult to find, so I don't think I'll get another opportunity anytime soon. I understood that I needed to move on.

He now works in IT in a multinational company.

The subjective accounts presented above point to the fact that questions of positioning in terms of social status and professional prestige or ambition are often at the centre of epiphanic moments experienced in life trajectories of migrants coming to the Czech Republic. At the same time, these life changing realisations are situation-based: their impact differs in dependence on participants' life circumstances. They can have a generative effect, as in the cases of Anna, who became determined to pursue a career as a therapist after 'getting the taste of actually doing what [she] liked', or Lena, whose job as a barista helped her to find a socio-cultural environment where she felt like she belonged and gave her the comfort and the confidence to rebuild a vision for her future. For others, however, the experienced epiphanies in relation to their socioeconomic positioning had a rather withdrawing effect. Confronted with the realities of the Czech labour market – and with the field of architecture specifically – Victor decided it was time to move on from his dream career and choose a profession that was financially secure. In Ina's case, the sudden understanding about the socioeconomic security the Czech Republic could offer her and her family made her reconsider her priorities and the importance she gave to the social status she enjoyed back in Moldova. At the same time, despite the gained security, the downwards mobility she experienced never ceased to worry her and she still had a hard time accepting it.

This highlights an important aspect in relation to experienced epiphanies that change one's perspective on their current situation as well as their future: while these realisations are crucial and typically followed by life-changing decisions, they are situation-based and their permanent character is not guaranteed. When Alvaro understood that even after 7 years of studying biology he would not be able to find a job in the field, he decided there was little chance for him to pursue his dream career and that he should tone down his ambitions, focusing instead on his financial stability. This disillusionment, however, did not have permanent lasting effects. After a year, he looked into a PhD programme and decided that if he could not work in biology, he might at least try to continue his studies in the field. As in Ina's case, there are certain elements that 'survive' epiphanic, life-changing moments and resurface in the post-epiphanic life trajectory. This could be considered an indicator of agency in professional aspirations in some cases and vulnerability in the face of social positioning in others.



### 8.4.3 *Coping with Hostility and Discrimination: Resignation, Ignorance, Refusal or Resistance*

Some people think I'm coming from Russia. One woman heard my accent and called me a communist! Maria, 45

This section explores how experiences related to social relations structured on one's identity, nationality, or language can act as turning points in life trajectories of migrants in the Czech Republic. As already indicated, among migrant groups in the country, there is a high predominance of economic migrants from eastern Europe, which we reflected in the sample of participants for biographical interviews.

In the stories related by participants from Ukraine, Moldova, and Russia, xenophobic racism reproduced at a macro-societal level and imprinted at a meso-level in a workplace or during meetings with public administration officials was a recurrent theme. Fox et al. (2012) studied the experiences of eastern Europeans in the United Kingdom and established that the mechanism of cultural differences operating as a criterion for exclusion is present in multiple environments. It can be reproduced by the media or at the institutional level, it can also strongly impact social relations at a micro-individual level in the workplace, in the communication between migrants and authorities or between migrants themselves. As a general rule, in the British context, eastern Europe refers to Romania, Poland, or Hungary. From the perspective of the Czech Republic, the border moves further east, referring to the countries outside the European Union. The mechanism of exclusion as experienced by migrants themselves remains, however, rather similar, manifesting itself through discrimination in the housing and the labour markets, as well as in everyday interactions. Maria (13), a woman from Ukraine living in the Czech Republic for almost two decades, explained that she still experiences some forms of discrimination:

There is still discrimination here, I notice it in the shops, when I speak to authorities, in the hospital where I gave birth to my daughter, people often react negatively when they hear my Czech. Some people think I'm coming from Russia. One woman heard my accent and called me a communist!

Indeed, it has been already established that while some forms of discrimination may be experienced in explicitly racial terms or language, while other forms of lacking in human capital may also act as driving factors behind discrimination (Stevens et al., 2012; Kempny, 2011). An analysis of subjective accounts of these experiences uncovers strong impacts that feelings of being discriminated against can have on migrants' social relations and their perspective on life in the host society. When Lena (3) was working night shifts in a warehouse in Prague, she was constantly confronted with hostile attitudes, from both management and her all-male co-workers.

I was really young compared to them, and the only girl working there, sometimes I needed help carrying heavier stuff. Whenever I asked someone to help, the reaction was so bad. They had a problem with how I spoke. I heard them talking behind her back very often. Can you imagine, grown men bad mouthing a 26-year-old girl. For me, that was nonsense. At one moment, I couldn't stand this talking behind my back, and I told the manager in a half Czech,

half Ukrainian what I thought about it. They actually apologised afterwards, but I still wanted to leave. I didn't leave with a scandal, I calmly told them why I left and explained how they behaved like bastards.

In her new job as a barista, a job that she was happy with, Lena again went through a similarly frustrating experience, this time, with a customer:

"When you come to the Czech Republic, learn to speak the language properly," she said to me. She still comes by, sits in between two tables, and comments on how my Czech is gradually improving. It's so frustrating. Some people, when they hear I'm from Ukraine, their reaction is "well, thank God you're not from Russia!" That's such a weird thing to say.

This time, however, Lena's reaction was different; she understood the importance of learning to tune out such attitudes and not let this affect her job or the plans and ambitions she has for her future, for her own sake: 'Now, I see that I should just ignore these kinds of remarks, or better, laugh at them.' Prompted by a sequence of two similar experiences that acted as turning points, Lena's epiphany consists in the understanding that she doesn't have to fix or escape a hostile environment but that she can gradually learn to ignore it and focus on her own plans.

A similar story was related by Daniel (11), a migrant from Moldova who worked at a printing factory. For him, the ambiguous nature of identity and how a shifting context influenced the way he was perceived by his co-workers were illuminated by a particular situation at work, which constituted a turning point in his understanding of how he was regarded:

There was a certain fear and hostility towards foreigners. I saw that kind of attitude towards me, and it wasn't particularly pleasant. But at some point, the management decided to hire some convicts through a social program. They were wearing grey t-shirts, and I happened to be wearing one as well. And then, one of the Czech co-workers noticed me and suggested I change my t-shirt to an orange one so that I would be more like them. I stopped being the foreigner – that place was then taken by the convicts.

The language Daniel spoke and his nationality constituted a dividing line that was eventually weakened as a result of the apparition of a stronger identifier, which reorganised the group of co-workers. In this moment, Daniel reflected on the trivial nature of otherness, which made it easier for him to diminish its importance.

In other stories, the withdrawing effect of epiphanies resulting from hostile attitudes because of one's nationality prevailed. Vasilij's (8) experience is illustrative. He is a migrant worker from Ukraine who had recently lost his job and had to pick up a low-paid position through a recruitment agency to keep his working visa. At the same time, he was not able to afford a place to stay by himself, so he was sharing an apartment with several other workers assigned by the agency. Furthermore, he was systematically confronted with a hostile work environment:

I think this is often the case when it comes to workers from Ukraine. No matter the situation, the Czechs must always be right! At a previous job, I was verbally abused by a Czech co-worker, and this was one of the reasons I left the factory.

In Vasilij's experience, in situations of conflict, critiques against Ukrainian workers most often boil down to their language skills: 'I was often being accused of not understanding what I'm being told, even though I understood perfectly!' He was

comparing his experience with the time he was working in Italy. In his words, he never experienced discriminatory attitudes there:

There was the same attitude towards Italian workers as towards Ukrainians, even though I spoke the language very badly. In Italy, if there was a difference, or discrimination, then it was expressed in the wages we were paid. There is a difference in wages in Czech Republic as well, but that's because I prefer to work through a recruitment agency. I will always be treated here differently; I will never feel here at home.

