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Finding your way into employment against all odds? Successful job search of refugees in Austria

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ABSTRACT
Labour market entry poses enormous challenges for recently arrived refugees, ranging from language barriers, devaluation of human capital, unfamiliarity with customs of the job search process to outright discrimination. How can refugees overcome these challenges and quickly enter gainful employment? In this paper, we draw on interviews with 26 male and female refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran, conducted in 2017 and 2018, who came to Austria in 2015 and 2014 and who have successfully entered employment. We depict refugees’ own perspectives on and strategies for fast job entry and integration. Personal agency and a proactive approach of seeking and seizing opportunities are key for overcoming initial barriers and entering upon positive integration pathways. At the same time, refugees’ personal agency is essential for establishing social ties to the host society, which also play a crucial role in early labour market integration. Finally, institutions of the Austrian labour market (the ‘apprenticeship’-system) interact with refugees’ agency in most intricate ways, both setting up nearly insurmountable barriers but also providing specific opportunities for refugees.

1. Introduction

In 2015, Europe saw a surge in refugee arrivals with the great majority of refugees coming from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. A little over one million people crossed the Mediterranean in search of refuge (UNHCR 2016). This movement of people has had great political repercussions, fostering the rise of far right and anti-immigration parties. However, the focus now ought to be on integration, in particular, labour market integration, as regaining self-sufficiency is of utmost importance both for refugees and the host societies.

The labour market integration of refugees proves to be a challenging process for Western societies. In the EU, during the first years after arrival, refugees’ employment rate is very low, averaging around 25% (Dumont et al. 2016). Refugees face a variety of
barriers when entering the labour market, which are related to host country language skills, the devaluation or non-recognition of foreign educational degrees and work experience, legal hurdles restricting labour market access, unfamiliarity with host country language market norms and customs, and discrimination, to name but a few (Krahn et al. 2000; Valtonen 2001; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; Piętka-Nykaza 2015; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018). We seek to build upon and extend existing studies that frequently focus on barriers to employment by representing the perspectives of those who have been able to quickly overcome multiple barriers and successfully integrate into the labour market. Thus, we want to investigate what individual courses of action are open to refugees in order for them to achieve economic self-sufficiency. How can refugees activate the resources at their disposal and how do specific institutional conditions influence what refugees can achieve for themselves?

Empirically, our article is based on 26 problem-centred interviews with refugees from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Iran, who came to Austria in 2014 and 2015 and who were already gainfully employed at the time of the interviews. Thus, our interviewees belong to a minority of refugees who have already found a job at such an early stage of integration (AMS 2017b). Based on these interviews, our findings show that refugees’ own agency plays a crucial role for early labour market integration despite multiple barriers running counter to those opportunities for action. But also social capital and specific institutions of the labour market, which shape the possibilities for usage and acquisition of human capital, are of utmost importance. We are able to show how these factors are interrelated, how the acquisition of post-migration social capital usually requires some form of agency on the part of refugees, and how the acquisition of post-migration human capital often necessitates both agency and access to social capital. While we are aware that our interview partners’ occupational experiences and success in Austria are exceptional to some degree, we believe that their pathways into employment can be seen as typical for refugees in Austria and also in other European countries to some degree.1

2. Labour market integration and job search: state of the art and theoretical arguments

In this section, we review the literature on refugee labour market integration with a special focus on the resources and courses of action available to refugees who try to find their path into employment. To put it in simpler terms: What can refugees do in order to find suitable jobs? A lot of research has addressed the many barriers to employment that lie outside of the immediate control of an individual refugee. Amongst others, this includes the asylum procedure and related legal restrictions (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016; Hatton 2016), health issues associated with forced migration and traumatic experiences (Bogic, Njoku, and Priebe 2015; Bradby et al. 2015), and discrimination (Valtonen 2001; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). This paper shifts the focus to investigating the opportunities, strategies and resources that can help to overcome the various barriers refugees face and further labour market integration. In doing so, we look at three main strands of literature which suggest the priority of agency, social capital and human capital for successful job search.

Albeit the concept of agency is quite young, a yet comprehensive economic and socio-logical literature has identified proactivity, aspirations, self-initiatives, attitudes,
development of the self, willingness to overcome barriers and prepare for unwanted/unexpected situations, etc., as important refugee agency aspects\(^2\) (Bauder 2005; Piętka-Nykaza 2015; Campion 2018; Obschonka, Hahn, and Bajwa 2018; Pajic et al. 2018). Contradictorily, after evincing strong proactivity by accomplishing the feat of flight, refugees often face institutional compulsion to scale down their agencies when arriving in the host country (Piętka-Nykaza 2015). Hence, regarding job search, they need to be adapted and re-developed. A prerequisite for this is confidence in one’s own capability to actively realise the tasks that are necessary in seeking a job, from sorting out and applying for job offerings to deciding on accepting a job. Piętka-Nykaza (2015, 540) argued that ‘refugees’ attitudes, desires and aspirations work in conjunction with their personal circumstances and conditions and have an impact on the diverse outcome of their process of decisionmaking’. We agree with Piętka-Nykaza that such a conceptualisation ‘provides a useful tool to explain what the agent does in practice and how structural conditions are mediated by agency’. Thus, depending on the commitment to agency for the job search process, situational barriers may appear as challenges which can be overcome rather than as threats (Pajic et al. 2018).

