

From surviving to thriving: ‘Success stories’ of highly skilled refugees in the UK

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Abstract

This article is located in the context of the refugee emergency in Europe and responses to it. We draw data from a qualitative study exploring challenges and factors that facilitated professional success in the experiences of five highly skilled refugees as they seek gainful employment in the UK. Findings emphasise the importance of motivation and resilience, and of (re)building social networks in professional (re)integration. Relatedly, the paper also examines how the concept of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ might guide ethical responses to the needs of these groups.

Il presente articolo si colloca all’interno del contesto dell’emergenza dei rifugiati in Europa e delle risposte ad essa. Lo studio di matrice qualitativa esplora le sfide incontrate da cinque rifugiati altamente qualificati nella ricerca di lavoro nel Regno Unito e i fattori che ne hanno determinato il successo professionale. I risultati della ricerca enfatizzano l’importanza che ricoprono la motivazione, la resilienza e la capacità di (ri)costruire una rete di contatti sociali per la (re)integrazione professionale. Inoltre, l’articolo esamina come il concetto di ‘competenza comunicativa interculturale’ possa collaborare ad elaborare delle risposte etiche alle necessità di questi gruppi.

Key words: Refugee reintegration; intercultural communicative competence; resilience; ethics.

Introduction

Europe is currently experiencing a major influx of refugees. Worldwide movements of people seeking refuge have caused widespread alarm in the global North, despite the fact that globally, the numbers have been relatively stable for many years. Europe, however, is currently experiencing the effects of the arrival of people seeking asylum and being granted status as refugees. By the end of 2015, the EU as a whole received over 1.2 million first-time asylum claims (IOM, 2015) with the main countries of destination being Germany, France, Greece, Spain, Italy and, to a lesser extent, the UK (Eurostat, 2019). By 2018, the UK, the context of our study, had hosted an aggregate of 126,720 refugees and 45,244 people had pending asylum cases (UNHCR, 2018).

A small but symbolically significant sub-group of these people are highly-qualified professionals — teachers, doctors, accountants, and lawyers, for example — who, having been displaced, often find themselves in low-skilled, minimum-wage jobs for which they are over-qualified. Prior educational attainment among refugees as a whole varies widely depending on individual circumstances and country of origin. Key information about this group is currently insufficient to get a clear idea, and any certainty of numbers in individual countries and across the E.U. as a whole is lacking. However, according to a report published by the European Commission (2017a), in 2014 one out of five refugees aged 15-64 in the E.U. had tertiary education. In the case of Syria, the largest single country of origin of refugees, estimates suggest that there are as many as 2,000 university professionals and a minimum of 100,000 university-qualified students amongst the refugee population in the E.U. (King, 2016), a large

majority of whom had prior professional experience before being forced to flee. It should be noted that Syria is relatively unusual in having a relatively large-scale higher education sector prior to the recent mass displacement of much of its population.

Labour market participation is central to the successful integration of refugees in their host countries and to the promotion of equitable relationships between host and guest communities (Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019). Previous studies on refugee professional integration agree on the importance of language proficiency (i.e. oracy and literacy in the language of the host country) in increasing job opportunities and in facilitating social and political participation (e.g. ACTA, 2017; Benseman, 2012; OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2018). However, the role that intercultural communicative competence plays in supporting the social and professional reintegration of highly skilled refugees is currently under-investigated.

This paper offers an exploration of part of the empirical and theoretical basis for a European Commission-funded project designed to help the professional reintegration of refugees in Europe, *Critical Skills for Life and Work*.¹ The project was carried out by a consortium of partners in Austria, the Netherlands and the UK. A specific aim of the project was to develop language learning support materials to facilitate professional reintegration by refugees. The project therefore necessarily focused on the intercultural and its construction in relation to the experience of displacement and attempted professional reintegration. It also posed a series of questions for further dialogue in relation to the refugee emergency and to the framing of ideas of intercultural communicative competence. The study's specific aims were, firstly, to understand the contextualized trajectories of highly skilled former refugees who have successfully reconnected with professions in Europe after displacement and, secondly, to explore these people's perspectives on what factors facilitated or inhibited their professional

reintegration. The idea was to draw on their experiences to guide the development of appropriate and helpful materials for the project's target groups.

There has been little research to date into highly skilled refugees and their employability trajectories. Here, our aim is to offer an insight into participants' post-displacement personal and professional journeys, as they share beliefs about what other skilled refugees need to support their transitions into their professional roles.