Having recently lost his job and being forced to work through a recruitment agency again, Vasilij understood that there was no point in planning a future in the Czech Republic: 'I feel like I am being looked down upon, especially in Prague. . . I shall move back to Ukraine very soon'. The increased insecurity that came with having lost a stable job led to reflection on the possibility of his circumstances never improving ultimately contributed to his decision to start planning a future back in Ukraine.

This withdrawing effect was also present in the experiences narrated by Ion (5), a migrant worker from Moldova:

To tell you the truth, I travelled a lot, I worked in Europe before, in Spain, in Georgia, in the Baltics, there's really a big difference between my experience there and here. In Georgia, for example, I was met with a much more friendly and warmer attitude, people there are extraordinarily friendly with you. They really make you feel at home, even if they don't know you. In the Czech Republic, they are a bit colder. . . I'm thinking maybe it's because there are many foreigners here, which leads to many problems, so they tend to keep their distance from you. No matter how friendly and genuine you are, you're still being kept at a distance.

The crucial moment that made Ion understand how he is perceived and what his behaviour should be from now on came when he tried to show initiative at work and share some of his expertise:

The Czech management really doesn't handle suggestions well, even if I have more experience in some aspects. My wife had the same experience. We decided then that it is better to not say anything at all, if it's so badly received by our supervisors. They probably thought that look, "foreigners are coming over and are giving us lessons," they wouldn't have any of that.

Despite the fact that this was not an issue he considered a problem in countries he had worked in before, Ion understood that in the Czech Republic, his nationality or mother tongue can structure his social relations. He even reflected on possible explanations:

I think that the older generation believes that we're caring some Soviet heritage, that we're representing the "Soviet man" and I'd like them to know that I have nothing to do with the Soviet Union, in fact we, as a nation and as a family, we suffered just as much, but it's really difficult to get rid of the stigma.

Ion has also made another important observation:

I've also noticed that the attitude towards Moldovans is more positive when compared to Ukrainians. I speak well Ukrainian, so with my colleagues from there I spoke Ukrainian. I don't have a problem with that. And after a month or so, a Czech co-worker came over with a

map he found lying around and asked me, “Ion, are you from Ukraine?” and I explained to him where I’m from and pointed to Moldova, and I could see his attitude changing. And then after a while he says, “oh Moldova, you have amazing wine there! You should bring some over!”.

This is an important point because in the cases of other participants, interactions that were structured by an imagined hierarchy between migrants from specific countries led to important understandings of how status can be negotiated and a higher social status, as a consequence, could be claimed. Ina (6), a Moldovan national, had a similar experience to that narrated by Ion when she worked at a large factory with other migrant workers, many from Ukraine. Like many Moldovans, Ina is fluent both in Russian and Romanian, and often offered to translate for Ukrainians, Moldovans, and Romanians working at the factory. As she explained, this is when she ‘stood out’ among other migrant workers and became convinced of the importance to stress out that she is from Moldova, which is different from Ukraine or Russia:

Sometimes, like at the doctor’s, they would listen to me and then ask, “Are you from Ukraine?” But I would proudly answer, “I’m not from Ukraine, I’m from Moldova!” Because I know for a fact that they like Moldovans here; they say they’re hard-working and friendly. Czechs don’t say bad things about Moldovans, and so I’m proud that I come from there.

Understanding the mechanism of how stigma and prejudice can influence the impression they leave, Ina and some other interviewed migrants attempted to control their identifiers. They recalled similar situations in which they acted reflexively and showed critical capacities when reading the context that they faced. This highlights the fact that a categorisation of migrants into either victims or agents free of constraint should be avoided (Squire, 2017; Amelina, 2020).

Social relations structured by one’s nationality or mother tongue can have a strong impact on how migrants in the Czech Republic perceive their host society and themselves. The effects of these epiphanic experiences can vary. They can cognitively constrain from pursuing opportunities, as was the case of Vasilij, or they can be instrumentalised by migrants such as Ina, who quickly learnt about the stigma and the performative effects that various eastern European identities can carry. To a varying degree, discriminatory mechanisms should therefore be highlighted as an obstacle to integration on the labour market.

## 8.5 Concluding Remarks

In each individual story, labour market integration was determined by a confluence of life circumstances and personal aspirations as well as institutional and structural barriers. On a general level, one can locate shared aspects that generated turning points in the life trajectories of MRAs. These may include economic hardship, material and social insecurity, or safety and life-threatening circumstances. A closer look, however, reveals the unique ways in which migrants and refugees navigate

situations of insecurity, experience constraints differently, adjust their life trajectories accordingly, and make use of structural opportunities. When analysing the factors that led to the crucial moment in which the decision to leave was taken as shown in Table 8.2, it becomes obvious that the nature of these turning points varies across experiences and is not specific to the category of refugees or economic migrants. These moments of transformation can be sudden and straightforward, prompted by an unpredictable tragedy or they can accelerate decisions triggered by negative experiences accumulated over time.

The question of social mobility and socio-economic status was one that strongly preoccupied many of the interviewed participants. Faced with laws that prevent migrant workers from accessing jobs other than those assigned to them through the issued work visa, some participants spoke about experiencing deskilling that marked them profoundly and left them disillusioned with their future in the Czech Republic. Despite a relative economic improvement that some experienced, the negative transformations in social status led to strong negative epiphanic moments, a phenomenon that Parrenas (2000) describes as conflicting class mobility.

At the same time, these life-changing realisations are situation-based, their impact differing depending on participants' life circumstances. While these epiphanic moments are crucial and typically followed by life-changing decisions, they are context-based and their permanent character is not guaranteed. For some participants, there were certain elements that 'survived' epiphanic, life-changing moments and resurfaced in the post-epiphanic life trajectory. This could be considered an indicator of agency in professional aspirations in some cases and vulnerability in the face of social positioning in others.

Another important aspect that resurfaced in the analysed micro perspectives concerned social relations structured by one's nationality or mother tongue. In some of the analysed life trajectories, social interactions structured by experiences of discrimination had a strong transformative impact on how migrants perceived themselves and those around them. While in some cases these experiences cognitively constrained them from pursuing job opportunities, others managed to adapt to the performative effect of stigma and manipulate its effects.

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# Chapter 9

## A Long Journey of Integration



Irina Isaakyan, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Simone Baglioni

### 9.1 Introduction

What is labour market integration and what would be the best way to think about it? The short answer is that integration is a process of establishing yourself as a professional and as a person in a host society. It is a long journey of responding to critical events, undergoing various obstacles, and possibly finding a desired outcome. It is a difficult journey during which the migrant may be lost, depending on how ready they are for it. It is therefore an outcome of migrant agency that follows a scenario, albeit with individualised configurations. It is a process of self-discovery through which the migrant not only finds a better place to live and work but also re-evaluates the symbolic meanings and social relations that they encounter. It is a complex socio-cultural scenario, in which each migrant is both the actor and the director.

In this chapter we reinterpret the findings of the book in the light of the ‘cultural monomyth’ theory, elaborated by Joseph Campbell (2008[1949]). First, we introduce the ‘cultural monomyth’ theory in reference to a recognised socio-cultural script around an epiphanic passage. Then we use its main concepts as heuristic devices to explore in-depth symbolic relations and meanings within the informants’

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epiphanic triangles and to finalise the interpretive theory of labour market integration. Based on the individual country case studies highlighted in the previous chapters, we also present novel typologies of turning points (or most critical events), epiphanic passages (or biographic journeys) that have been provoked by them, and biographic boons (or epiphanies of integration). In the concluding section, we argue that both migrant agency and its outcome of the labour market integration are ‘liquid’ (or ‘fluid’) phenomena, which have unfixed, unexpected, and diverse outcomes for migrants.