Upon starting the job search process, unfamiliarity with cultural nuances and ‘unwritten rules’ of the host country labour market could impede refugees’ quick labour market integration, rendering their efforts ineffective (Bauder 2005; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018). A possibility to overcome these barriers and bridge the knowledge gap is to turn to those who have already been successful, i.e. to activate one’s own social capital.

In terms of information, influence, trust and collective norms of reciprocity, social capital yields benefits to job-seeking refugees (Granovetter 1995; Seibel and van Tubergen 2013, 245). Here, it is important to draw a distinction between social capital composed primarily of ethnic network contacts, often referred to as bonding social capital, and network contacts with the majority population, often referred to as bridging social capital (Kanas, van Tubergen, and van der Lippe 2011; Eisnecker and Schacht 2016). Contacts with an existing ethnic community in the host country will help refugees overcome their initial isolation and may provide valuable help to enter a first job and thus speed up the way into employment, but ‘ethnic path integration’ has been found to facilitate entering the labour market at the bottom, with little upward mobility chances (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; Campion 2018). In contrast, bridging social capital can improve refugees’ job search success in the host country due to various reasons (Gericke et al. 2018). Natives can be expected to have better knowledge about the local labour market, e.g. regarding job openings, and they will likely be able to provide valuable information regarding the culture and nuances of the job application and hiring process (cf. section 5.2). Studies have shown that these social relations, a typical example of weak ties in the sense of Granovetter’s theory, are beneficial for refugees’ job search (Seibel and van Tubergen 2013; Eisnecker and Schacht 2016), but of course this requires willingness on the parts of both refugees and natives.

Another challenge job-seeking refugees will encounter is the language barrier.\(^3\) Insufficient host country language skills greatly hinder formal job search, human capital theorists would argue (see Lamba 2008; Haan, Kroh, and Troutman 2017, for key arguments), as it is nearly impossible to find and read job offers in newspapers or on the Internet, write a résumé and application letter, or successfully handle a job interview with Austrian employers. Also, informal job search will be more successful if refugees have better host country language skills, as this will facilitate communication with natives (volunteers,
members of NGO’s, government workers) who likely have first-hand knowledge about job offers. If employed, refugees who lack these forms of human capital occupy employment niches of segmented labour markets which require hardly any language skills or qualifications. While such niches accommodate quick labour market integration, they also bear a considerable risk of long-term marginalisation (UNHCR 2013). Learning the host country language becomes all the more necessary for those aiming at more qualified, high-ranking positions (OECD/UNHCR 2016).

In order to explain a person’s placement on the labour market, other forms of human capital are of high importance as well. Research results regarding the education levels of newly arrived refugees in Austria and other European countries have indicated that such levels are polarised, with a relatively high share of refugees disposing of only very little education, while another relevant share has completed tertiary education (Buber-Ennser et al. 2016), but encounters limited transferability of pre-migration human capital (Krahn et al. 2000; Lamba 2008; Brücker, Rother, and Schupp 2017). Refugees with higher educational degrees often face difficulties in the academic validation process due to lacking documentation, amongst others, but even successfully recognised degrees often are discounted by employers (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; Smyth and Kum 2010; Willott and Stevenson 2013; Correa-Velez, Barnett, and Gifford 2015). On the contrary, post-migration qualifications obtained could have positive effects on refugees’ success on the labour market (cf. section 5.3).

Individual ways into employment may also differ in relation to the usability of pre-migration and post-migration working experiences. Empirical studies have shown that the discounting of refugees’ foreign working experience is widespread in OECD countries (Creese and Wiebe 2012; UNHCR 2013; Dumont et al. 2016). Human capital theorists would argue that the discounting of pre-migration human capital is plausible and, up to some point, rational. Employers find it difficult to assess the quality of a foreign educational system and its compatibility with the labour market of the host country (de Vroome and van Tubergen 2010, 378f.). Thus, hiring refugees based on their pre-migration qualifications is often perceived to be a high-risk bet (OECD/UNHCR 2016). Also, the value of foreign work experience (sometimes gained in war-torn countries) is limited due to the fact that the institutionalised organisation of firms and the labour market is quite restricted in its comparability (although this may vary between jobs, industries and the extent of labour market regulations). For refugees, of whom many dispose of significant (pre-migration) human capital, it is not easy to activate these resources and for some at least, the best choice would possibly be to re-educate or re-train in the host country.