Theoretically, we are guided by a socio-constructivist framework and by its concern for human experience in social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Gergen, 2009), to provide an understanding of how participants construct and make sense of their own experiences as highly skilled refugees in the UK. The study is guided by the following research questions: 1) What factors (if any) hindered participants' professional reintegration? and 2) What factors (if any) supported their professional reintegration?

Having introduced the issues addressed in this article, we will now review the relevant literature and present the theoretical underpinnings, the study and the methodology. We then discuss the emergent findings prior to presenting our conclusions and their implications for researchers and relevant stakeholders.

Refugee reintegration and careers: previous research

As Hebbani and Kawaja (2019, p. 921) contend in their research on professional aspirations of refugees in Australia: 'refugees and the general population do not start off from the same level playing field as ... [refugees] ... come to the country severely disadvantaged when compared to the local population or most other migrants (on other visas).' Essentially, for refugees, searching for a job and labour market integration are situated at the interface between individual and contextual factors that they do not have any control over, having to depend instead, for example, on particular

organisations/employers or countries (Kogan, 2016; Pajic *et al.*, 2018). A lack of agency is a major issue.

According to the European Commission (2017b), legislative and administrative procedures are also major barriers to refugee employment in Europe. Different European countries implement different policies and practices to facilitate the labour market integration of refugees, with policy heavily influenced by local contextual factors such as attitudes to refugees and asylum-seekers.

Previous research suggests that major barriers exist for highly skilled refugees and migrants who seek appropriate qualified employment. These include having to learn the local language, lack of work experience in their new countries and understanding of the local professional labour market, and previous qualifications not being recognised (see Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012; Sturesson *et al.*, 2019). Illness and caring duties might also have negative impact on highly skilled refugees' own aspirations for their future (Hebbani & Kawaja, 2019). Furthermore, compared to refugee groups fleeing from previous conflicts — for example those who fled from the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s — post-2014 refugees from Asia and Africa might face additional problems due to their (real or perceived) different socio-cultural backgrounds and ethnicity (Pajic *et al.*, 2018; Vončina & Marin, 2019).

There is a small, emerging strand of research on 'refugee careers', i.e. how refugees re-enter employment and how this can be facilitated. For example, Pajic *et al.* (2018) use career construction theory to show that psychological capital improves job search effectiveness. A recent study conducted by Hebbani and Kawaja (2019) exploring career aspirations of refugees in Australia showed that the majority of them aspire for professional and managerial jobs. Although these studies support an understanding and improvement of employment outcomes of the general refugee

population, it is arguable that there is a lack of systematic research on the factors that support highly skilled refugees to rebuild their careers, and on the specific barriers that they face. A further issue is that not many studies differentiate between migrant workers and refugees, meaning that the special situation of refugees (see Cortes, 2004; Reitz, 2002), involving factors like trauma and lack of financial support and necessary professional certifications, is disregarded.

A number of initiatives are taking place across Europe to support the social and professional integration of refugees into their new countries. Such initiatives include the provision of face-to-face language support delivered by universities, vocational and training organisations, local and international NGOs and activist groups, as well as online resources for refugees and those who work with them. For example, the Council of Europe has developed a toolkit in seven languages designed to assist organisations providing language support for adult refugees (available at www.coe.int/lang-refugees). Free resources created internationally include a set of on-line resources by the UNHCR for teachers working with refugees (available at <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/teaching-about-refugees.html>). However, highly skilled refugees are a specific adult target group that is currently under-researched and not well served by education providers. It is this gap that this study tries to fill.

Theoretical background

The study presented in this paper is informed in particular, by concepts of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and ‘third place’ (Kramsch, 1993, 1999). The concept of intercultural competence refers to ‘the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or

divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world' (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7).

Over the past 25 years, a number of models of ICC have been developed (see Ladegaard, 2018). To understand the experience of highly skilled refugees, we draw on the work of Michael Byram and in particular on his intercultural communicative competence, or ICC model (1997, 2009). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) categorise the model as a co-orientational model, as it sees the ability of interlocutors to reach mutual understanding and a shared level of worldviews as fundamental to initiate intercultural competence. The ICC model was initially conceived for application within the context of foreign language education as was the case for the *Critical Skills for Life and Work* Project.

In his work, Byram (1997, 2009) challenges 'native speaker models' of language learning where learners are judged by native speaker standards (see also Young & Walsh, 2010; Young & Sachdev, 2011). Instead, he emphasises the importance of engaging, through a foreign language, in intercultural communication and interaction with interlocutors with different culturally-influenced values, beliefs, and assumptions. The model is premised on the view that intercultural communicative competence requires linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence in a foreign language. The model is constructed around five separate but interdependent components:

- Intercultural attitudes: the ability to suspend disbelief towards individuals' own and other cultures. Curiosity and openness are central to this *savoir*, which enables individuals to 'decentre' and see the world from the perspective of an outsider who might have a different set of values and beliefs.

