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## How do refugees use their social capital for successful labor market integration? An exploratory analysis in Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Using Germany as an example, this qualitative study explores how refugees use their social capital within and outside organizations to enter their host countries' labor market. Following a grounded theory approach, we interviewed 36 Syrian refugees who had already secured employment in Germany. We aim to provide in-depth information regarding the available types, uses, and benefits of social capital with regard to their access and integration into the labor market. We found that refugees have access to different types of social capital and that these types can offer different forms of support to refugees during the labor market integration process. In addition, we identify subtle differences in the kinds of support offered through vertical and horizontal bonding and bridging social capital. More specifically, we found that vertical bridging social capital is a valuable source for securing adequate employment, whereas horizontal bonding social capital and independent job-searching methods may more often lead to low-skilled work or underemployment. Our findings provide new insights into how different forms of social capital can facilitate labor market integration of refugees at different stages.

Refugee populations have increased considerably in recent years, and finding solutions for their successful integration has become an urgent and challenging task for many countries worldwide. In contrast to immigrants who left their home country voluntarily, refugees are individuals who had to leave due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (United Nations Human Rights, 1951). Approximately 65 million people were displaced from their home by conflict or due to persecution in 2016 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017), and many of them applied for asylum in Europe or other Western countries. Germany alone had an intake of approximately one million refugees in 2015 and an additional 280,000 refugees in 2016 (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), 2017). Most of the refugees came from Syria and other crisis-riddled countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, or Somalia, and they are likely to stay for a longer period of time due to the uncertain situation in their home countries. Therefore, policy makers in Germany and other host countries need to develop solutions for their social, political, and economic integration.

Labor market integration, i.e., securing and maintaining any type of formal employment, has been identified as one of the primary goals, as desirable outcomes at the societal and individual levels have been reported (e.g., Battisti, Felbermayr, & Poutvaara, 2015; Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010; OECD, 2016; Worbs, Bund, & Böhm, 2016). More specifically, obtaining employment was found to be an important lever that can help to reduce welfare dependency and improve individuals' well-being (Pernice & Brook, 1996; Thränhardt, 2015; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). However, studies have shown that successfully entering the labor

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market can be a challenging process for the majority of refugees (e.g., Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). For example, research indicates that only 50% of refugees were employed after living in Germany for five years (Brücker, Hauptmann, & Vallizadeh, 2015). Well-known challenges include uncertainty about legal status, lack of language proficiency, lack of formal qualifications, cultural differences, and, in some cases, traumatic stress (e.g., Battisti & Felbermayr, 2015; Marfleet & Blustein, 2011; Ward et al., 2001). To date, we still know little about refugees' vocational behavior in general, and how they enter the labor market more specifically.

While much research has been done on *social capital* and its effects on the career development of migrants (e.g., Haug, 2008; Lamba, 2003; Lancee, 2012; Lin, 2001; Piracha, Tani, & Vaira-Lucero, 2013; Ryan, 2011; Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008; Williams, 2006), there is only a limited number of studies focusing on the social capital available to refugees in the context of labor market integration. These studies have also generated inconsistent findings (e.g., Aguilera & Massey, 2003; Lancee, 2010; Li, 2004). On the one hand, Drever and Hoffmeister (2008) have found that social capital can be particularly helpful for migrants and refugees to gain access to the labor market, as it might compensate for their potential lack of formal qualifications. On the other hand, Potocky-Tripodi's (2004) findings did not support the positive association between social capital and migrants and refugees' integration processes. Instead, human capital and language proficiency had a larger impact on refugees' employment status and income compared to social capital. In addition, there have been contradictory findings regarding the role of ethnic *bridging and bonding social capital* when it comes to migrants' and refugees' labor market integration (e.g., Lancee, 2016; Phillimore & Goodson, 2006). Whereas tight bonding social ties are often associated with closed-off migrant communities that lack social and economic resources within host societies, bridging social capital may provide individuals with access to valuable career-related information and offer them social mobility (e.g., Lancee, 2016; Nannestad, Svendsen, & Svendsen, 2008). Other studies have shown that bonding social capital can, however, help migrants and refugees secure housing or employment (e.g., Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Li, 2004), thus, contributing to their labor market integration.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, researchers have argued that the concepts of ethnic bonding and bridging social capital, which distinguish social ties based on ethnic similarity, may not be sufficient in explaining differences in value of migrants' and refugees' social capital (Patulny, 2015; Ryan, 2011; Ryan, Erel, & D'Angelo, 2015). Additional characteristics of social ties, for example their relative social location (e.g., social class, educational background), might also influence the value of migrants' and refugees' social capital. These characteristics have been integrated into social capital theory by Ryan (2011), who introduced the terms *horizontal and vertical social capital*. Horizontal social capital refers to contacts who are similar in terms of relative social location and who have similar access to resources and knowledge. Vertical social capital describes contacts who belong to different social levels and have access to more valuable resources and extensive knowledge (Ryan, 2011).

Using Germany as an example, this qualitative study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate about the impact of social capital on refugees' vocational behavior by exploring how refugees use their social capital within and outside of organizations to enter the labor market of their host countries. Due to the high number of recent intake of refugees, Germany provides a relevant context to investigate the vocational behavior of refugees in the early stages of their integration process into a highly formalized and regulated labor market. Following a grounded theory approach, we interviewed Syrian refugees who had already secured employment in Germany. Our goal was to learn more about the relationship between their social capital and the process of labor market integration.

By doing so, we aim to make three distinct contributions to the literature. First, we identify and categorize the different types of social capital available to refugees in their host countries (e.g., family members, friends with different ethnic backgrounds, officials, and social workers) into horizontal and vertical bonding and bridging social capital. Second, we take a temporal perspective to explore how refugees' labor market integration process unfolds and how the different types of social capital may influence this process. Third, we explore the value of the different types of social capital in terms of the level of occupation that refugees achieve. We find that subtle differences seem to exist with regard to the use of different types of social capital (e.g., horizontal – vertical, bonding – bridging), of which especially vertical bridging social capital was beneficial for refugees.

## 1. Theoretical background

### 1.1. Refugees are a special group of migrants

While many studies do not distinguish between refugees and other groups of migrants (Cortes, 2004), refugees differ from other migrant groups. Migrant is a broad term that includes individuals who moved to another country for economic reasons (BAMF, 2017), while refugees had to leave their home country because they faced or experienced persecution and have been accepted by host countries based on humanitarian grounds (United Nations Human Rights, 1951). Because they left their homes involuntarily, they seldom have time to prepare for a new environment and culture. In addition, refugees often lack financial resources and foreign language skills (Ward et al., 2001), which makes securing employment in their host countries even more difficult. Moreover, some suffer from traumatic stress caused, for example, by violent warfare and crisis in their home country (Pernice & Brook, 1996). These circumstances make refugees a strongly disadvantaged group within their host countries' societies (Yakushko et al., 2008). However, once refugees have been granted asylum status, they tend to stay longer than other migrants (Ward et al., 2001), and this can increase their motivation to improve their language skills, to acquire formal qualifications, and to enter the labor market in the host country (Cortes, 2004).

<sup>1</sup> We offer a more comprehensive analysis of these mixed findings in the following theoretical background section.

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