3. Refugee labour market integration in Austria

Over the past three decades, Austria has become an important target country for migrants and refugees. Amongst others, this process is attributed to the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, leading to one of the largest intra-European refugee movements after World War II (Bauböck and Perchinig 2006), yet this country also became a target of mobility within the EU after acceding in 1995. Refugee immigration is currently at the centre of social debates. As in other European countries, the number of refugees’ asylum requests in Austria has grown considerably in particular since 2010, mostly associated with armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Measured by the overall population, and along
This country has for some years been among the nations to receive the largest numbers of asylum seekers. Forced migration to Austria peaked in 2015 with 88,340 asylum seekers and has since been on the decrease (BMI 2015, 2018). The most important group of refugees to arrive in Austria between 2015 and 2017 came from Afghanistan and Syria (approx. 41,000 each) and from Iraq (approx. 18,000), in addition to Pakistan, Iran and Russia. A significant share of refugees having arrived in that time period are still awaiting the outcome of their asylum procedures in 2018, indicating a considerable backlog (BMI 2018).

Labour market integration of refugees in Austria is a difficult and lengthy process. As in other European countries, refugees fare far worse on the labour market than other immigrants at least initially (Fasani, Frattini, and Minale 2018). The figures from Austria in Table 1 represent a lower bound of refugees’ employment rate and thus the trend seems broadly in line with developments in other European countries. The numbers also show that the labour market integration of refugees in Austria is much slower than in the U.K. or Denmark, while it is comparable with the trends in Germany for example.

In Austria, asylum seekers’ access to the labour market is restricted before their claims for asylum have been accepted resulting in a de facto employment ban for refugees with negative long-term consequences for labour market integration (Dustmann et al. 2017; Hangartner, Hainmueller, and Marbach, 2018). However, there are a few loopholes. Most importantly, refugees below the age of 25 were allowed to take up an apprenticeship if no domestic applicants are available until September 2018 (when the newly elected government stopped this programme). Work permits can be granted on a case-by-case basis for seasonal employment. Refugees are also allowed to become self-employed, always provided that they comply with the regulations in place for self-employment.6

The issue of forced migration is highly relevant in political terms and has dominated public discourse in many European countries over the past years. In Austria, it decisively contributed to the anti-immigration coalition between the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) winning the most recent parliamentary elections in October 2017 (STANDARD 2017).8

### 4. Sample and methods

The present study applied problem-centred interviews as a research tool (Witzel 2000). With this instrument, we interviewed a total of 26 refugees who had immigrated to 

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Notes: Austrian data (added by the author) are provided by the Austrian Public Employment Service (PES) and show the employment rate of refugees, who registered with PES in 2015 and the first half of 2016 after the recognition of their asylum claims.

Austria in 2014/15 about their transition into the job market. The sample contained refugees aged 18–40 from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Iran. These nationalities make up the vast majority of the refugee population in Austria (cf. Section 3). The interviews were carried out from July 2017 to January 2018. Main interview language was German, English was used in a few cases in which the interviewee preferred so. Targeted case selection was applied as a sampling strategy, starting off from contacts with various NGOs, volunteer and refugee organisations in Vienna and other Austrian cities. Our main objective was to interview male and female refugees who were already in gainful employment according to the ILO-definition (at least 1 h of paid work in the reference week) and who had come to Austria no earlier than 2014. In addition, we took care to adequately represent the most important nationality groups, in particular, Syrians and Afghans. The sample contained more men than women (see Appendix), which corresponds with the composition of refugee populations on the Austrian labour market. The respondents’ educational backgrounds were highly divergent, ranging from never having attended school to holding university degrees, and they were employed in various branches (e.g. catering, retail, agriculture, production work, social work with a focus on refugees), mostly working full-time with some exceptions in part-time jobs. In our empirical analyses, the respondents’ statements were fully anonymised, pseudonyms were found for names.

The analysis of text material in the present study consisted in a multiple-step procedure to approximate a deepening analysis of the entirety of individual cases and to facilitate cross-case comparisons. In this connection, we combined thematic charting (Ritchie, Spencer, and O’Connor 2005) with a coding method (Ezzy 2002). The steps of assessment were the following: (1) Completed interviews were analysed via a text reduction procedure to extract key themes and their contexts and to elaborate their differentiation. The extracted key themes and their subcategories were then interpreted by means of a detailed comparison of commonalities and differences; (2) on this basis, cross-comparisons were drawn between individual passages at individual-case and cross-case levels; (3) in a further step, we applied a coding method more closely focused on the particularities of statements and argumentation. Based on these results, a system of categories was developed which was applied as an assessment scheme and with which the interview contents were systematised. This assisted in further substantiating those categories and facilitated a deepened description of the empirical material (Ezzy 2002).

5. Empirical findings

Refugees’ ways into employment are diverse. Our interview partners relied on a broad scope of entry points into the labour market, applying their resources in various combinations and accentuations. Overall, we identified three distinct pathways into employment that were open to refugees seeking quick labour market integration, as based on our thematic analysis:

- Seeking and seizing of opportunities: personal agency factors
- Making use of social capital: the specific roles of volunteers, NGOs and host families
- The acquisition of post-migration human capital: the Austrian institution of apprenticeship and its manifold influence on refugees’ labour market integration
While we draw an analytical distinction between these pathways, it is important to note that they do overlap and occur in varying combinations within our interviewees. In order to illustrate the interplay between the different pathways, we also present two individual cases in detail (Figures 1 and 2) and we will discuss this interplay in the final chapter of our paper again.