- Knowledge: not primarily knowledge about a specific culture, but rather knowledge of how social groups and identities function and what is involved. It focuses on social groups in one's own culture as well on social groups in other cultures and on general interaction processes.
- Skills of interpreting and relating: it stresses the importance for learners to acquire the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with knowledge(s) they already have.
- Skills of discovery and interaction: it refers to the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills in real-time communication and interaction.
- Critical cultural awareness: concerns the ability to interpret, evaluate and negotiate perspectives, practices and products in one's own and others' cultures which might lead to some degree of acceptance of new ideas.

The concept of critical cultural awareness is central in the model and it represents the developed outcome of the other four components (Byram, 2009). It involves not only critical thinking but also social transformation through critical self-reflection, intercultural dialogue, and action (Guilherme, 2000; Holmes, 2014; Houghton, 2012; Porto, 2019).

The model has attracted some criticism (see Byram 2012, 2014), for example, for being Eurocentric and not explaining how the components work together (Risager, 2007); for not clearly articulating the linguistic dimension of intercultural competence (Liddicoat *et al.*, 2003); and for neglecting the affective component of ICC (Phipps and Gonzalez, 2004; Borghetti, 2017). We will return to some of this criticism in our conclusion.

Despite the limitations of the model, we chose it to frame our work because it articulates the multifaceted nature of ICC and seemed most relevant to the needs and situations of our participant group. In this paper, we do not use the model for pedagogical purposes (e.g. assessing participants' ICC) but to make sense of participants' journeys to professional reintegration through an intercultural lens and, in particular, to understand their ICC development.

The second key theoretical concept that informs our study is Kramersch's (1993, 1999) notion of 'third place', which considers the space between cultures that language learners may reach as they develop ICC. Kramersch (1993: 236) explains that learners are 'located between the culture [they] grew up with and the new cultures he or she being introduced to'. As insiders and outsiders of both cultures, learners need to learn how to operate in new ways as they develop new awareness of their own identity and positioning. The concept of 'third place' is important in relation to our study because it enables us to understand the powerfully transformative nature of the refugee experience.

The study

The three local project teams (in the UK, the Netherlands and Austria) investigated in detail the lives and experiences of people who had successfully made the transition from refugee status back into the professional sphere. This was done through qualitative interviews ('success stories') which sought to discover exactly how participants had made the transition, what had helped them, what had hindered them, and what they could pass on to others like them by way of advice. This article focuses on the five 'success stories' gathered in the UK.

Participants

The identification of research participants was purposive, a common feature of qualitative research (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) and was based on participants' educational and professional background and on their willingness to be part of the study.

The table below offers further details about the participants:

| Name, gender, age | Country of origin | Number of years in the UK | Previous occupation | Current occupation |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Benjamin, M, 47 | Eritrea | 20 years | Financial controller (Eritrean Government) | Property developer and CEO of a local NGO |
| Muneer, M, mid 40s | Iraq | 16 years | Trainee doctor | Lead psychiatrist and university lecturer |
| Sadaf, F, mid 40s | Middle East* | 11 years | Translator and language teacher | Writer, translator and language teacher |
| Hanes, M, mid 30s | Eritrea | 11 years | Maths and computer science teacher | Mechanical engineer |
| Khaled, M, late 40s | Syria | 3 years | Civil engineer | Civil engineer |

*The participant asked for her country of origin not to be specified

All participants completed full degrees (undergraduate + MA-5 years) in their countries and two of them, Benjamin and Sadaf, completed a PhD in the UK. Benjamin and Hanes, the two Eritrean participants, completed their education in English while the other participants had learnt English as adults and had used it in professional contexts.

The participants' command of foreign languages varies. For example, Hanes speaks nine languages to varying degrees (e.g. Tigrinya, Tigre, Arabic, Italian, English), Benjamin and Sadaf speak four languages; Muneer three languages and Khaled two (Arabic and English). All participants are, indeed, multilingual, however only Sadaf, who is a trained translator, reported a specific previous interest in foreign language learning. Further information about the participants and their backgrounds is provided in the findings section.

