

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Socio-Professional Trajectories of Refugees in France: An Identity Work Perspective

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates refugees' socio-professional trajectories in France. Our findings suggest that refugees follow different socio-professional paths shaped by identity work and acculturation mechanisms as they go about integrating in the French context. We identify three socio-professional trajectories: 'adjusting', 'enhancing', and 'detaching'. This study contributes, firstly, to research on refugees' socio-professional adjustment and vocational adaptation, and secondly, to the literature on identity work. It does so by offering novel insights into the processes of repairing, reorienting, and reconstructing cultural and professional identities in the context of refugees' relocation to host countries, in this case, France.

Keywords: Refugees; acculturation; discrimination; identity work; professional trajectories

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In my country I liked to run, to be with people, I had my own house... I lost everything, I had to start from scratch. Fortunately, my health is good, when you work you progress and everything in life is beautiful. We mustn't give up. I knew nothing about French catering, I was in too much pain in my body, but I hung on to make a living. You have to make a living, you have the right to do so.

— M., Afghan refugee in France
Head waiter in a Parisian restaurant

Since the exodus of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and other conflict zones in 2015, and the recent armed invasion of Russia into Ukraine in 2022, hosting, installing, and acculturating large numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers has become a major priority for many European countries (Pawlak, 2022). This has highlighted the urgency of understanding how refugees navigate the multifaceted challenges related to relocation in a new country.

Overall, scholars agree that refugees suffer from a drastic reduction in career opportunities (Tharmaseelan et al., 2010), and that even after many years in a host country, they may still experience economic and socio-political discrimination (Yakushko et al., 2008). The scant research has mostly focused on refugees' struggles with occupational transitions (Davey & Jones, 2019; Pajic et al., 2018), the

coping mechanisms they develop in the face of vocational identity threats (Wehrle et al., 2018), and adaptation processes to the host country's labor market (Campion, 2018; Gericke et al., 2018). However, the process by which refugees navigate socio-professional pathways in the context of identity making (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Burke, 1991) remains underexplored.

Notably, social and cultural acclimatization is especially important in the context of professional adjustment, since the economic crisis in France, as in Europe, has changed the national asylum policy: the figure of the 'welcome refugee' has now been replaced by that of the 'undesirable asylum seeker' (Julien-Laferrrière, 2016). This shift in host societies' perceptions can lead to feelings of discrimination, marginalization, and stigmatization, which potentially impact refugees' professional and career adaptation (Wehrle et al., 2018).

In this article, we explore how such inflicted self-definitions might threaten refugees' identity coherence, motivating conscious and unconscious identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). We therefore adopt an identity work lens (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Killian & Johnson, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) to capture a more holistic perspective of the way refugees navigate acculturation (Berry, 1992) and

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socio-professional processes in the French context. More specifically, we explore different pathways refugees develop, in the context of civil society support, by simultaneously engaging in professional, social, and cultural identity work. Following a qualitative methodology based on 19 life-story interviews with refugees in France (completed with 7 interviews from other key actors in the field), we consider experiences of loss, hurdles, obstacles, and discrimination related to refugees and ethnic stigmatization, and their impact on identity work. Past research has mainly focused on identities in isolation, neglecting the unavoidable interconnections between multiple identities (Caza et al., 2018; Ramarajan, 2014). Addressing this lacuna, and following a call by Atewologun et al. (2016) and Caza et al. (2018), we consider the dynamic interplays across cultural, ethnic, professional, and refugee identities, and the way these shape refugees' socio-professional trajectories in France.

Our study describes three possible trajectories that refugees might follow: 'adapting', 'enhancing', and 'detaching', each reflecting dynamic negotiations between multiple identities and different types of acculturation. Focusing on the above-mentioned processes allows us to explore possibilities for voices that might have been lost or diminished during multiple transitions, to reclaim the space to re-emerge and regain the agency needed to operationalize career plans. Our study offers new insights into research on refugees' socio-professional adjustment (Lee et al., 2018; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002; Wehrle et al., 2019) and vocational adaptation (Baranik et al., 2018; Yakushko et al., 2008). Moreover, it contributes to identity work literature (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Nardon et al., 2020; Wehrle et al., 2018) by providing, firstly, an in-depth account of refugees' experiences regarding the discrimination, threats and difficulties encountered, and secondly, the process of repairing, reorienting, and reconstructing their identities. While civil society support is not a focus of our study, we acknowledge civil society's crucial role in the development of the proposed trajectories.