5.1. Seeking and seizing of opportunities: personal agency factors

A large group of the interviewed refugees showed specific attitudes and aspirations toward job seeking that strongly influenced their way of entering the labour market. These factors can be summarised as personal agency and its occurrence is intertwined with different settings of social structures and institutional settings (Piętka-Nykaza 2015; Obschonka, Hahn, and Bajwa 2018). Because refugees are highly susceptible to the opportunities they encounter, it is vital that they are able to recognise them as such and actively attempt to go after them. While personal agency manifests itself in approaching job search with a high level of proactivity, it may also imply flexibility and adaptability when facing dequalification and the devaluation of previous educational attainments and job experience (pre-migration human capital) (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018). These aspects frequently went hand in hand in our respondents’ narratives.

Often, our interview partners were left with little choice other than to start a career anew from the bottom. For some interviewees, this implied accepting any job available, even if this meant being overqualified, or working for a very low wage hardly fitted to support them. But then, finding a job was not so difficult: ‘There are a lot of jobs in Austria if you only accept’

Mohammad (34 years from Syria) came to Austria in 2015. He was currently working in retail sales with the prospect of soon becoming a shop manager. Mohammad’s story helps to illustrate the importance of seeking and seizing opportunities, the interplay between social capital and work motivation and finally the role of institutions of the Austrian labor market. In his case, close contact with Austrians enhanced the urgency to find work quickly. Still in the process of attending German classes, by keeping his eyes and ears open, he stumbled across a job opportunity, a job in a retail store where it was okay for him to speak English (the exact process was related in the main text). With the help of his Austrian girlfriend, he applied for the job.

On the one hand, Mohammad was happy to have secured a job, but on the other hand, this led to difficulties with the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS). At that time, he was attending a German course. As his job was only part-time (25 hours), it would have been easy for him to finish the course and work at the same time, but his course had been paid for by the employment agency. There he was told that he would have to drop out of the course if he started to work or pay for it himself. But the amount of his current salary was pretty much the same as his previous unemployment benefits. The institutional set-up was stacked against him taking up work: “They asked me why I am working. Because normally refugees get the money from welfare. It is exactly the same money I get from my job. [...] But you know, I don’t care about it.”

He preferred starting to work for three reasons. First, he was convinced that gaining work experience in Austria now would help his future career. Second, Mohammad recounted that working enabled him to feel free, independent and in control of his own life. In contrast, when living on social benefits, he would feel controlled by institutions like the employment agency: “I feel I am free. I am not under the control [by the AMS] like all my friends are.” Third, Mohammad felt obliged to his Austrian girlfriend, who was supporting him a lot during his early days in Austria. At one moment, he described having felt like a parasite, depending on her for everything. “I felt like one of these worms. (...) Because everything she was doing, she was doing for me. And I felt so bad. (...) And now it’s working. I’ve found myself. I have a new family now, her family.”

Being in close contact with Austrian natives, in particular his girlfriend and her family, motivated Mohammad to try and become independent quickly. He experienced being treated with more respect because he was working: “So when they talk to me and ask ‘oh, are you in the social-welfare system’, I would say ‘No, I have a job. (...) I make my own life.’ (...) ‘I am like any Austrian. Maybe I don’t have a passport, but in general, I am like any Austrian. I pay my taxes, I have the same schedule. I have everything they have.’

Figure 1. The case of Mohammad.
Mohammad, 34 years old and from Syria, demonstrated a high level of aspirations to seize upon any chance open to him so that he could gain self-sufficiency and profit from that experience in the future. In a retail shop, he noticed by chance that the store manager and an employee were conversing in English. He recognised this to be an opportunity as his English was very good and he successfully applied for an open position there. His job which was actually in the same field as his former job as a retail agent in Syria, but in an inferior position with a low pay gave him the possibility to further develop his language skills in contact with the host society. By overcoming the hardship of initially entering the labour market, he was not afraid of devaluing his former work experience. Rather, he hoped to improve his chances for future employment by gaining work experience in Austria as quickly as possible.