Data collection and analysis

The data collection took place between January and March 2018. The data set includes five one-to-one semi-structured interviews which lasted between 56 and 76 minutes. Participants were asked open-ended questions on the following topics: (i) travel and intercultural experiences prior to coming to the UK; (ii) professional experiences in their country of origin and in the UK; (iii) experiences of language learning/linguistic adjustment in the UK; (iv) experiences of education and training in their country of origin and in the UK; (v) factors that were of support (as they rebuilt their careers); (vi) factors that were a particular hindrance; (vii) key advice they would give to others in a similar position.

The interviews did not explore the specific circumstances of the participants' displacement, although some of them chose to share some details with the researcher (Ganassin). Instead, the interviews focused on participants' wider experience of rebuilding their careers and becoming 'success stories'. Following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012), data were subjected to thematic analysis which involves researchers familiarising themselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. The initial organisational principle

was the research questions. The analysis revealed six major umbrella themes (experiencing intercultural encounters, expectations and professional goals, obstacles to employment, factors that facilitated employment, understanding success, ways forward) within which there were several sub-themes. In this paper, we will be focusing on the themes established under the two umbrellas of ‘obstacles to employment’, ‘factors that facilitated employment.’

The study received ethical approval from the university where it was based. Two participants were recruited through a local partner charity and the other three participants were part of our previous professional network. Before the interviews, participants were fully informed about the ethical principles around anonymity and confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and the right to ask questions about the study. All data were recorded anonymously, and only information about participants’ country of origin, profession, age group and gender was recorded along with the data. The interviews were audiotaped and notes were taken to complement them. All identifying features (e.g. details of displacement and relocation) were removed unless otherwise stated by participants. Participants were interviewed in a location of their choice. The interview venues included a local café, a hospital, a local charity, and a local university library.

Researcher positioning and languages of the research

As the study was located in an English-speaking macro-context, the data were collected in English, which was also a shared second language between researcher and participants. We argue that a common background of migration – as was the case here – can make the researcher and researched approachable to each other. A shared linguistic identity as ‘foreigners’ might be beneficial in research conducted in a context of

migration and displacement as linguistic power between researcher and researched is neutralised, and the researcher's non-judgemental acceptance of participants' (English) language skills can be beneficial to the researcher-researched relationship (Ganassin & Holmes, 2013; 2019). Italian — Ganassin's first language — was occasionally used in the interviews with the two Eritrean participants who were educated in Italian (and English) in their country.

'Success stories' of highly skilled refugees: developing ICC beyond the five components

Following the categorisation proposed by Kogan (2016), we discuss factors that hindered and supported participants' professional integration in terms of contextual (related to the context of displacement, e.g. immigration policies) and individual factors (related to the participants' personal background, e.g. language skills).

Factors that hindered professional reintegration

Participants' journeys to their current professions varied according to: a) nationality and the circumstances of their application for refugee status; b) personal circumstances (e.g. family situation); professional and job market-related factors. Some participants took several years to re-enter their professions for reasons including their status in the UK and the lack of recognition of their pre-existing qualifications. For others, the transition was quicker. For example, Khaled began once again to work as an engineer six months after his arrival in the UK, as soon as he had obtained his paperwork and he was legally allowed to work. The two main factors that hindered participants' professional reintegration were financial constraints and problems with the local bureaucracy and legislation.

Financial constraints

Consistent with what previous literature on refugee employment shows (Hebbani & Kawaja, 2019), lack of financial capital and the inability to access alternative funding to pay, for example, for re-training are major obstacles to people's professional reintegration. Muneer needed to pay for his English language and professional certificates, whilst Sadaf wanted to teach a second language (Farsi or Turkish) or to be an ESOL teacher but 'it is so expensive and there was no funding for that'. Benjamin explains:

The number of qualified refugees is huge but because of the lack of support from the government and the agencies and also because they want to do something now, they put it off and after 4 or 5 years they will forget their profession and that is a waste a talent for themselves and for the community.

Lack of financial resources is a factor which is also related to a lack of legal status as, under the current legislation, asylum seekers are not allowed to work in the UK and often find themselves in a limbo (see discussion in Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019). Nevertheless, all participants were able to achieve their goals, often through temporary unskilled employment. Muneer recalls: 'I worked in a pizza shop. I worked in a news agency shop. I looked at it as something temporary when I was doing exams.'

Problems with local bureaucracy and legislation

All participants encountered problems with the UK government bureaucracy and legislation that affected their personal and professional reintegration. Khaled's family had housing issues whilst Benjamin and Sadaf had to wait for years for a decision on their asylum case.