## 9.2 Epiphanic Passage: In Search of Identity Boon

Victor, a businessman from Eastern Europe, arrives in New York at the moment when his country of origin is affected by a political coup. With devalued documents and no way back due to his home country because of border closure and geo-political changes, he finds himself trapped in JFK Airport for several months until the international situation stabilises. The airport becomes a microcosm of the United States, a tiny piece of America, in which this protagonist of Steven Spielberg’s masterpiece *The Terminal* (2004) mobilises his migrant agency toward labour market integration. An unexpected encounter with a taxi driver results in a friendship that enables Victor to get his first informal job at the airport and eventually progress towards the construction supervisor of the Terminal where he has been detained.

By contrast, the flourishing family restaurant business of Maya (a Pakistani immigrant in New York and the protagonist of *Special Victims Unit*, Season 19, Episodes 20–21) is ruined as a result of the gang assault on her family and the murder of her husband and eldest daughter. This is compounded by the deportation of her asylum-seeking brother and a long trial for justice. Left eventually without a man’s support in her ethnic entrepreneurship and with deep scars from the experienced violence, she and her youngest daughter are doomed to start from scratch or most likely seek employment somewhere else.

The extra-polar fictional stories of Victor’s integration success and Maya’s integration failure resonate with migrants’ everyday accounts narrated around the world. The 30-year-old Ukrainian police officer Lena arrives in Prague, where she literally bumps into her soon-to-be boyfriend in a bar and he helps her get a bartender job and integrate into local society (as earlier discussed by Gheorghiev and Numerato in this volume). However, the same-age Nigerian artist Nathan is arrested by mistake and sentenced to jail in Switzerland (see Mexi in this volume).

Unbelievable how dramatically one event can change the whole life of a migrant. We shall never know for sure how the ‘broken integration’ projects of Maya and Nathan will end. What we do know is that those traumatising events have transferred both into new spaces of symbolic meanings and power relations. This is what happened to Victor and Lena, who, having experienced their turning points, become involved in the enactment of new socio-cultural scripts. Within those ‘turning point scripts’ (Denzin, 2011), the past of Victor and Lena (with all their pre-emigration

memories, habits, and skills) was intersecting with their present at destination, bringing in other challenging events and a multitude of factors that affected how they were dealing with the herein expanding epiphanic passage.

In this connection, scholars note that, in many cases, critical events only initiate the change rather than finalise it (Campbell, 2008[1949]; Mackey-Kallis, 2001; Salla, 2002). They signify the beginning of a new relational and symbolic scenario that the person is to follow, to ‘master a new world’ (ibid.). Campbell (1991, 2008 [1949]) conceptualises this process as the ‘hero’s journey toward self-individuation’, or self-discovery. By viewing this biographical journey as ‘monomythical’, Campbell (2008[1949]) recognises the presence of fixed societal norms and traditions that inevitably structure the epiphanic passage. The ‘cultural monomyth’ is associated with something universally present and understood but which the person – the migrant – may not yet know and must find out on their own in order to decide how to adjust to it. Campbell’s (ibid.) socio-anthropological metaphor of ‘cultural monomyth’ becomes synonymous with our concept of epiphanic passage, showing the person’s progression from turning point to epiphany and thus illuminating the triangular relationship between the turning point, the epiphany, and the bridge between them.

To begin with, when the turning point takes place, it is often associated with an accident or mistake and remains ignored by the person if they are ‘not prepared for transformation’ (Campbell, 1991). The challenging nature of the turning point manifests itself not only in a novel form of agency but also in the person’s inability to grasp the importance of an impending change. As noted by Glaser and Strauss (1971: 95), ‘the meeting of a challenge may lead to more complex preparation until the test is definitely failed or passed’. That is why turning points often take place in clusters, which consist of what Campbell (1991) views as multiple ‘calls of adventure’. First Luciana (whose story was analysed in the Introduction to this book) wanted to escape from the casino. She realised that something must be going wrong in the gambling room when she had suddenly heard a scream. Anticipating a trap, she tried to flee from the back door. However, the doorman with a gun immediately made her recall all consequences for disobeying a criminal network. Having understood him without words because of her prior experience of victimisation, she eventually decided to go with the flow and concentrate to the maximum on her habitual art of survival. She thus found herself ready for the oncoming challenge.

In fact, responding to such a ‘call’ becomes a challenging task that is associated with risks, uncertainty, and hardships. It resembles an ‘ordeal’ (Campbell, 2008 [1949]). Campbell (ibid., 1991) explains that one who wants to confront challenges imposed by turning points must enter an entirely new relational space to exit as a ‘reborn’ person. He symbolically compares this ‘sphere of rebirth’ with the ‘world-wide womb image of the belly of the whale’ or ‘the belly of the beast’.

However, this space of rebirth is not always structured by democratic relations, as Luciana’s story eventually shows. For migrants, it may be structured by excellence criteria that determine membership in elite Western universities (Smetherham, 2010) or in transnational corporations (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020) as well as by smuggling networks and underground norms of the black market (Achilli,

2019). Emerging through such a relational and psychological hardship, the person has to reaffirm their moral values or something that they truly love. Scholars of cultural studies call this part of the rebirth ‘sacred marriage’ (Mackey-Kallis, 2001; Salla, 2002); the other part of being reborn is associated with ‘regaining the lost kingdom’ or resolving economic or material issues (ibid.). The ‘golden fleece’ to be found at the end of the hardship is associated with being rich or happy or both and receives its endorsement in the epiphany.

Scholars argue that ‘personal change does not happen in a vacuum but it is situated within and impacted upon by a larger social context’ (Teruya & Hser, 2010). Progressing through the epiphanic passage is affected by social relations and networks of support or patronage (Coleman, 1988; Merrill & Altheit, 2004; Teruya & Hser, 2010). In this connection, migrant networks have a diversity of resources (ranging from cultural attraction and soft persuasion to coercive power) that may structure such crisis passages (Fernandez Kelly & Portes, 2015; Krissman, 2005; Portes, 1995). Denzin (2011) notes the presence of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in all biographic meanings.

Fighting for the kingdom or moral values, the person is always supported by ‘mentors’ and ‘kindred spirits’ (Campbell, 2008[1949]; Salla, 2002) such as migrant solidarity networks (Fernandez Kelly & Portes, 2015; Portes, 1995) as they ‘slaughter dragons’ and negotiate with various ‘nemeses’ and ‘thresholds’ (ibid.), including various immigration officials and biased employers (Marchetti, 2014a, b). Moreover, racial/ethnic and gender factors also ‘trigger turning points and redirect life pathways’ for people in general (Teruya & Hser, 2010) and migrants in particular (Marchetti, 2014a, b; Merrill, 2019; Merrill & Altheit, 2004).

Studies show that legal provisions, labour market integration policies and discourses, as well as civil society organisations and social partners, provide migrants with a range of different opportunities that differ across countries and migrant categories. For example, so-called economic migrants are provided with opportunities that asylum seekers or irregular migrants do not have (Sandoz, 2019; Weiner & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Employment challenges are compounded by disability. Thus, not only more educated but also more physically fit migrants de facto have better employment opportunities at destination, while newcomers with medical conditions may have unrecognised healthcare needs that impede their successful employment (Baglioni & Isaakyan, 2019). Gender differences also create different structures of opportunity and, consequently, different ‘tissues’ that line the ‘belly of the whale’: women thus continue to lag behind men in their benefits from recruitment policies and become adversely affected by persistent cultural stereotypes about gender roles both in the family and in the economic system. As a result, childcare duties and educational disadvantages may become unsurmountable barriers for women (Christou & Kofman, 2022).