What makes me better than them [other refugees; authors’ note] is that I have more experience working with Austrian companies. So let’s say you want to work in any firm, and I have already worked for three years in my CV. Who will they choose? (Mohammad)

Apart from this willingness to start from the bottom and work one’s way up again, other important characteristics among our interviewees were a high level of proactivity and confidence, i.e. a certainty about what to wish and strive towards for the future, and
believing in one’s abilities. Nineteen-year-old Afghani Issa provided one example: ‘So when I first came here, I said: I will cook for the president. My counselor said that it would be hard, but I always said that I could do it’ (Issa).10

Self-discipline, on the other hand, is connected to educational attainments, such as learning the language of the host country, qualifying for certain jobs, making an effort to fit in with the host society, and seeking to establish social networks. Nour, a 26-year-old Syrian, provided an example: ‘In the beginning, I was studying German eight hours a day at home, in order to have a good command of the German language’ (Nour). Conveying exceptional motivation to find work and emphasising the desire for and commitment to work was also accompanied by distinguishing oneself from other, seemingly less motivated groups (often within the same ethnicity), a background against which their efforts and willingness strongly contrasted. Perseverance showed itself in situations of setbacks and in maintaining a positive attitude even in a long and demanding job search process. Not only refugees who cannot (or do not want to) rely on their social capital adopt this characteristic. It may also emerge in combination with the use of social capital (e.g. continuously asking for potential job offers).

Looking for a job on the Internet frequently requires writing many applications. Patience and persistence are a necessity, as Golshan, 25 years old and from Iran, highlighted: ‘Most of the time, [they said] we don’t need you. But I knew that it would work at one point. So I didn’t stop and I didn’t give up’ (Golshan). After having a hard time finding a job as an agricultural engineer, she finally accepted a job as a horticulturist. Her case illustrates several important factors that can speed up the job search process, namely willingness to start from anew, perseverance in job search but also flexibility and adaptability in a professional sense, i.e. being open to new paths apart from the work experience already gathered. This may prove to facilitate quick labour market integration. Pajic et al. (2018) explored ‘career adaptability’ as a similar concept. For some of our interviewees, this meant taking up vocational education in new professions (see also section 5.3), while others found a chance of employment in refugee counselling. Language skills and their own experience of the asylum-seeking process itself thus became a resource in such a working environment. Tarek (24), a Syrian student of architecture who started working as a counsellor in a refugee camp, explained how his own experiences had turned into resources for his job:

I sit around with people and talk about what they should be doing or they ask me a lot of questions, because I’m about as young as they are – what I did and how I learned German? And sometimes we learn together, although my German is not at all perfect or good – but it still helps them, they sometimes become self-confident when they talk to me. (Tarek)

Flexibility sometimes emerges out of necessity if a desired job cannot be found even after lengthy and intensive job-seeking efforts and thus forces refugees to downscale their expectations. Abbas, 19 and from Iraq, was looking for an apprenticeship which he could combine with completing the high school certificate (Matura) for one year, without success. In the end, he settled for a job in retail, but was not at all happy about it:

The X*supermarket was not at all what I wanted. (…) But because I was simply forced (…) I started searching. I was looking around a lot on my own. I sent out about 70, no, no less than 70 applications, okay, and 44 of those (…) were car dealers, I wanted [badly] to work as a mechanic, a car mechanic. I had three job interviews (…) and received three rejections.
Another promising way into employment is mobility within Austria, at times seen in refugees who were based in Vienna, due to difficulties in finding a (good) job in town. The unemployment rate is the highest in the capital, compared to the other eight states in Austria (AMS 2017a). In addition, the migrant population in this country is primarily located in Vienna and the typical branches for immigrants’ initial employments, such as construction and the food service industry, are already highly contested and often precarious. Moving or commuting to other places where there is a lack of workers may increase chances for employment, as the story of 20-year-old Afghan Navid depicts. After facing many refusals in Vienna, it was when he started applying for jobs in other (smaller) Austrian cities that he was successful within a short time. He phoned companies throughout the country and asked whether he could come, demonstrating his high motivation by always submitting his résumé personally: ‘I called and she told me I could send it in, I said no, I’ll come over, always. To Graz or Linz, too, also Freiburg or St. Pölten’ (Navid). This example of geographical mobility again illustrates the importance of structural preconditions, as this opportunity might not be feasible for less mobile groups (e.g. families with small children).

5.2. Making use of social capital: the specific roles of local volunteers, NGOs and guest families

Social capital is also of crucial importance to refugee integration. In our interviews, we found evidence of social contacts providing valuable assistance in finding a job, housing and accommodation, and in acquiring language skills. Actually, our interview partners enjoyed great support by locals, thus having exceptional access to bridging social capital.

In part, this support was a direct result of the European wave of solidarity with refugees in the summer of 2015. One of our interview partners, 21-year-old Morteza from Afghanistan, related his experience of arriving at the Austrian border at that time: ‘Many young girls and boys were standing there, handing out cookies and juice and saying ‘Welcome’ and ‘Willkommen’. […] I said, I don’t want to go any further, I want to be here in Austria’ (Morteza). In this supportive climate, some refugees (and many of our interview partners) received more help than others. For some of our interview partners, luck played a major role, i.e. being placed into camps in which local activists were present and supportive in various ways, while others showed to be actively gaining social capital as they were volunteering themselves, visiting schools and attending German courses.