The literature also indicates that recognition of previous degrees might be challenging for refugees (Martín *et al.*, 2016). This was not generally the case for our participants, and only Hanes had issues in getting his overseas degree recognised in the UK:

I arrived in the UK and I tried to use my qualification, my degree but I cannot and I was not granted refugee status for about 15 months [...]. I had problems with the UK NARIC, I had to do another degree. I sent everything to the UK NARIC and they said ‘we don’t really care of what the [previous] degree is we only really care of how long you have been in higher education’.

UK NARIC is the designated UK national agency for the recognition and comparison of international qualifications and skills. Hanes was not able to obtain a Statement of Comparability, a document issued by UK NARIC that confirms how overseas qualifications compare to the UK system. However, because he had stated in his application that he had previously been in higher education, Hanes found himself in the position of not being able to use his degree and, at the same time, not to be eligible for a student loan. However, again, participants demonstrated their ability to cope with major setbacks.

Hanes continues: ‘I got my status in March 2009 and then I went [to] apply for university and I went to university in September. I worked in a factory [...] I did interpreting jobs once a week and focused on my studies.’

Other factors: mental health and language proficiency

Overall, participants agreed on the role played by contextual factors in hindering their professional reintegration. They also advanced two other reasons that might prevent other highly skilled refugees re-entering their professions: mental health and language proficiency. Sadaf referred to the experiences of other refugees, saying that ‘wellbeing

might represent a major issue'. Muneer, who currently works as lead psychiatrist in a local mental health clinic, confirmed that 'people [who are displaced] might have some mental health difficulties.'

According to the European Migrant Network (EMN, 2015), refugees perceive limited language knowledge as the main obstacle to finding employment. All of our participants had sufficient proficiency on arrival to function on a day-to-day basis. However, most reported difficulties with the higher level, professional reintegration-specific and culturally appropriate language they needed to regain professional employment (see Sturesson *et al.*, 2019). This point is developed next, where we turn to factors that supported reintegration.

Factors that supported professional reintegration

Participants defined the factors that supported their professional reintegration in the following areas: English language (including intercultural communication); rebuilding their personal and professional network; being able to contribute to their new community; and motivation and resilience.

Language

All participants stated that their appropriate, high-level English language skills were vital to re-enter their professions. Sadaf had worked as a translator in her country and, although she felt that she lacked experience of using English in face-to-face communication, she considered her own language background as a major advantage: 'without knowing English, it would have been really difficult. Language is a huge barrier'. Studies on refugee careers focus on language proficiency as a major factor that can hinder professional reintegration (Hebbani & Kawaja, 2019). In our study, the role

of (English) language is inextricably related to the development of ICC as are the other factors that supported participants to re-enter employment.

Even participants who were educated in English and whose proficiency conformed to Frimberger's (2016) conceptualisation of 'language plenty' felt that they were not prepared for their new life in the UK. Benjamin explains:

I used to watch Hollywood movies, that's the only education that I had about the culture of the West and that did not prepare me. When I came here it was not difficult for me to pick it [English language] up but I was not prepared [...]

Hanes initially tried to work as a teaching assistant but 'it was not possible because first thing the culture, the [local] language, the situation was not good'.

However, participants' retrospective analysis of their 'success' shows that they were able to develop ICC and to understand not only how things work in their new country but to understand, as Benjamin explains, 'that people are basically the same.'

The importance of understanding 'the system and the culture' of a new context resonates with Byram's (1997) skills of interpreting and relating, which involve the ability to interpret symbols and events of other cultures and to relate such interpretation to one's own culture and experience. Language proficiency, according to Sadaf, 'opened a first door' but much more effort was required in terms of rebuilding one's life and career.

Ability to (re)build one's personal and professional network

Byram (1997) explains that a curious attitude is a prerequisite for the development of ICC because any development in skills and knowledge assumes an active will to engage with different beliefs, values and behaviours. It is arguable that our participants found themselves in a position where they had to engage with a totally new context after they

were forced to leave their countries, and to rebuild completely new social and professional networks.

Participants valued their ability to transfer their pre-existing interpersonal skills, as it evident from Benjamin's account:

Ambition is what I [have] got but also interpersonal skills you have to be good to people, and listen and understand and learn.

Muneer also explains that his ability to 'fit in' helped him to rebuild a personal and professional network:

The environment and people [helped me to feel integrated]. I've always fitted in well. It is also a reciprocal thing as I am easy going and flexible.