Having different resources at their disposal, experiences of migrants thus differ substantially in terms of their dealing with ‘spaces of rebirth’. Triandafyllidou (2018) shows that, in order to survive (‘recuperate’), some migrants can simply pass through hardship without changing its texture. At the same time, other migrants become more ‘resilient’ and find new opportunities while seeking their place at the

destination country. There are also those who, ‘resisting’ the conditions that they face, seek to ‘subvert and disrupt’ them.

The hardship, or crisis passage, in which the migrant enrolls resembles a mythical journey. It ‘captures and illuminates the transformation of consciousness’ (Campbell, 1991: 155) and ‘embodies the awakening to the new world’ in which the reborn person finds their identity ‘boon’ (ibid.: 167). The boon that the reborn person obtains is their epiphany – the story about the meaning of their own biographic experience, the story about the meaning of being alive, the story about the meaning of being integrated, and so on (Salla, 2002). An epiphany is thus ‘a spiritual manifestation’ (Joyce, 1944: 213), which the person develops during the state of crisis and which ‘alters the fundamental meaning structures in his/her life’ (Denzin, 1989: 70).

### 9.3 Structure Versus Significant Others: One ‘Call’, Different Journeys

The stories of Maya, Victor, Magda, and Lena in different chapters of this volume show that migrants’ labour market integration is actually part of a wider social system and invariably intersects with such established relational structures as xenophobia, street crime, geo-political order, or simply a local neighbourhood embodied in a bar. While interacting with these structures, labour market integration becomes affected by their in-group relations into which the migrant may be suddenly drawn through a specific crucial event.

In this connection, it is important to understand that such events differ in terms of their source, visibility, composition, and epiphanic effect. In fact, such critical encounters take place because they are provoked by different people, social groups, and institutions. They are generated by social forces (societal rules) or specific people – the latter often acting on behalf of the former and delivering the message from the former to the migrant. Some critical points are rather explicit for the migrant while others may be hidden and not immediately perceived. For example, Lena admits having felt confused for a long time about what was going on in her life before her employment situation stabilised and she started to recognise the impact of certain events upon her career trajectory and specifically the role of that crucial bar encounter. The migrant can experience one turning point that can change their life as well as a few critical events in their interdependence. In other words, turning points take place within relationally and symbolically rich, interactive environments that structure migrants’ journeys.

Migrants’ actions and thoughts invariably come into dialogue with diverse social relations and their symbolic meanings that architecture the host society context, and such relational/symbolic interaction may work differently for each migrant. Therefore, turning points open different identity passages and create different epiphanic effects for different migrants. Thus, different people interviewed by us have experienced different turning points.

Table 9.1 presents the ‘turning point’ typology that we have developed on the basis of these observed differences.

We have found the following categories of ‘integration turning points’. These overlapping typologies can be summarized in Table 9.1 below.

First of all, the turning points that have affected the lives of our informants can be divided into personified, institutionalised (instrumental), and institutionally-personified (instrumentally-personified).

These ‘turning point’ categories differ by their nature: the critical events that our informants experienced had, in fact, different sources. When we think about who had engineered those turning points, we see these three divisions, with the first category comprised of ‘personified’ turning points – or inter-personal, micro-level events that are bound to specific people in banal, everyday situations. As Ellis and Triandafyllidou argue in the chapter about Canada (in this volume), personified turning points are illuminated by divorce, domestic violence, loss of a significant other, interference of friend or relative, and an incidental – yet ground-breaking – meeting with a stranger. Sponsored by specific people and various bonds of intimacy, such events are perceived by our informants as highly emotional.

The importance of such personal encounters is illuminated by the stories of Victor and Lena. As shown above, they have followed the integration scenario of meeting a significant other who becomes a close friend or partner. The taxi driver befriended by Victor and Lena’s Czech boyfriend are the integration mentors who enable these migrants’ job entrance while also providing them with tips not only on how to survive in a new culture but also on how to progress toward a higher level of labour market integration. This is especially common among our female informants, who used their sexuality as an effective tool for integration. For example, in the Czech chapter, Gheorghiev and Numerato narrate the story of the Russian migrant Sofia who met a Slovak man in Moscow, married him, and moved to Prague. It was a personified turning point for her because that meeting had changed her life and helped her reconsider her identity toward a person who had eventually learnt to enjoy living and working in a small city. The beginning of a new life toward labour market integration for many women was also associated with a divorce as ‘the end of an unhappy marriage’ and the beginning of a skilled career. Such events facilitated the informants’ entrance to new institutional contexts and to new loci of power.

The persistence of institutional power as a factor of labour market integration further leads us to see the turning points that are steered by wider social institutions. A biographically critical event, in fact, can be created through an institutional force such as the institutionally administered process of job application, citizenship acquisition, recognition of credentials, asylum application, or law enforcement (for example, refugee detention, imprisonment, or forced repatriation). We call such turning points ‘institutional’ to stress their omnipresent nature and the power of an institution in the restructuring of the migrant’s life if they become responsive to such a turning point.

Institutional turning points create crisis passages that may be unavoidable due to certain circumstances such as the situations of job search or status legalisation. Such situations and the institutional forces they bring in will unavoidably affect migrants

**Table 9.1** Typology of turning points

TP type TP example	Nature				Epiphanic Effect				Visibility		Composition		Epiphanic passage (crisis passage)
	Institutional/ instrumental	Personified	Institutionally- personified	Withdrawal	Generation	Bifurcation	Visible/ overt/ explicit	Hidden/ covert/ implicit	Single	Clustered			
1. Divorce at origin (with liberation)		x				x	x		x				Economic hardship but socio-cultural emancipation
2. Separation from children		x			x		x		x				Family reunification and confirmation of motherhood
3. Imprisonment at destination	x					x	x				x		Extreme marginalisation and temporary identity loss, with consequent conformation of new solidarity bonds
4. Job application failure at destination	x		x	x	x	x	x		x			x	Economic suffering and despair; Switch to an alternative space [motherhood]; or Panache for accumulating new experience
5. 1st bad job at destination	x			x	x	x	x		x			x	Toad pool Waiting Taking a break from career
6. War (with economic downfall and/or gender discrimination)			x		x		x						Optimistic relocation to another context

(continued)

**Table 9.1** (continued)

TP type TP example	Nature			Epiphanic Effect				Visibility		Composition		Epiphanic passage (crisis passage)  Emotional suffering from unfair treatment, loss of hope
	Institutional/ instrumental	Personified	Institutionally- personified	Withdrawal	Generation	Bifurcation	Visible/ overt/ explicit	Hidden/ covert/ implicit	Single	Clustered		
							x	x				
7. Encounter with a prejudiced administrator			x	x			x	x	x		x	
8. Encounter with a solidar- ity network			x		x		x	x	x		x	Alternative career New identity
9. Encounter with prejudice		x					x	x	x		x	Emotional suffering from unfair treatment, loss of hope

who aim at labour market integration. In fact, if labour market integration is one of the migrant's aspirations, they will not bypass such institutionally established hallmarks: they will be emotionally affected by them. The institutional turning point of asylum application decision or recognition of credentials means that the migrant becomes part of, and a symbolic player in, an established and well-structured relational scenario such as negotiation of a job contract, legal status appeal, or planning for a more challenging career step. Our findings show that an institutional context that had immediately swallowed our unprepared informants acted like a devouring beast: the herein expanding crisis passage was extremely difficult to manage without network support.

