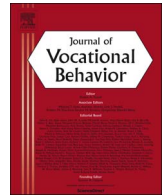


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## Personal agency in newly arrived refugees: The role of personality, entrepreneurial cognitions and intentions, and career adaptability

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### ABSTRACT

In light of recent developments in the world of work towards increased uncertainty, a rapid pace of change and new possibilities for intentional self-development, subsequent research has strongly emphasized the role of personal agency (e.g., self-initiative, entrepreneurship, and adaptability capacities) in taking advantage of this environment. Here, we adopt this view of personal agency to study early integration processes of refugees facing personal situations that involve examples of extreme uncertainty combined with new opportunities. Specifically, we examine the relationship between personality factors, entrepreneurial alertness and intentions, and career adaptability in a sample of  $N = 267$  refugees ( $M = 27.56$  years, 78.1% male), mostly from Syria, newly arrived in Germany after their flight. Employing structural equation modeling, the data revealed that entrepreneurial alertness is a crucial proximal predictor of entrepreneurial intentions and career adaptability in newly arrived refugees. In addition, the personality factors self-efficacy and resilience were relevant background factors: they predicted entrepreneurial alertness, which in turn mediated the direct link between these background factors and career adaptability. The results underscore the relevance of an agentic perspective in the study of refugees by highlighting the importance of entrepreneurial cognitions and underlying personality factors for the early integration process.

In recent years, due to war and misery in regions of the Middle East, South Asia, Africa (North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa), and the Western Balkans, a massive refugee immigration to countries such as Germany has posed major challenges to the receiving societies. During the European refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, it is estimated that more than one million refugees sought asylum in Germany. Consequently, the question of how to integrate such large numbers of refugees coming from very different cultural backgrounds has become the subject of an intensive debate.

To understand such integration processes and to drive them forward, most existing approaches in research and practice concentrated on institutional factors and barriers (e.g., bureaucracy and governmental integration programs), or on the importance of socio-demographic personal factors such as learning the language of the host country, health-related aspects, or interventions associated with the traumatic war and flight experiences (Bakker, Dagevos, & Engbersen, 2017). However, it is largely unclear which role individual differences in personal agency factors play in this process, particularly with respect to entrepreneurialism as an important sector of the economy (Frese, 2009) and career-related meta-skills such as career adaptability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Thus, this study investigates entrepreneurial intentions and career adaptability as central personal agency factors in newly arrived

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refugees. Focusing on personal characteristics that might drive such personal agency, we then study entrepreneurial cognitions as a direct driver of personal agency as well as personality factors (risk-taking, general self-efficacy, and resilience) as influential background factors.

The literature on career development in refugees and migrants offers many examples of the challenging nature of integration processes in the work context (Colic-Preisker & Tilbury, 2006; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008; see also Titzmann, Silbereisen, Mesch, & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2011). This challenging process starts as early as the refugees' arrival in the host country. Research indicates that there is a so-called refugee gap, namely that it is particularly difficult for refugees, compared to other types of migrants, to successfully enter the economic sector in the host country (Bakker et al., 2017). Potential reasons for this refugee gap comprise detrimental effects associated with the flight as such (e.g., education and qualification documents get lost during the flight or are not recognized in the host country; traumatic flight experiences) as well as detrimental conditions in the context of reception (e.g., asylum procedure and administration problems due an unexpected, massive influx of refugees). Indeed, massive waves of refugees (e.g., the influx to Germany during the European refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016) can be overwhelming, leaving institutions, such as employment agencies or education centers, unprepared and untrained for such an unprecedented and unexpected influx.

