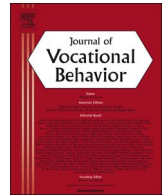




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Refugees' career capital welcome? Afghan and Syrian refugee job seekers in Austria[☆]

Petra M. Eggenhofer-Rehart^{*}, Markus Latzke, Katharina Pernkopf, Dominik Zellhofer, Wolfgang Mayrhofer, Johannes Steyrer

Interdisciplinary Institute for Management and Organisational Behaviour, WU (Vienna University of Economics and Business), Welthandelsplatz 1, 1020 Vienna, Austria

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how refugees relocate, acquire, and convert cultural, social, and economic capital when entering the Austrian labor market. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with Afghan and Syrian refugee job seekers to investigate how the value of the capital forms changes when they move to a culturally distant field, and what strategies they use to develop their career capital portfolio. Findings reveal that (a) all capital forms are strongly devaluated; (b) refugees striving to use their cultural capital encounter unfamiliar labor market rules, occupational identity threats, and status loss; (c) acquisition and conversion of new capital require both the intricate interplay of capital forms and refugees' proactivity. The article concludes with a discussion of theoretical contributions and practical implications for refugee labor market integration.

During 2014–2017, more than 180,000 refugees applied for asylum in Austria, and work permits were granted to over 70,000 applicants (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2017). Whereas efforts to provide basic services such as food, accommodation, or language training were largely successful, refugees have been hardly integrated into the labor market. Refugee unemployment remains high, with only 15.2% of those having received work permits between January 2015 and June 2016 being employed in December 2016 (Public Employment Service Austria, 2017). As stable employment is crucial for societal integration, with regular income forming the material basis of social participation (Ager & Strang, 2008), and enables individuals to build a broader social network (Gundert & Hohendanner, 2011), refugees' unemployment is a problem for both themselves and their host society. Austria's prior experiences echo these findings: First, after the failed uprising against the communist regime in Hungary in 1956, Austria took in 190,000 Hungarians; second, labor shortage in the 1970s led authorities to open up the labor market to *Gastarbeiter* [guest workers] from Turkey and Yugoslavia (Mayer, 2010); third, during the Balkan war in the 1990s, Austria took in 115,000 refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and the Kosovo (Fassmann, 2007). Experiences with these incidents show that obtaining stable employment is pivotal for refugees' personal and economic well-being, development and long-term integration. At the societal level, high refugee unemployment not only threatens social stability, but also deprives the national economy of access to valuable human capital.

Against this backdrop, this study explores how displaced people of the most recent refugee wave across Europe strive to enter the

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^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: petra.eggenhofer-rehart@wu.ac.at (P.M. Eggenhofer-Rehart), markus.latzke@wu.ac.at (M. Latzke), katharina.pernkopf@wu.ac.at (K. Pernkopf), dominik.zellhofer@wu.ac.at (D. Zellhofer), wolfgang.mayrhofer@wu.ac.at (W. Mayrhofer), johannes.steyrer@wu.ac.at (J. Steyrer).

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Austrian labor market. We address two questions: First, what cultural, social, and economic capital procured in the home country can refugees relocate to their host country to obtain employment? Second, what strategies do they use to acquire cultural, social, and economic capital and to convert the new capital portfolio into career capital that is valued by the local labor market? To describe and explain refugees' efforts, we conducted 35 interviews with Afghan and Syrian job seekers who arrived in Austria between 2011 and 2016. We draw on Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) theory of practice that focuses on the interplay of social fields and economic, social, and cultural capital. The theory maintains that to achieve a favorable position in a field, agents need to acquire capital that is valued in this field. Through this theoretical lens, we study how the value of refugees' capital changes as they move from one social field to another (Fernando & Cohen, 2016), i.e., from their homeland to Austria, with its different culture and institutional context. We also identify how interdependencies of capital forms come into play upon capital acquisition and conversion. This enriches the extant Austrian (Karasz, 2017) and global literature (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Crowley-Henry, O' Connor, & Al Ariss, 2016) on migrants' and refugees' labor market integration.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Refugee and migration research

Literature specifies diverse reasons to pursue a career across national borders, discussing company-assigned and self-initiated expatriates (Andresen, Bergdolt, Margenfeld, & Dickmann, 2014), skilled migrants (Zikic, 2015), and refugees (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014). Skilled migrants' most useful resources are personal contacts in the host country, professional and educational networks, academic qualifications, skills, prior knowledge of the host culture, visas, economic support by the family, bursaries, and scholarships (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011; Fossland, 2013). Yet, educational certificates are often devalued by host country authorities (Danzer & Dietz, 2014; Zikic, Bonache, & Cerdin, 2010), and migrants face underemployment (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011) and discrimination (Dietz, Joshi, Esses, Hamilton, & Gabarrot, 2015).