All participants valued their ability to re-build a social and professional network and to build relationships with people who could help them. Although he had some relatives in London, Benjamin did not have any contacts in the north of England where he was placed after his arrival. However, he was soon able to develop a new network mainly through his interpreting job:

The thing is that the social network you had back home disintegrated but you create a new one from scratch. The contacts I had in London were not useful but I made new ones through my interpreting job.

Sadaf considers herself a very introverted person. Nevertheless, her circumstances pushed her to create a new social network and to seek help from others:

The things that helped me the most were the networking and studying [...] I tried very hard.

Contributing to the new community

Contributing to the new community as a way of finding a new sense of belonging emerges as a distinctive component of the refugee experience. All participants valued how volunteering helped their own personal and professional journey. Although he

could not use his degree, Hanes found a volunteering job as an IT technician for a local charity to make use of his computer science skills. Khaled volunteered in a local engineering firm to get experience and a sense of ‘how the system works.’ He also emphasises the importance of supporting others even when his own family was facing a difficult situation:

I also support newly arrived refugees. [...] I deal with some organisations that take care for refugees. We find solutions for the families. We want to be part of the community. We say ‘we are Syrians. We are neighbours. We look for peace. We are welcoming’.

Sadaf considered volunteering important to fight her sense of isolation:

I wanted to volunteer. I did it because I did not want to stay at home, I wanted to be out as much as possible. It was difficult because I was working at the restaurant but the rest of the time I just really wanted to be part of the community.

A recent study conducted in Austria shows that volunteering for asylum seekers yields both social and symbolic capital as it supports participants to position themselves as potential citizens (Hassemer, 2019). Our participants indeed saw the practical benefits of volunteering (e.g. networking and gaining/using their professional skills) as they demonstrated ability to make rational choices about their situation, ‘to be realistic’ in Khaled’s words. It is also evident that participants were not only able to distance themselves from the familiar and to understand, as we saw in the previous section, how the ‘unfamiliar’ works (Kramsch, 2009), but they actively sought a sense of belonging to a new ‘third place’ they could not just be part of but also contribute to.

Motivation and resilience

The final sub-theme shows the importance for participants of maintaining a positive outlook even when they encountered major difficulties. Except for Khaled, who had a quick transition back to his previous profession, the other participants initially

undertook jobs for which they were over-qualified. Nevertheless, none of them complained. Muneer reflects on his experience of working night shifts in a pizza shop and of studying during the day:

It was something that added to my experience in life, which possibly made me understand the community, it made me understand how to talk to people.

Hanes credits his success to his ability to endure hardship, and to focus on his goal to regain his professional status as an engineer:

[What helped me was] adaptation and being able to keep going and never giving up. [...] in my mind I always believed in myself, I was concentrating on my degree, I was more focused on doing my degree. I don't know why but I always believed that I would have found a job through that route. That was my main goal. I finished my degree, all by myself. I started my applications, day and night, I sent maybe 30 applications to different companies.

Benjamin echoes Hanes' perspective as he explains that:

I had not seen my family for years. At some point I was working, paying for my education and living and I was doing a teaching qualification and a PhD. I trained my mind only to look at the positive, I went blank. I cannot remember any obstacles that I didn't turn into something positive.

As Byram himself (2009) acknowledges, the list of the ICC components included in his 1997 model is not exhaustive, and it does not include, for example, personality traits that contribute to ICC. To understand our participants' experiences, we draw on the concept of resilience, that is 'the capacity of individuals to cope successfully with significant change, adversity or risk' (Lee & Cranford, 2008, p. 213). Luthar (2006) explains that resilience is not a permanent trait, but a developmental process in which 'new strengths and vulnerabilities emerge with changing life circumstances' (p. 741). In the words of Sadaf:

Refugees came here and they have to survive. At home, everything is taken for granted. Here there are only two ways:

either live or not to live and if you want to live just find something to fight for. [...] I was dying but I had to save myself.

ICC and resilience

While this study provided evidence to support Byram's ICC framework – particularly in relation to the factors that support participants' professional reintegration – the importance of resilience as a key component of their 'success' emerged from the analysis of participants' accounts. There is clear evidence that all participants had developed not only ICC but also resilience during their journey to successful integration and employment (Mercer & Babić, 2019). This additional dimension, which emerges from the study, does not play a prominent role in current models of ICC, as we noted in our review of literature above. The refugee experience is very different from most other experiences of sojourn abroad and migration which inform the development of most models of ICC. None of our participants wanted to leave their original home country, or had time to prepare to do so. Furthermore, none of them knew British people or had ever thought to live in or visit the UK. Nevertheless, they were able to successfully transition back into the professional sphere. Their intercultural communicative competence, building on their pre-existent English language proficiency, related in all cases to resilience and motivational factors, and contributed to their success, as defined by their professional reintegration.

