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Can I come as I am? Refugees' vocational identity threats, coping, and growth☆

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ABSTRACT

Trying to re-establish their lives in a host country, refugees face multiple integration barriers in relation to work and society. This study, derived from 31 semi-structured interviews with refugees residing in Germany, explores how these barriers also threaten refugees' fundamental identity needs for worth, distinctiveness, continuity, and control. Faced with such threats, refugees tried both to protect their previous identities and/or to restructure them to adjust to their new situation. Findings also highlight identity threat jujitsu to both support refugees' identity protection and create better connections between themselves and their environments. Further, we point to resourcing as a form of buffering potential future hardships. Finally, both refugees' resourcing and coping with adversity were related to the potential for psychological growth. This study offers new insights into how transition experiences impact refugees' personal and career-related growth in the new country.

1. Introduction

The unprecedented number of people fleeing war and terror has caused millions of refugees from countries such as Afghanistan and Syria to seek shelter in Europe (Holmes & Castaneda, 2016). This situation requires insights on the quality of and conditions for refugees' positive vocational and societal integration. Literature on refugees' experiences describes the challenges that they face in host countries (e.g., Constant, Kahanec, & Zimmermann, 2009; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008), yet does not fully explain what such barriers imply for some of the last resources that refugees have left, namely their fundamental understanding of themselves.

The current study addresses this topic and offers the following three contributions. First, the study contributes to research on refugee integration into work and society by targeting how refugees' obstacles towards integration can represent actual threats to their identities, thus throwing "the most basic, underlying existential assumptions that people hold about themselves […] into disarray" (Crossley, 2000, p. 539). More precisely, while past research has stressed the influence of various barriers on refugees' vocational integration (Smyth & Kum, 2010), and of identity threats in particular on skilled migrants' career transitions (Zikic & Richardson, 2016), we still know little about how these barriers may be experienced as identity threats among refugees. Thus, the present study starts with a premise that refugees' fundamental identity needs (for the worth, distinctiveness, continuity, and control over their identities; Eilam & Shamir, 2005) may be affected during this transition. Further, we explore the impact of various

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integration barriers on the satisfaction of these needs. Here, we consider both the threats to existing identities and the imposition of new and threatening identities (cf. Kira & Klehe, 2016) in the refugee context. Second, we unravel refugees' coping responses to these identity threats in the face of the meager resources that refugees tend to have left. As the findings show, this will lead to an extension and refinement of current conceptualizations of coping with identity threats (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011). Third, without wanting to belittle the difficulties associated with their situation, we reply to the call for research that provides a broader understanding of refugees' resettlement experiences on their adversarial psychological growth[1], i.e., their ability to understand and define themselves in new or more complex ways, enabling an enriched functioning (Chan, Young, & Sharif, 2016). By examining whether and how coping with identity threats can potentially result in refugees' psychological growth, we extend past research, which found indications of potential growth in the context of re-entering former professional identities (e.g., Zikic & Richardson, 2016).

2. Defining the study concepts and its context

Like migrants in general, refugees often encounter major career barriers in the host countries' labor markets, impairing their (local) employability and leading to unemployment, underemployment, and a poor integration into the host country's work and society (e.g., Smyth & Kum, 2010; Zikic, Bonache, & Cerdin, 2010). Our study takes place in Germany where the dual system of vocational education and training is defined by a high degree of vocational specificity (Hillmert, 2006). Designed to upskill its labor force, the system pursues high levels of education and academization (Baethge & Wolter, 2015), and fosters workers' sense of professional pride, strong vocational identities, and the relatively high social status of their occupations. Yet, while offering a competitive advantage for the German national economy and rewarding workers who navigate the system successfully (Weihrich, 1999), the system can also disadvantage people who enter it from the outside and/or do not possess the required credentials (Hillmert, 2006), as deviations from the stipulated educational and career paths can result in poor chances for work or career success.

The first aim of this study is to understand the effects of central threat sources on refugees' vocational identities in the host country. A person's self-concept comprises of a personal identity (i.e., an individual's self-definitional traits and idiosyncratic features) and social identities (i.e., an individual's context-dependent social self-definitions; Gecas, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Each identity has its relevance in the overall self-concept and has, in various degrees, positive or negative affective connotations. People give meaning to their identities by attaching values, beliefs, and other attributes to them, which in turn, define who one is in a specific context, relation, or role (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). They color our expectations, e.g., on economic, psychological, or social aspects of life, and the way we approach and perceive our environments (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

An inability to re-establish their earlier career trajectories can *threaten* refugees' previous identities (e.g., as a professional, contributing member of society, or breadwinner; cf. Petriglieri, 2011). Additionally, refugees are often seen and treated in the host country in ways that not only threaten and invalidate their previous identities (i.e., Smyth & Kum, 2010), but that impose new, stigmatized, and threatening identities upon them (e.g., being unemployed, foreign, and a potential threat to the host country's real and/or symbolic resources; e.g., Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Research on other stigmatized populations suggests that such inflicted *threatening* self-definitions disrupt individuals' sense of self and increase stigma experiences (e.g., Kira & Klehe, 2016). The refugee status then entails the double jeopardy of co-existing threatened and threatening identities adding to the more commonly recognized traumas of, for instance, physical hardship and violence.

Threatened and threatening identities can endanger the satisfaction of fundamental identity needs. More precisely, Eilam and Shamir (2005) distinguished between four such essential needs, i.e., the needs for self-worth, self-distinctiveness, self-continuity, and self-control. Threats that challenge refugees' *self-worth* target aspirations for a positive self and social regard (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Giuntoli, Hughes, Karban, & South, 2015). Threats to their *self-distinctiveness* inhibit their sense of uniqueness (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Also, refugees' loss of valued identities or imposition of unwanted identities may further endanger their sense of *self-continuity*, i.e., the enduring essence and coherence of their self-concept (Eilam & Shamir, 2005). While research has extended this taxonomy of possible identity needs (e.g., including the need to belong; Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016), we focus on threats to the identity needs identified by Eilam and Shamir (2005). These cover both the present identity experiences (i.e., self-worth and -distinctiveness) and also address the identity experiences over time (self-continuity). Finally, we also analyze threats to their *self-control* (cf. Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Ryan & Deci, 2000), as refugees are in a uniquely vulnerable position when it comes to the fundamental human need for being able to control one's life and who one is (cf. Yakushko et al., 2008).

The second aim of our study is to unravel how refugees cope with actual and potential threats to their identities. When facing such threats, individuals use different coping responses (Carver & Scheier, 1992; Zikic & Richardson, 2016). Petriglieri (2011) theorized that in such cases, people either protect their identity or seek to change and restructure it. Thus, *protection* means maintaining one's threatened identity and refusing to let go of it by, e.g., emphasizing its positive distinctiveness, or derogating the source of the identity threat, thus invalidating the threat. *Restructuring*, on the other hand, changes the meaning of an identity, renders it less important, or results in exiting it altogether.

When analyzing the identity-protection responses in our data, we realized that many refugees used what Kreiner and Sheep (2009) called 'identity threat jujitsu'. *Identity threat jujitsu* describes certain behaviors that aim to turn negative threats into positive movement to both retain one's threatened identity and to establish improved relations between oneself and one's environment by either reframing the threat as an opportunity and/or, rather than derogate those posing the threat, seeking to build improved

[1] Literature on psychological growth comprises both adversarial (Joseph & Linley, 2005) and post-traumatic psychological growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For uniformity reasons, we will consistently use the term 'adversarial psychological growth', including both concepts.

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