Amir (24, from Syria), for instance, met his benefactor while volunteering in a big interim refugee camp. This acquaintanceship led to a free apartment for Amir. ‘There, she was a voluntary doctor, I was a voluntary interpreter and there we met. Then, for a short time, we were conjoined. Then she found my flat. She said, I’ll pay for everything, she just passed me the keys’ (Amir). As one of very few who could speak English, Soraya got to know various volunteers who then became close friends. Her experiences as a volunteer interpreter are portrayed in the case description below. Like for Soraya, relationships between refugees and native volunteers intensified for many of our interview partners. Morteza considered himself to be one of his volunteer German teacher’s grandchildren: ‘I have a teacher […] and every Wednesday, she cooks for all her grandchildren and I belong to them, too. […] I go there every Wednesday’ (Morteza). This teacher also found a side job for him as a vine dresser. Karim (19, from Afghanistan) also designated a
woman who supported him generously as a parent. ‘I found a mentor here, she helps me very well. She comes to visit me, she asks what I’d need, she helped me with my school, everything. My Austrian mother’ (Karim).

Several of our interviewees were living with Austrian guest families who tended to provide high-level support. Merhab, 24 years old and from Iran, described his former guest family as highly assisting – especially the family’s father who was a German professor and practiced the language with him. Residing with an Austrian family, Issa also referred to them as mother, father and brother. Having access to this level of bridging social capital clearly showed impact on our interview partners’ labour market integration. Issa always wanted to be a premiums cook, so together with his host parents, he set up an application to a famous Viennese hotel. There, he is currently passing an apprenticeship as a cook (see also section 5.3). This illuminates that volunteers’ willingness to help (Seibel and van Tubergen 2013) is a crucial factor, over and above refugees’ own agency.

Hessam, 19 and from Afghanistan, found his guest family via a network initiative that mediated refugees to jobs and accommodation. After trying out different schools, he was placed into his current apprenticeship at a fast food restaurant by volunteers of the same initiative. Together with such private initiatives, notably, NGOs play important roles in the Austrian refugee situation by providing essential support. For example, Mahmout (22, from Syria) related to the assistance he had received from the association *T, which supported his graduation from middle school. Another department of the same association supported refugees in applying for jobs. There, an advisor helped him write a résumé and motivation letter. He is now involved in an apprenticeship as an IT technician at a university.

Opportunities opened to our interviewees often led to lower-qualified jobs, particularly when mediation to a job took place within their ethnic communities. This reproduces findings of other studies (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006). By contrast, higher-qualified occupations tended to be acquired in association with a high level of aspirations and a very active job searching process, even though this did not automatically lead to highly qualified jobs. Remarkably, all interviewees passing apprenticeships found their employment via social contacts (cf. section 5.3). Regarding the methods of job search, our interviews point out that the distinction between formal and informal job search (Merlino 2014) is sometimes not suitable to explain the experiences of our interview partners. For them, using formal job search methods required access to social capital, in particular, to gather support in writing job applications and résumés. For example, Navid’s German teacher assisted him in writing a résumé. Syrian accountant Yasin (28) got to know several helpers when he himself was volunteering. One of them paid for a high-quality German course, another assisted in applying for his current job: ‘So I sent my CV and also my cover letter. But my cover letter, I didn’t write it. And I asked Mr. A* to do it for me, and he did, and I think, he helped me with this’ (Yasin).

5.3. The acquisition of post-migration human capital: the Austrian institution of ‘apprenticeship’ and its manifold influence on refugees’ labour market integration

While agency and social capital are key, some barriers refugees encounter are rooted in the structure of Austrian institutions, the Austrian labour market and the legal framework. In
particular, the Austrian system of formalised vocational education – apprenticeship – proves to be both a barrier and a major opportunity for refugees.

Several of our interview partners reported having made great efforts to resume their original profession, but whenever they applied for a position, they were rejected because they did not hold formally certified education. This is a well-known phenomenon when it comes to highly skilled refugees who had been doctors, teachers or lawyers in their home countries (Piętka-Nykaza 2015; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018). In Austria, however, people who had originally been craftsmen are affected as well. For instance, Amir recounted: ‘I wrote many applications, to many companies, as a painter or varnisher. But everybody: “Do you have an education? Did you do an apprenticeship?”’ (Amir).

Amir had worked as a varnisher in Syria for 13 years, but he was unable to continue working in his profession in Austria as he lacked formal education. From a human capital theory perspective, it is understandable that Austrian firms found it difficult to assess his experience. For him, however, this meant losing his profession and being treated unfairly: ‘I was working as a varnisher for 13 years and I’ve got pictures of what I was working on. That’s practice, and I can do more than people who did three years of apprenticeship’ (Amir). He adopted a different strategy for entering employment – by being flexible he seized a chance that presented itself and started working as a night shift counsellor in a refugee home.