Institutional turning points can also be viewed as 'instrumental' turning points because they act as instruments of some centralised power that descends upon the migrant. The centralised power that descended upon our informants through such instrumental turning points structured their struggle for the 'lost kingdom' or for the economic benefits of integration that were safeguarded by institutional forces.

The sponsor of this category of turning point could be a firm, an accreditation agency, a police department, or immigration bureaucracy, which, in many cases, is supported by the state itself. Such turning points coincide with what Glaser and Strauss (1971) define as institutionally normalised events to open new but rather standardised status passages. Yet unlike an abstract harbinger of an official status passage, a macro- or meso- level encounter that became an instrumental turning point was always emotionally coloured. It was always perceived by our informants as a very intense emotional event that had initiated more than a new status passage. For them, it had opened a crisis passage or a new identity journey with a new monomyth and new symbolic meanings. The event of a failed job application became a turning point for our informants only when that experience was perceived as painful and challenging. (At the same time, Glaser and Strauss (*ibid.*) note that such institutional events may pass unnoticed emotionally, without becoming the turning points for people who experience them.) It is the high degree of perceived emotionality and life change that can transform a particular event into a turning point.

It is through these turning points that the informants were introduced to the power embodied in such institutions. It is not that they had been previously unaware of the institutional domains of citizenship, asylum application, or labour market that are in place across national contexts. However, the effect and benefits of EU citizenship, qualified employment, or legal residence was understood by the informants specifically through such turning points and solely because those specific events had changed their lives. Such symbolic interaction and cultural learning (the learning of the local life) are vividly illuminated by Ellis and Triandafyllidou in the Canadian chapter: 'The first thing I encountered when looking for official jobs was that employers were looking for someone who was a citizen'. The informant admits having experienced the institutional turning point of the job interview, after which he immediately and unmistakably grasped the symbolic meaning of Canadian citizenship (or permanent residence) for labour market integration. He notes that citizenship was associated with permanence and stability for the employer, while the informant himself was appealing as a figure contradictory to the idea of permanence.



Dealing with such turning points, he and other informants realised that they had to master those instruments of ‘regaining the kingdom’: they came to understand that they had to learn how to appropriately use such political instruments as particulars of accreditation, job specificity, details of the citizenship application process, and job market entrance rules. For example, Lisa (interviewed by the Canadian team) notes that she had to learn ‘how she should be presenting herself to employers’ to appeal on the same level with Canadian citizens. Navigating through the belly of such a beast was not an easy or explicit process, and it turned out to be rather difficult work of migrant agency. The informants needed to learn how to deal with those who were feeding that beast of integration. They needed to understand how to negotiate their turning points with thresholds – that is, with people who represented those institutions of power. Their encounter with those people often became the turning point on its own.

Located at the crossroads of institutions of power and their everyday contexts of communication, such critical events – or ‘institutionally-personified’ turning points – are life-changing encounters with people who represent institutional forces. It is for them that Lisa was mastering her ways of self-representation. Through that appeal, she hoped to manage a wider social structure around the intersecting landscapes of the Canadian job market and immigration law while articulating instrumental decisions on hiring, firing, or status acquisition. Those institutional representatives – e.g., immigration officials, employers, social workers – had immediately engaged in an intense emotional communication with the informants. The reason for such additional emotionalisation of instrumental turning points could be the official’s personal bias of racism, xenophobia, or sexism that deeply touched the informants’ emotions. During a job interview in her home country, Lena had a difficult communication with the ‘all-male group of examiners’ (Gheorghiev and Numerato, in this volume). That traumatic experience – a ‘violent interrogation with deeply misogynistic questions’ – confirmed her decision to leave Ukraine forever (*ibid.*). The informants further admit that such institutionally-personified encounters simultaneously with the structure and the people had opened very dynamic and controversial crisis passages for them.

This classification does not only point to the tie between the turning point and identity passage but illuminates the uniqueness of turning points’ impacts upon people.

## 9.4 War and Pandemic: The Individuation of Agency

The individuation of epiphanic passages and identity boons is seen in how different people may react to one and the same historical event. In fact, a grand historical event such as war does not become a turning point and a start of a new crisis passage for everyone who experiences it.

In this connection, the Russian mini-series *Hunting for the Gauleiter* (2012–2013), which is based on real events around the execution of the high

command German officer in Nazi-occupied Belarus, shows how differently grand historical events such as the second world war can be experienced by different ordinary people. This is illuminated by the encounter between three women: Galina, Maria, and Vera. Their images were taken from the World War II national heroes Yelena Mazanik, Mariya Osipova, and Nadezhda Troyan who organised and executed the assassination of gauleiter Wilhelm Kube in 1943.

For Maria, a former district attorney, the war had become the institutional turning point, while for aspiring Soviet lawyer Vera it was the institutionally-personified turning point having opened a negative identity passage – or a crisis passage – for both of them. Before the war, they had been elite *nomenklatura* workers while during the war they had to live clandestinely in the miserable conditions of constant starvation and fear for their lives. In addition, Vera's father was executed as a hostage by the Nazis. This led both women to immediately hate the Nazi regime and join the local resistance.

On the contrary, the social status of the former waitress Galina was very much raised during the occupation when, in 1941, she was selected by the gauleiter as the governess for his children and his own secret mistress. For her, the war thus became a positive institutionally-personified turning point, opening the door to gainful employment and a more comfortable lifestyle.

Two years later, the occupation became a negatively bifurcating turning point for her because she was forced by the resistance to assassinate the gauleiter against her volition. Blackmailed by the Soviet partisans, she finally agreed out of the fear for her sister and nephew. The other two women (Vera and Maria) eagerly participated in this act of execution and in all other activities of the resistance movement.

In line with this, the accounts of the interviewed Ukrainian and Syrian migrant-women show that the war back home was perceived differently by them and mostly with very specific and individualised critical moments such as job dismissal or a sudden splash of interpersonal violence rather than as a big geo-political change per se. In fact, our informants who come from war-affected areas reveal different degrees of emotionality in their accounts about the military conflict as such.

Holding the same stance, the global effect of the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the interviewed informants differently. For some it has become a new starting point while for others it has acted as a dumping ground. The research of Ellis and Triandafyllidou (Canadian chapter) and Calo and Baglioni (UK chapter) shows that in Canada and the UK migrants who work in the healthcare sector have suddenly found new career opportunities: 'I work in the mental health field. Right now, the Covid is helping me. It is opening more opportunities for me. It's weird. But I am grateful' (*Lisa from Canada*). At the same time, there are informants who complain of increased vulnerability and 'new layers of uncertainty' that have been added by the pandemic to their employment situation: they express frustration with the rapidly increasing instability of their employment (*ibid.*).

This leads us to see a new feature of turning points – their directionality, or epiphanic effect. In fact, turning points, as further supported by our data, can be sub-divided into the following categories: negative turning points of withdrawal; positive (or generative) turning points; and bifurcating turning points.