Thus, we argue that successful integration into mainstream society may not only depend on institutional factors and language- and health-related aspects, but also on personal agency factors such as self-initiative, entrepreneurialism and a strong career adaptability in the newly arrived refugees. The new host society may provide many new opportunities (e.g., skilled jobs in the German industry or markets for entrepreneurial activity) but it may often require an entrepreneurial mindset and career adaptability in refugees to proactively embrace these opportunities and to cope with the uncertain situation. Such an agentic perspective on refugees' early integration and career development processes follows a general psychological framework highlighting the role of personal agency in uncertain situations (Bandura, 2001; see also Swann Jr. & Jetten, 2017) and thus agentic capacities of individuals as producers of their own positive development (Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007), including their successful career development (Lent, 2005).

In the present study, we aim to contribute to this issue by examining a specific group of concern, i.e. newly arrived refugees, and their personal agency at this first stage of the integration process. We believe it is important to conduct such a study with newly arrived refugees to test the general view on personal agency and to reach a better understanding of the personal prerequisites and fundamentals constituting integration processes. This focus enables us to study refugees who are still in the process of a major "ecological transition", which is a core element in research on positive development in context (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). We examined entrepreneurial intentions as our first concrete indicator of personal agency (Obschonka, Hakkarainen, Lonka, & Salmela-Aro, 2017; Obschonka, Silbereisen, & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2010), and career adaptability as the second indicator of personal agency which is a general meta-skill in the modern world of work (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Inspired by an earlier study on predictors of career adaptability (Uy, Chan, Sam, Ho, & Chernyshenko, 2015) in young students from the normal population (student sample in Singapore), we were mainly interested in the effect of entrepreneurial cognitions (entrepreneurial alertness, Tang, Kacmar, & Busenitz, 2012) as a proximal predictor of career adaptability and entrepreneurial intentions in the specific context of newly arrived refugees. Moreover, following career construction theory (Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), we took a closer look at the role of personality factors as underlying dispositional background factors. This way, we first tested whether the main results presented by Uy et al. (2015) could be replicated in a specific sample of newly arrived refugees. Second, we then moved beyond that by investigating specific personality factors relevant to the situation of newly arrived refugees.

## 1. Entrepreneurial intentions and career adaptability as personal agency factors in the integration process of refugees

In the present study, we focus on entrepreneurial intentions as a concrete indicator of personal agency given that self-initiative has shown to be highly relevant for newly arrived refugees and their specific personal situation. In recent years, policy makers and educators have developed a strong interest in investigating entrepreneurship as a new 21st century skill. Young people in particular should learn to succeed in their occupational career, which is crucial if one wants to start an own new business (Obschonka, 2013). Experts stress that entrepreneurship is often an extremely important channel through which individuals who are otherwise limited in their opportunities (e.g., with respect to open job positions that match their specific skills), can enter into the economic life of a society (Hisrich, Langan-Fox, & Grant, 2007). The case of refugees pertains to be a prime example of a situation representing high uncertainty and limited opportunities or high challenges with respect to traditional career paths, suggesting that entrepreneurial agency might be particularly relevant for their entry into the labor market. In the entrepreneurship literature, migrants are often seen as a particularly interesting research subject due to the entrepreneurial agency they often demonstrate, but also due to their ("hidden") potential for entrepreneurial activity (Baycan-Levent & Nijkamp, 2009; Collins & Low, 2010; Kloosterman, 2010). Migrants are an important part of modern society and unlocking their entrepreneurial spirit and potential has become a central policy and education focus around the globe, including Germany (Kontos, 2003). Thus, we study entrepreneurial intentions among newly arrived refugees as a work-related integration skill.

Although entrepreneurial intentions do not directly measure (later) entrepreneurial activity, such intentions have become a central research focus in contemporary entrepreneurship research because they mirror valid information on entrepreneurial agency of a person and have indeed substantial predictive validity for subsequent entrepreneurial activity (Fayolle & Liñán, 2014; Obschonka et al., 2010). Similarly to the students investigated by Uy et al. (2015), refugees, in the first months after their arrival, face an early phase of orientation and planning with respect to their future careers. A focus on intentions instead of actual behavior therefore seems to be more promising in the context of refugees as this group, newly arrived in the host country, may need more time and

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