Without formal (certified) education, it is very difficult for refugees to find jobs as craftsmen and even if they do, their wages will be significantly lower in comparison to their certified peers. Thus, especially young refugees are encouraged to engage in apprenticeships, but they face an adverse monetary incentive structure. When doing an apprenticeship, pay is sometimes below the level of social assistance money (e.g. in lowly paying branches like gastronomy) which they would receive if unemployed. Also, an apprenticeship will take three to four years, and pay is considerably higher than for a worker without formal education only after it is completed. Thus, it is little surprising that refugees who are unfamiliar with this system often do not see the purpose of completing an apprenticeship. This is aggravated if refugees are counselled to do an apprenticeship in a profession in which they have already gathered considerable work experience. Parwiz, 22 and from Afghanistan, had substantial work experience as a tiler and failed to see any purpose in doing an apprenticeship: ‘And I got to learn for another three years for a piece of paper? That’s a bit strange to me’ (Parwiz). He tried to find a way to get an apprenticeship certificate more quickly – which is possible in principle – but on his own, he failed to do so. Instead, with the help of his brother, he found an assembly job in a car factory.

Nour faced the same problems as Amir and Parwiz, but he chose to acquire post-migration human capital as a strategy. Although he had applied for a large number of jobs, he was unable to find work in his field of expertise, salesmanship. Nour did not resign but instead continued to show high aspirations. He analysed his situation and formed a strategy, approaching his counsellor at the Austrian employment agency and telling her that he intended to advance his education in Austria: ‘I told her that I want some training; I cannot succeed if I don’t have an education from Austria. Even though I have work references, they do not count at all’ (Nour). The employment agency enabled him to start an accelerated apprenticeship for adults. Amir, Parwiz and Nour were all confronted with the same challenge, namely the lack of formal education and the resulting non-recognition of their pre-migration human capital. They reacted in different ways, yet all of
them demonstrated various forms of agency. While Amir and Parwiz proved adaptability and flexibility and changed their professions, Nour decided to acquire formal education. Structural factors play a role in addition to personal preferences. While Nour received good counselling and support in finding an accelerated apprenticeship, Parwiz, who could not find an appropriate place, was searching on his own.

The Austrian apprenticeship system for craftsmen is a burden for some but a major opportunity for others. Completing an apprenticeship is one of the very few possibilities for asylum seekers to start working. Several of our interview partners had taken up an apprenticeship while still being asylum seekers. They encountered a starkly different incentive structure than already accepted refugees. While for the latter, an apprenticeship only pays off in the long run, asylum seekers, who receive only very low-level social assistance, benefit financially from day one.

For refugees, two important advantages of apprenticeships are, first, their accessibility to people with little formal schooling and, second, the possibility of paid work and gaining education at the same time. For Hessam, doing an apprenticeship was a suitable alternative to the higher technical school he had tried to attend initially but found too difficult. Of course, an apprenticeship also includes vocational school, which may be difficult but feasible. He considered working and studying at the same time as an advantage and as an available strategy to circumvent the barriers he was facing due to his limited education. ‘I wasn’t in school for long, only five years. I think it is very good to learn, but working is better. And, so, I would be working and get an education after three years, that’s also very good’ (Hessam).

Pursuing vocational education in Austria is among the most important possibilities available to recently arrived refugees. It allows them to overcome the barriers associated with the non-recognition of work experience and skills gained in their home countries. But whether refugees are able to follow this path depends on the interplay between refugees’ own agency, structural factors (e.g. labour market regulations) and, importantly, whether they receive support. All of our interview partners who engaged in education in Austria received a substantial amount of support either from institutions or from Austrian volunteers. Karim, who was doing an apprenticeship in retail, expressed this view quite clearly: ‘Yes, without acquaintances, I believe, it doesn’t work out. I’ve sent many job applications, but unfortunately, all were rejected. They said that they have better candidates than me or, maybe they take Austrians first, then refugees’ (Karim). Interestingly, the effect of refugees’ own agency need not always be beneficial. If Parwiz and Amir had been less flexible, they perhaps would have enjoyed better career perspectives by now.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Entering the labour market poses enormous challenges for recently arrived refugees, starting from the language barrier, unfamiliarity with customs of the job search process, the lack of recognition of home country educational degrees and work experience, and outright discrimination. This explains their comparatively low level of employment. Among the refugees who have recently gained access to the labour market in Austria, employment is estimated at 30% (see Table 1). In this paper, we analysed successful ways into employment as applied by refugees who had come to Austria in 2014 and 2015. While we analytically distinguished three pathways, we also showed that in the
lived reality of refugees, the overlap and interrelation between these pathways produces a larger variety of individual ways into employment.

Our findings show that refugees’ own agency is key in the job search phase. Our interview partners demonstrated high levels of work motivation (disregarding adverse monetary incentive structures) and were willing to start their career anew. They showed self-confidence, aspirations and flexibility, seizing opportunities available to them, even if this meant giving up their original professions. Also, mobility was identified as an important resource available to some of our interview partners. Thus, people who had little access to other resources, such as human and social capital, were still able to find employment profiting from regional labour shortages. However, telling from our empirical material, the thesis is plausible in our view that the importance of agency in our interview partners’ lived experiences points also to the barriers refugees face and the amount of effort it costs them to find any job at all. Moreover, agency alone is insufficient. It always interacts with other factors thus creating or failing to create opportunities.