## 9.5 Epiphanic Bifurcation

The negative turning points are events related to exclusion and rejection. They give way to crisis passages and negatively-coloured epiphanies of withdrawal associated with survival through chronic hardships, often with an uncertain end of being trapped. The informants have developed a sense of withdrawal after having experienced such events as job loss, unsuccessful job application, and sexual bias, especially within the contexts of the pandemic or military conflict. One of the most traumatising experiences for our informants was the institutionally-personified turning point of their failed first job application. As Ellis and Triandafyllidou show in this volume, an emerging epiphany of withdrawal in this case can be the informant's 'broader sense of life in Canada as based on waiting, struggle, and restricted opportunity'. Our informants from the UK and Denmark also confess on the herein developed feelings of 'living with constant uncertainty – as if in a jail' (Bruun Bennetzen and Pace, in this volume). Such negative turning points had led our informants to the epiphanies of 'endless insecurity and struggle', which were further compared with emotional 'entrapment' and 'imprisonment' (Caló and Baglioni, in this volume).

Conversely, the experienced positive turning points terminated those hardships and opened new identity passages of the generative and optimistic nature for our informants. In particular, positive turning points facilitated informants' inclusion and enabled their access to the job market at destination. The generative turning points of a sudden job offer, citizenship acquisition, or a breakthrough from a violent matrimony led to epiphanies that steered various spaces of resilience and resistance. The informants who experienced such turning points suddenly started to use a variety of resources to achieve their labour market integration. They felt like 'the whole world was opening up in front of them', bringing in new freedoms for self-realisation in business and education or in family-building. If for some informants a particular event such as failed first job application was a negative and emotionally-incarcerating turning point, for others the same event could be quite positive and create new opportunities for career change or devotion to the family.

As we can see, the value of experienced turning points is inseparable from the nature of the epiphanies they provoke. However, the observed relationship between our informants' turning points and epiphanies was far from unilateral: it was rather complex. Thus, we have found that there is no direct correlation between a positive turning point and a generative epiphany – or between a negative turning point and an epiphany of withdrawal. A negative turning point may not only cause an attitude of withdrawal but also trigger a generation of positive thinking, creating the effect of epiphanic bifurcation.

By 'epiphanic bifurcation' we mean an attitudinal/epiphanic combination of withdrawal from a negative experience with a concurrent or rapidly sequential generation of a positive epiphany. In this reference, Bruun Bennetzen and Pace (in this volume) think about a Syrian refugee-woman who underwent the pre-emigration divorce from a violent marriage:

When I finished my divorce papers in 2010, I could finally relax a bit. I was looking forward to the future when I arrived in Denmark. I was really happy. It was like I was flying. I thought that now, after all the problems and anxiety that I had had, everything was getting better. I had a lot of hope. (*Habiba, a Syrian refugee-woman in Denmark*)

Bruun Bennetzen and Pace (ibid.) further explain that such experiences of women's liberation from long-term abuse often led to the intersection between the withdrawing epiphany of 'falling behind' (or 'not being good enough') as a 'wife' in the traditional sense and the concurrent generative epiphany of 'being free' as a human being who is entering the new global world. The latter epiphanic element has been a very strong factor of the women's labour market integration. The epiphanic bifurcation is thus about the consolidation by the migrant of such seemingly conflicting experiences enduring the abuse and still managing to obtain a high level of social control over one's life. The latter experience becomes operationalised through a very strong turning point such as divorce.

Our book further shows that the epiphanic bifurcation (or emergence of bifurcating turning points) can be affected by such factors as the migrant's language acquisition (see, for example, Caló and Baglioni in this volume) and employers' personal knowledge and sentiments about the process of migration (see Duomo and Lillie, in this volume). A successful completion by the migrant of a language programme or an encounter with a compassionate immigration official, therefore, may become a major turning point that would steer the epiphanic bifurcation toward a more generative epiphany about integration.

In some cases of epiphanic bifurcation, our informants were experiencing their withdrawing and generative epiphanies almost simultaneously. Yet for the majority, the generative bifurcation appeared much later – months after a withdrawing, negative turning point – as fostered by an additional positive turning point. In these cases, the epiphanic bifurcation was based on the clustering of two turning points and, consequently, on their cumulative effect. In biographic research, positive turning points that do not intersect with hardships lose their value in the 'golden fleece' hunt. As scholars argue, what is taken for granted proves itself to be meaningless in identity quests because an easy life does not teach anything (Campbell, 1991, 2008[1949]; Mackey-Kallis, 2001). Our informants' stories prove that events invoking positive change reveal their biographic power only when they occur within the turning point cluster: when they soothe the effect of major negative events or when their own effect is combatted by sequential painful events. Maria Mexi shows in this volume that migrant-women's entire dedication to their families became substitutive for their employment integration (the 'career of a mother') only when they were comparing its advantages with their failure to access the job market.

For our informants, the effect of epiphanic bifurcation often meant a philosophical acceptance of their own personal limitations and a rather optimistic reconciliation with unsurmountable career barriers. This is shown, across all chapters, in the informants' crisis passage of accessing the labour market and applying for the first job at destination: the turning point of rejection generated both despair and desire to learn new skills. The volunteering experience and the acquisition of EU citizenship became the second turning point to speed up the new skill development or facilitate

the once-impeded job market entrance, or both. In this reference, Caló and Baglioni show that EU citizenship becomes more than a turning point that allows ending the precarious status (and the crisis passage). It also turns into the sought identity boon in terms of both economic/professional achievement and personal growth.

The cumulative/aggregated nature of epiphanies offers us two additional angles to look at turning points. They can be differentiated through the prism of their visibility and composition. On the grounds of visibility, the turning points can be distinguished as visible (overt, or explicit) and hidden (covert, or implicit). The visible turning points were easily recognised by the informants in their retrospective epiphanies during the interview. They related to what Denzin (1989) calls ‘major’ events. They could create new identity passages and epiphanies on their own (as single events) or in a cluster with other events that acted either as the harbingers or aftermaths of the major turning points.

In terms of their composition (or structure), turning points can be thus divided into single and clustered. The experienced cluster of time-separated turning points made the cumulative effect on the epiphany (‘as if nothing had really happened’ and ‘as if the epiphany had just arrived out of the blue’). The initially invisible turning points were often discovered by our informants during their epiphanic moments, when the established rapport between them and the researcher facilitated their recognition of those hidden personified events that had been nested within the turning point clusters.

Such turning points were usually hidden – or nested – within the context of other, bigger institutional events such as war. As shown by Gheorghiev and Numerato in the Czech chapter, the Syrian refugee-woman Naz was initially complaining that the war had ruined her life by having forced her to leave the country. However, she had eventually admitted that it was not only the war but mainly an encounter with gender discrimination at the moment of her university application that had implied no career prospects in Damascus for herself or her daughter.

Such accounts show that the epiphanic bifurcation has been largely grounded in turning point clusters, which combine institutional and personified or institutionally-personified events. An institutional turning point could foster the migrant’s withdrawal and negative perception of the host country, while a personified event that took place later fostered their generative thinking about integration and mobilised their work of migrant agency. Thus, our informants failed their first job interviews and started to feel desperate before meeting a helpful person or joining a solidarity group that opened the door towards believing in oneself as a professional and as a person. And vice versa, in certain critical situations, some informants did lose their hope for a better life – the hope that was later shattered by a traumatic encounter with a rude or biased person or an institutional malpractice. In this reference, the authors of the Danish and Czech chapters illuminate how the cumulative effect of the war in Ukraine or Syria was intensified by impeded educational rights and disrupted career opportunities for skilled women from these countries. Our interviews also show that an intrinsically instrumental event (such as war or pandemic) was paving the platform for another – more personified – turning point (such as gender-based administrative practice) within the geo-political or socio-economic regime of changing power relations.