From surviving to thriving: supporting others

We concluded the interviews by asking participants: 'What advice would you give to someone who has recently migrated to the UK?' Three main pieces of advice were offered. Firstly, the importance of improving one's language skills by learning the

language of the host country. In Sadaf's words: 'The situations are different but first of all learning the language'. Hanes suggests to other highly skilled refugees in the UK that: 'if the background it's not from English speaking countries they [educated refugees] have to go for it' (i.e. improve their English language skills)

Secondly, participants suggest that others focus on their own professional development. Khaled pointed out, however, that this might be a long and frustrating process. It is important 'to be patient to rebuild yourself'. In the participants' views, the most important steps are getting a locally-recognised qualification (either by getting an overseas qualification recognised or by re-training), and to identify the career pathway that they want to pursue and any source of support (e.g. funding they can access):

Find something and study, if you want to be a hairdresser, a chef, in you want to work in art, higher education, whatever. Identify those funding from the government. (Sadaf)

Now these people who have been doctors and so on, it's all dormant, but they can revive it. It is about promotion of the fact that there is help. Maybe not adequate but there is help. [...] It is possible being successful.
(Benjamin)

Thirdly, all participants encouraged others in a similar situation to actively try to build a new social network, as suggested by Muneer: looking for voluntary work in their sector to 'go back to track and to work harder and achieve their ambitions.' As Sadaf explains:

Try to integrate, don't stay at home, do not give into emotions, maybe into the past, do not give into the past, because the past is over.

As participants drew on their own experiences to give advice to others in a similar situation, they encouraged them to actively look for opportunities (e.g. courses that they can attend) and to focus on individual factors over which they can have a certain

level of control. In Hanes' words: 'if you try hard there are a lot of opportunities, that's why I say you can do what you want if you put [in]? the extra amount of work.'

As we discuss the conclusions of our study in the final part of the article, we draw on participants' advice to propose our own recommendations. They also strongly inform our conclusions.

Recommendations and conclusions

This article has investigated how a group of highly skilled refugees in the UK experienced a transition back to employment commensurate with what they had enjoyed before displacement. Our analysis showed that participants' professional reintegration was hindered mainly by contextual factors beyond their control (e.g. length of the asylum process), whilst participants credited their successful reintegration mostly to individual factors (e.g. their ability to build a new personal and professional network).

The exploration of participants' ICC development resulted in a number of findings which could not always be coded using Byram's ICC model – our proposed theoretical framework – as they highlighted different aspects of ICC which arguably extend the model beyond the five competencies discussed above. Findings emphasised the central role of elements of ICC in achieving 'success' and also stressed the importance of intrinsic motivation and of socialisation skills in building and maintaining social networks. They additionally revealed inter-relationships between ICC and psychological resilience after displacement. Here the importance of promoting and supporting the accrual and development of various types of 'capital' – human, social, psychological and physical – emerged strongly from the data (Mercer & Babic, 2019).

As we approached our study, we framed our participants as 'language learners' as this was one of the target groups for the *Critical Skills for Life and Work* project.

However, our findings show that such an understanding of highly skilled refugees does not adequately capture the complexity of their position and experience. Kramsch's (1993) notions of 'third place' and symbolic competence (2009) suggest that individuals – seen as multilingual subjects – situate themselves in a place 'in between' from which they can mediate between cultures. Our participants went beyond mediating in that they were able to both analyse their own circumstances – what they had lost, and what they had wanted to gain – and to actively create opportunities for themselves, despite the contextual factors that hindered them.

The findings of this study stressed the differences between the refugees' experiences of foreign language learning and intercultural encounters and those of other groups of migrants and sojourners (e.g. students). Our participants were, interestingly, simultaneously *elite*, in terms of their background, but, at the same time, *marginalised* in terms of their displacement. They were able therefore to tell us about experiences which both drew on existing social and linguistic capital and on individual skills and resources which they developed as refugees. Our findings therefore invite new thinking on the highly skilled refugee experience: there are issues that are common to any ultimately positive migrant experience (e.g. the importance of having sufficient access to the local language(s)). At the same time, each experience is different, depending on both contextual and individual factors.