Our empirical analysis further indicates that social ties to locals (in particular volunteers) are a crucial resource available to some refugees. Often, these locals serve as door openers for refugees to enter employment. We also analysed how refugees were capable of gaining valuable social capital. A key strategy applied by many of our interview partners was volunteering which enabled them to get in touch with native volunteers. But of course, these natives also need to be willing to help (cf. Seibel and van Tubergen 2013). In this context, the experiences of our interview partners show that the frequently made distinction between formal and informal job search does not fully reflect the realities of refugees’ job search process: Often informal help proved to be a prerequisite for the ability to apply formal methods, e.g. when writing résumés and job application letters.

The institutions of the Austrian labour market, in particular, the educational system for craftsmen – apprenticeship – play an important role as well. Apprenticeships were found to be a two-edged sword: on the one hand, refugee craftsmen with considerable work experience from their countries of origin found it impossible to re-enter their profession, as they lacked the formal education required for their professions in Austria. On the other hand, especially young refugees who had come to this country with little prior schooling found that taking up an apprenticeship was a suitable way for them to enter the labour market and enjoyed good long-term career perspectives.13

As we purposefully interviewed refugees who had already found jobs, the findings of our research may not directly apply to those who still are searching. Some of our interview partners showed levels of work motivation, which might be considered exceptional, but in many other aspects, e.g. regarding education,14 age and gender, or types of jobs in Austria, they are typical. Thus, we believe that based on our interviews, we were able to describe characteristic pathways towards employment of refugees, which are not only unique to Austria. For instance, apprenticeships and social contacts with natives are key aspects facilitating labour market integration of refugees in Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and other countries as well (e.g. Eisnecker and Schacht 2016; Hockenos 2018).

As concluding remark we want to mention that at the time of the writing of this article, the Austrian government set in motion a series of policies that are meant to damage refugees’ attempts of integration into society in ways which are unprecedented in the history of the country.15 The effects of these far-reaching anti-immigration policies will be a topic for future research, which is much needed in our view.
Notes

1. We apply a rather general definition of labor market integration based on the ILO concept (see https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=778), by counting people, who are gainfully employed as successfully integrated.

2. It is an undisputed fact in research that the agency and competence to act are highly relevant for people who have been forced into flight and wish to become integrated in a new home country. Still, current economic and sociological studies apply various leading concepts in investigating these abilities and competences. In the tradition of Bourdieu, for example, Bauder (2005) referred to habitus, while McPherson (2010) related to the development of the self, following Foucault. Campion (2018) and Obschonka, Hahn, and Bajwa (2018) used personal agency to subsume the role of personality, intentions and career adaptability. Piętka-Nykaza (2015, 524) viewed refugees as creative agents, whose individual choices and motives influence the ongoing events that construct the process of their integration into a new society. She argued that research within the field of refugee studies predominantly elaborates on structures that control and restrict refugee agency, while there is little research that would explore the ways in which refugees live and deal with the numerous obstacles they encounter in their daily lives.

3. Evidence on the important role of host country language skills for refugee labor market integration has been provided by Auer (2018) and Zwysen (2018) among others.

4. Out of a total population of 8.6, 2 million people with migrant backgrounds were living in Austria in 2017 (28% above the 2010 level).

5. The highest absolute numbers of asylum seekers between 2010 and 2016 were observed in Germany (1.73 million), France (462,000) and Sweden (432,000). Austria received 219,000 refugees over this time period (Verwiebe, Seewann, and Wolf 2018).

6. The Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) accounted for 33,000 refugees with granted asylum status searching for employment in Austria in August of 2018; 1200 of those were registered as looking for an apprenticeship.

7. In barely any other social issue have Austrian opinions been so polarized. Huge initiatives to improve refugee integration were in opposition to the rejection of an open pluralistic society on the part of an increasingly influential right-wing movement. Similar arguments have been provided by Teney et al. (2014), who identified such polarization tendencies in many European countries.


9. It is important to mention that refugees’ readiness to assume whatever job makes them prone to exploitation. Idris, 40 and from Iraq, quickly found a job in a restaurant after receiving subsidiary protection. But he only worked on weekends, earned less than what he would have received if claiming social assistance for the unemployed, and, most importantly, forewent the chance to attend German courses for free. His German skills were still very limited and he lacked a genuine perspective to improve his working conditions.

10. When we interviewed Issa, he was engaged in an apprenticeship in a famous Viennese hotel which is actually frequented by the president.

11. This part of the Austrian labor market is highly regulated and many jobs are closed positions which are controlled by representatives of trade associations as well as the chambers of labor and commerce.

12. For theoretical arguments why this might be the case, we refer the interested reader to Campion (2018).

13. Unfortunately, the new right-wing anti-immigration government has stopped asylum seekers from taking up apprenticeships in September 2018, thus effectively blocking an important and successful pathway into employment.

14. It might be worthwhile pointing out that the highly educated are somewhat underrepresented in our sample and that education only played a minor role in the accounts of our interview partners.

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