## 9.6 Identity ‘Boon’: Arriving at the Epiphanic Moment

The epiphanic moment itself can be compared with an identity boon - with the golden fleece of understanding something new about oneself as a changed person and one’s own new place in the new world of the EU. The epiphanic moment may relate to the boon that has been found – for example, the migrant’s generation of integration-wise thinking (boon found). In this reference, our informants’ fully-achieved (found) boons were associated with the re-evaluated spaces of motherhood, political activism, skill acquisition, better lifestyle, or European citizenship. Apart from that, their epiphanic moments also revealed their identity boons that were ‘lost’ somewhere en route or ‘suspended’ (delayed and unfinished). For our informants, the boon lost meant their withdrawal from integration activities and projects, while the boon suspended (or the boon-in-progress) refers to their self-positioning in terms of still searching for the meaning of one’s own migratory journey. The boon suspended thus implies the unfinished, or ‘fluid’, nature of integration.

The crisis passages through which their boons have been attained can be compared with the work of their migrant agency. The observed crisis passages fall within the following categories. On the one hand, we can see the informants’ crisis passages of withdrawal, generation, and bifurcation. Within each passage and across all passages, the boundaries between different strategies – e.g., recuperation, resilience, resistance – could be blurred, conveying complex configurations of migrant agency. Here we can see the two main types of epiphanic passage (two challenges): existential depot and existential battlefield. The ‘depot’ could be the temporary career depot (in the form of waiting for confirmation of job/asylum application) and the ‘toad pool’ eternal depot (where people got stuck, bogged down, and de-skilled). While the ‘battlefield trial’ was associated with new skill development, accumulation of experience signified redemption (or breakthrough) toward a new career or a specific desired job.

Immigration laws, employment contracts, specific traits of national welfare and labour market, socio-cultural practices of job recruitment, and various other frequently mentioned barriers and enablers of integration are the factors that have structured and (re)directed the informants’ epiphanic passages. Their list includes such migrant-network actors as officials and ordinary people with whom our informants came into dialogue and who supported, temporarily obstructed, or completely disrupted the informants’ navigation through their crisis passages. In Joseph Campbell’s (1991, 2008) rhetoric of cultural symbolism, those people resemble the ‘mentors’, ‘thresholds’, and ‘villains’ (‘dragons’) who architecture ‘calls for action’ (or turning points) and whom the responding navigator should respectively befriend, treat with caution, or ‘fight to death’ (‘slaughter’) on their way to the ‘Golden Rune’ (or the epiphanic moment of self-fulfilment).

## 9.7 Fighting for the ‘Kingdom’ – Waiting for the Boon

As our interviews show, the boon of labour market integration is associated for our informants with obtaining legal status and finding the ‘right’ job in their area of specialisation, or at least commensurate with prior professional experience. Such economic position can be compared with what Campbell (2008[1949]) calls ‘regaining the lost kingdom’. Many of our informants had initiated their migratory journeys in conditions of unemployment, war, and violence in their countries of origin – in conditions when their old kingdom was destroyed, their old job was taken away, and their old property was lost or stolen. That is why regaining the lost kingdom through migration was a desired prize for many of them. It was especially meaningful for the women who escaped an abusive marriage/relationship or another situation of domestic violence.

The informants argue that this boon of integration can only be found when a migrant can enter the labour market at destination in the conditions of informational transparency and with full respect to their rights, including adequate salary, working schedule, and work-life balance. Our informants believe that only in these conditions of equity can migrant-newcomers find regular and sufficient employment at destination. Unfortunately, this outcome has been rare. In the majority of our cases, the ‘boon found’ was equivalent to occupying a position and fulfilling professional tasks that were different from their previous professional experience back home. Some understand this situation as the ‘boon achieved’ while others think that they have not yet fully regained their kingdom and cannot reconcile themselves with having only a fraction of it.

All informants agree that the degree to which you will be able to regain your kingdom depends on your first job at destination and on the recognition of your credentials – the latter factors influencing the former. Those who see themselves as ‘waiting for a better opportunity’ picked the first job ‘under-scaled’ available hoping for their ‘second chance’. The herein postponed boon is tied to their current situation of ‘having a very dirty manual job’, which has been often obtained through the irregular market.

Migrant agency in this case intertwines with the segmented nature of European labour markets, which allocate employment resources according to an invisible division of workers as if in castes. It becomes a discriminatory milieu, in which the migrants specialise in certain tasks and jobs (not always of their first choice and generally considered at the bottom of the moral hierarchy of work) while local populations are engaged in other professional (and often more desired) areas. Our informants thus had to take their first jobs in the sectors of personal care, domestic work, agriculture, cleaning, and waste collection. For example, the highly skilled and tertiary-educated Maria arrived in the Czech Republic as an undocumented migrant and had to accept ‘the dirtiest job at the factory for CZK 32 per hour’. In the same stance, Adam, who worked as a medical doctor in his country of origin, is employed in a fast-food restaurant in Canada. The unfinished epiphanic passage of ‘being in-waiting’ or ‘temporarily living in the belly of the beast’ is perceived as a ‘degrading experience’, ‘jail sentence’, or ‘hanging nowhere’.

Some informants may, however, believe that they ‘have taken a step back’ to enable the next – more positive – phase of their agency. They sometimes try to use this ‘backstepping’ time to master some new skills such as language or accumulate residence experience for their prospective citizenship. Support networks, family obligations, and some personal beliefs are among the enablers of the informants’ bifurcation that is associated with resilience and hope.

## **9.8 The Boon of a ‘Toad’ – Boon Lost**

Our research also shows that, while making this compromise of ‘backstepping’, our informants often underestimate the danger of ‘being in-waiting for a long time’. Ndomo and Lillie (in this volume) compare such naïve migrants with a toad from an old African legend, who dove into the cooking pot and tried to swim in the simmering water as its temperature rose; by the time the toad realised that being in the boiling water was not safe anymore, he had no energy to swim back to the surface. He was boiled in the water, remaining there forever.

The authors draw a parallel between the rising temperature of the pot’s water and the labour market sector where migrants are employed in dirty and low paid jobs. In this connection, Simon Duffy (2011) confirms that in highly developed countries, demoralising and stigmatising dirty jobs are often delegated to migrant-newcomers. As Ndomo and Lillie (in this volume) further argue, this employment segment is indeed very harsh, extremely difficult to manage on an optimistic note, and detrimental to labour market integration. The ‘toad’ metaphor thus applies to a newcomer-migrant who underestimates dangers that may be awaiting them in the ‘belly of the beast’ into which they jump in hopes of their return to the kingdom.

This is illuminated by Valerie, who was interviewed by Caló and Baglioni. She accepted the only job available and started working in a beauty studio, providing waxing and other beauty treatments for a retail company, with no plan for her career’s future development. She has literally become ‘boiled in the heating water’ at destination: physically exhausted, impoverished, and stigmatised – and feeling civically dead.

The ‘toad pot’ (or ‘toad pool’) symbolises a specific type of epiphanic passage in the belly of the beast from which there is no way out, while such ‘toad pool’ stories usually remain hidden from the public eye.

## **9.9 The Boon of Solidarity: Still Fighting for the Kingdom – But Not Alone Anymore!**

In this difficult milieu, some migrants, however, do manage to find qualified employment although it may mean an entirely different career. For example, the medical doctor Angela reunited with her expatriate husband, who had been working



in Finland for some time. Unable to find qualified work immediately upon arrival, she had to put her medical career on hold. During that waiting period, she decided to retrain as a nurse, and she is now successfully developing a career in that role. Angela was actively using her social connections and the connections of her professionally-established husband to rebuild her career. Her story shows the importance of networking for newcomer-migrants as well as of combining various resources such as gender and informal work. She had gained her experience through volunteering while her husband had been supporting her financially.