It is therefore important not to think about refugees (or even highly-skilled refugees) as being a single, homogenous group. Each person and each journey is individual, and it is fundamental for researchers to focus on the intersectionality of factors such as country and context of provenance, language, gender and professional sphere to make sense of each 'refugee experience'. Here we have found that the concept of 'intercultural communicative competence', particularly as characterised in Byram's

(1997, 2009) language-pedagogical model, might guide ethical responses to the experiences and needs of these groups in that they relate learning a language to learning to be interculturally effective while maintaining and developing a sense of self-concept, in Kramsch's (1993, 1999) conceptualisation, in a third (intercultural) space.

Following Cameron *et al.* (1992), we believe that research should be done *for* and *with* participants. This study is premised on the view that a commitment to social justice and intercultural dialogue is the most important goal for research on refugee groups. As the *Critical Skills for Life and Work* Project was designed to support the professional reintegration of highly skilled refugees and to promote intercultural dialogue, we see informing policy decisions as one of the main remits of this study. We also see it as aligning very closely with the aims and aspirations of social action initiatives such as the *New Scots: Refugee Integration Strategy* (RIS, 2018).

The skills, knowledge and professional experience of highly skilled refugees often count for little, as host countries in an alarming number of cases fail to utilise the potential of much sought-after qualified personnel. The integration of highly skilled refugees into the labour market is crucial in order to avoid their long-term dependency on state financial support and their marginalisation and to create a positive image in the eyes of the public. Successful reintegration will also help to push against negative discourses on refugees in particular, and migration in general. In the global North, it will also help to address ageing-related 'demographic deficits' and workforce shortages. At a human level, it is also a duty to help that all people should respond to, not least researchers with an interest in intercultural communication, and policy-makers involved in the care and rehabilitation of displaced people.

The findings of this article support our argument that highly skilled refugee professionals can make an invaluable contribution to host societies if given the chance

to do so. This is of course additional to the fact that refugee status is not granted to people with an expectation of ‘contribution’ but on a well-founded fear of persecution. The fact is that they can be part of the solution to challenges affecting the global North such as demographic ageing, or lack of specific skills in vital areas such as healthcare. In current debates around immigration, the issue of how to best optimise the employment potential of skilled refugees is strikingly under-investigated. We therefore have a poor understanding of the particular difficulties faced by this group, and what is required to ensure their successful transition into relevant professions – a transition that would benefit a large number of parties across Europe and, indeed, beyond. It might also hugely benefit countries of origin of refugees, should they be able to return.

The qualitative study presented in this article was small in scale and aimed at providing insights drawn from individual contexts and circumstances. It might therefore be useful to extend this study with a larger sample from different contexts. Further studies could also adopt an intercultural lens to compare the experiences of highly skilled refugees across different communities, countries of origin and displacement and specific professions and thus go beyond the single national context our study was located in. They could also explore experiences beyond the global North.

A major challenge in our study was achieving gender balance and recruiting women willing to share their ‘success stories.’ This could be due to a number of factors. For example, in advocating the importance of supporting refugee women, Benjamin explained that ‘equality in the Eritrean community is not yet developed. Traditionally we did not have Eritrean women working as professionals.’ Sadaf and Khaled both noted that refugee women with professional backgrounds ‘often choose to’ or ‘are pushed to choose’ to focus on their families rather than on their careers.

According to the EU Labour Force Survey (2016), the employment rate for refugee women is on average 45%, 17 percentage points lower than that of refugee men and 6 percentage points lower than that of other non-EU born women. Future research might explore the experiences of refugee women professionals: which specific factors hinder their professional reintegration and what support they need to facilitate their transition back into their professional roles.

Another possible area of study could explore employers' and policy-makers' perceptions and attitudes towards highly skilled refugees. We were very conscious in designing and conducting our research that facilitating (re)integration is the responsibility of the hosts as much, if not more, as it is of displaced people (see also Ager & Strang, 2008). Our participants were examples of the brave and resourceful people who have managed 'success' in re-entering the employment market, despite the many and considerable obstacles they found after displacement. Attitudes that inform these contexts, particularly but not exclusively related to employment, are, we feel, badly in need of exploration, and ideally revision, if the human potential of refugees is not to be wasted, to the detriment of themselves and the societies in which they live. It is reasonable to conclude that until public discourse and the legislation change (and, for example, asylum seekers be allowed to work in all countries) no real progress can be made in their professional reintegration in the vast majority of cases, and the participants in our study will remain exceptions in their success rather than the norm. Social action which both recognises and supports the role that refugees and other migrants can play, and which offers them practical help to be able to contribute and to thrive, is needed now more than ever. This is true in all the multifarious contexts worldwide that people displaced by economic or political circumstances find themselves in.

Note

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