Refugees encounter still greater hurdles because they lack many of the resources that skilled migrants rely on. Urged to leave home unexpectedly, they have no time to prepare appropriately (Bakker, Dagevos, & Engbersen, 2016). Because most refugees cannot choose their destination, they end up in a country that they hardly know and where they have no personal contacts except relatives who have fled with them. Many families suffer emotional distress due to temporary separation (Savic, Chur-Hansen, Mahmood, & Moore, 2013). This aggravates mental health problems caused by traumata (Ellis, Murray, & Barrett, 2014) that they have suffered through persecution, physical assault, bombings (Kılıç, Magruder, & Koryürek, 2016), and calamitous conditions in refugee camps (Young & Chan, 2015). As mental health affects re-employment chances (Mitra & Jones, 2017), traumata entail substantial hurdles for labor market integration. Refugees are also disadvantaged due to their precarious legal status (Jackson & Bauder, 2014) during the lengthy process of obtaining asylum (Akkaymak, 2016). Due to difficulties to have their qualifications recognized, they enter the labor market later, have higher unemployment and underemployment rates, achieve lower income (Bakker et al., 2016), and many get stuck in the secondary labor market (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006). Their chances to find meaningful employment decrease with every year of temporary status (Codell, Hill, Woltz, & Gore, 2011).

1.2. The theory of practice

Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theory of practice provides a useful lens to analyze refugees' labor market entry as it allows for consideration of the interplay between context and individual characteristics. Along with habitus, i.e., the embodied system of dispositions that is structured by the field and in turn structures agents' perceptions (Lizardo, 2004), the concepts of field and capital represent interrelated building blocks of the theory (Özbilgin & Tatli, 2005). A social field has its own rules, logic, and power dynamics (Schneidhofer, Latzke, & Mayrhofer, 2015). While agents compete for positions in social fields, they accumulate, convert, and invest various forms of capital. To become powerful, they need to possess capital that is relevant to the respective field. The relationship between capital and field is circular (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992): "[I]n order to construct the field, one must identify the forms of specific capital that operate within it, and to construct the forms of specific capital one must know the specific logic of the field" (p. 108). Bourdieu (1986) describes three basic capital forms: Economic (money, property), social (networks and the ability to activate them), and three forms of cultural capital. Institutionalized cultural capital includes degrees and diplomas; objectified cultural capital depicts cultural products such as artworks or books; embodied cultural capital refers to personalized, long-standing dispositions of body and mind (e.g., bodily conduct, dialect). Capital is useful for an agent only if it is recognized as legitimate and can be used in a specific field; then, it becomes symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This implies that capital is relational, i.e., its value arises only in relation to a specific field. Also, a change of rules in a social field can shift the focus to areas that have not been valued before (e.g., teaching vs. research in academia), thus changing the value of existing capital portfolios (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Hence, capital portfolios are never universal (Duberley & Cohen, 2010). Symbolic capital that allows agents to advance their positions in a specific career field is referred to as career capital (Jellatchitch, Mayrhofer, & Meyer, 2003). Although smooth transitions within a field may occur, successful transitions to a different field cannot be taken for granted (Latzke, Schneidhofer, Pernkopf, Rohr, & Mayrhofer, 2015). In transitions between fields, the individual's relationship to the social order becomes visible, as does the context-specific nature of that individual's capital (Duberley, Mallon, & Cohen, 2006).

The view that the value of career capital is relational rather than universal and depends on the field in which capital is meant to be invested guides our analysis. It responds to calls for a more contextualized perspective in career studies (Al Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin, & Sautari, 2012; Chudzikowski & Mayrhofer, 2011) and for research into skilled migrants' capital mobilization (Crowley-Henry et al.,

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