Volunteering is only one way to trail your path into the labour market because it provides work experience in the country of settlement and enables access to new interpersonal ties. Being networked is a key condition to obtaining employment at destination. Danielle, who was interviewed by Caló and Baglioni (in this volume), notes that access to the UK job market 'is not about just finding the link and applying for jobs. It is all about network connection and experience in the UK. So it is not easy to create personal connection if you are not here since you are born here'. Similarly, another migrant interviewed by Ndomo and Lillie notes that 'the way to work in Finland is to know a friend who will recommend you to the company that is looking for workers. This way you can work with them for a very long time as they see how you work, because they are afraid of signing a long-term contract with you in case you are not suitable for the work'.

In other cases, the migrants' commitment couples with opportunities provided by local civil society organisations, and volunteering becomes a valid surrogate of work experience in the country of settlement. This is shown in the story of Diana, who now lives in Switzerland:

The volunteer work that I am now doing is closely connected to my area of professional specialisation. It gives me confidence that I have the ability to work in the field here in Switzerland. For me, it is important to see how a third party can see and value my work. Now I have a good estimate of where and how I can further get a decent job with a decent salary (Mexi, in this volume).

In this connection, all our authors note that the crossroads between ethnic/female solidarity and institutionalisation may lead toward a positive bifurcation among backstepping migrants. This is illuminated by the effectiveness of such an institutionally-personified enabler of integration as support from municipal case workers of the diasporic origin for our female informants. However, the 'network' solution may not work equally for everyone. For example, Bruun Bennetzen and Pace (in this volume) argue that skilled women who arrive as dependent migrants from North Africa are often marginalised in their network membership and, consequently, in their job search. These women complain about the inadequacy of public services and the scarcity of childcare resources. For example, a recently divorced woman from Yemen who initially followed her husband to Denmark confesses to having no access to the mobilisation of her resources:

I think you will hear this from a lot of women you interview: due to the lack of support from your partner, you always feel like you are falling behind. And when you are falling behind, you don't feel that you are good enough. I feel very sad because things are not working out here (ibid.).

Thus regaining (or rebuilding) the kingdom through the migrant network may work well for some migrants, depending on their country of origin.

### **9.10 The Boon of the ‘Sacred Marriage’ – The Boon of Womanhood**

To what extent do material benefits remain important and to what extent can migrants be resilient when facing their loss? Here we can ask what is more important for our informants to ‘regain the kingdom’ and return to their career or revive their fragile ‘sacred marriage’. The epiphanic conflict between the economic incentives and moral benefits is sometimes resolved by our informants in favour of the latter. This is seen in the accounts of those who re-evaluated their humanistic values after having been affected by the critical event of divorce, separation from children, or imprisonment.

The feminisation of positive epiphanic bifurcation toward the ‘sacred marriage’ (or family preservation) is illuminated by the trajectories and epiphanic moments of migrant women who are mothers seeking to restore their relationship with their separated children. A negative turning point (such as detention, divorce, or job loss) becomes positively bifurcating for such migrants when it relates to motherhood or political activism. The dynamics of the bifurcated epiphanic passage manifests itself in the women’s progression from aspirational failure at destination and consequent frustration – toward hope in the form of expecting a decision on asylum or job application. Such women experience additional turning points that are steered by their ‘mentors’ from ethnic or gender solidarity networks, or both.

The reconciliation with a less qualified job may also be seen as an integration boon of womanhood. This is illustrated by the liberation of battered wives from their violent husbands or other abusive familial ties at origin and their consequent orientation toward a ‘normal working life’ at destination. Such a woman may see her less-qualified job at destination as a desirable outcome of integration because an event such as a job can enable her independence. The preserved ‘sacred marriage’ is embodied here by various spaces of womanhood, whose moral values outweigh the incomplete material benefits.

### **9.11 Liquid Agency, Liquid Integration: Concluding Remarks**

This book brings together a variety of experiences of labour market integration that have been lived through by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (MRAs) who have settled in Europe and North America over the last 7 years. These biographic experiences have been located in Canada and southern, northern, central, and

western Europe (namely: Denmark, Finland, Italy, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and the UK). While dealing with rapidly increasing inflows of economic and humanitarian migration through a variety of channels, these countries have different political-institutional approaches towards welfare service provision and labour market organisation. They range from States with strong welfare systems (like Denmark and Canada) to countries with rigid labour market policies and fewer social provisions (like Italy).

This book is unique in its in-depth exploration of the interactional context around labour market integration across Europe: a nuanced examination of the role of specific events and daily encounters in migrants' lives enables a better understanding of wider social forces that may shape their agency and labour market integration (for instance, marriage, networking, xenophobia, immigration law). We achieve this through the innovative framework of interpretive biography, while looking into integration from the angle of epiphanic passage – or the nexus between the turning point (an event that challenges the life of a migrant), migrant agency (the process of making decisions on this challenge), and the epiphany (a consequent identity change that conveys a new perspective on integration). The adoption of the interpretive biographical approach pays off as it allows us to identify both dynamics of, and subtle similarities in, MRAs' experiences, as well as to analyse the interaction between individual biographies and policy environments without being hampered by contextual differences.

'What is labour-market integration?', we may ask. And what would be the best way to think about it? Our book shows that integration is a process of establishing yourself as a professional and as a person in a host society. It is a long journey of responding to critical events, encountering and overcoming various obstacles, and possibly finding a desired outcome. However, it may happen that the outcome may be not what was initially expected.

It is a difficult journey during which the migrant may be lost, depending on how ready they are for it. It is therefore an outcome of migrant agency that follows a socio-cultural scenario, although with individualised configurations. It is a process of self-discovery through which the migrant not only finds a better place to live and work but also re-evaluates the symbolic meanings and social relations that they encounter. It is a complex socio-cultural scenario in which each migrant is both the actor and the director.

Integration is affected by specific events, which, however, trigger more complex relations and engage migrants in complex existential passages. Responding to a particular event, the migrant undergoes a crisis passage during which they re-examine their goals and values before finding some meaning in their new life. It is a biographical journey as if through the belly of the beast.

Migrants experience various kinds of critical events. These events are steered by institutions or people – or both at the same time. These events may provoke withdrawal and generation of some positive ideas and practices. But they can also be quite ambivalent and offer multi-directional trajectories; they can provoke epiphanic bifurcations.

These events may be apparent for the migrant but may also go unnoticed until a certain point. The migrant often comes to understand their meaning in retrospect, during the interpretive biographic interview.

These events open new crisis passages (epiphanic passages) for migrants, through which the migrant experiences various kinds of physical but also emotional and intellectual hardships that may be somehow released when the migrant reaches the epiphanic moment of self-revelation.

This interpretive-biographic architecture of migrant agency points to its fluid, or liquid, nature. By nature, migrant agency and its outcome of labour market integration are both liquid because they can manifest themselves in a variety of forms: stepping back and waiting for the second chance, searching for or mobilising networks, looking for a job, and learning new skills. It is liquid because it is never final: it can be interrupted, delayed, broken, or stretched. Backsliding migrants who wait and learn as well as migrants who do not work in desired jobs but devote themselves to their families or engage in volunteering can be strong, resilient agents and well-integrated people, depending on how they understand their own integration. The relativity of labour market integration is further proof of its fluidity.

The ‘belly of the whale’, or the ‘epiphanic passage’, is actually the negotiation between the economic incentives/priorities and humanistic values. The so-called lost/regained kingdom and sacred marriage interweave and may have different meanings for different migrants. The dynamics of the epiphany are revealed in the consolidation of integration forces. This is perhaps another creative way to think about labour market integration.

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