Theoretical background

Identity work and refugees

Identity work is often viewed as an ongoing and continuous process of negotiation and reconstruction of simultaneously held identities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Caza et al., 2018; Lucas, 2011) through interactions between people and systems. It is broadly defined as an unconscious (i.e., not mindful) process of 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising' self-meanings in order to achieve coherence and distinctiveness (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626). While constrained by the reproductive power of

hegemonic discourses and social contexts (Caza et al., 2018), active and conscious identity work requires a minimal amount of self-doubt and openness to self, and is an outcome of psychological-existential concerns or inconsistencies in self-image (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Certain triggers such as role transition, challenging environments, individual and situational factors (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Kreiner et al., 2006), as well as conflict between identities, can foster more intense and concentrated identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006). Thus, even though individuals actively participate in constructing their identities, these choices are influenced and even bounded by social factors (Caza et al., 2018). This reading points to the processual and contextual aspects of identity making (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), rejecting essentialist understandings of identity, and instead considering fluid interconnections between evolving selves within their surrounding environment (Mandalaki, 2021).

Specifically, relocation to a new country is liable to affect social identity-making processes, involving new social 'labels' as well as new cultural and professional endeavors. Individuals, such as refugees, who perceive their social groups to be 'tainted' or threatened are more likely to engage in identity work (Ashforth et al., 2007; Doldor & Atewologun, 2021) to maintain a coherent sense of self (Koveshnikov et al., 2016; Kyratsis et al., 2017) and to deal with status dilemmas or widening self-perception gaps (Tcholakova, 2008).

Recent studies have explored how contextual factors such as diversity climate (Newman et al., 2018) and psychological barriers such as vocational stress and coping mechanisms (Baranik et al., 2018) interfere with refugees' professional adjustment. Others have focused on the development of networks that enable refugees to adapt to the host country's labor market (Campion, 2018; Gericke et al., 2018), arguing that much of the cultural, social, and economic resources that refugees bring to the host society are highly undervalued (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Consequently, refugees grieve intangible and cross-cultural losses, such as loss of belonging and competency (Wang et al., 2015), loss of social status and identity (Casado & Leung, 2002), as well as tangible losses such as access to familiar aspects of their home country including people, places, food, music, together with other aspects of past life (Aroian et al., 1998) such as language, social networks, and other skills (Casado et al., 2010). To address these challenges, they engage in identity work, seeking to develop a coherent sense of self throughout their transition (Fachin & Davel, 2015).

Refugees' acculturation in host countries

The academic literature on refugees discusses several types of acculturation, widely known as adaptations, attitudes, feelings, goals, identities, modes, options, orientations, outcomes, paths,

policies, preferences, strategies, or styles (Berry, 1997). When questioning refugees' socio-professional trajectories, Berry's two-dimensional model proposing four acculturation strategies – *assimilation*, *integration*, *separation*, and *marginalization* – appears particularly suitable. It refers both to newcomers' cultural heritage and identity, and to the search for and maintenance of exchanges with the host group (Berry et al., 2006).

Assimilation occurs when individuals adopt elements of the host culture and move away from their home culture. Integration appertains to maintaining elements of the home culture while borrowing elements from the host culture. Separation strategy involves avoiding interactions with the host culture to maintain the home cultural heritage relatively intact. Finally, marginalization signifies failing to establish relationships with either the home culture's communities or the host society. These acculturation strategies are generally associated with psychosocial or socio-demographic variables, which refer, respectively, to psychological and sociocultural acculturation (Berry, 1997). Instead of expecting a universal progressive adaptation process, a multitude of factors might determine refugees' acculturation processes, linked to social mobility as well as professional adjustment (Portes, 1995; Silberman & Fournier, 1999). As discussed here, such transitions trigger identity work processes.

In this article, we consider the interplay between identity work processes and acculturation efforts to investigate different socio-professional pathways that refugees may endeavor:

Methodology

Research context

Rooted in political and historical factors, the refugee crisis is of international concern. It is laden with power asymmetries between actors (Vianna, 2016) insofar as it expresses the supremacy of a State, which grants sovereign protection to a foreigner who may be the target of persecution in another sovereign State (Krulić, 2003). Before presenting the empirical part of our study, it seems crucial to describe the historical, social, and legal context of our research.

Refugees in France

As a country of immigration since the middle of the 19th century, France has received three main flows of migrants of very diverse origins (i.e., local Europeans, nationals of the former colonial empire, and migrants from the rest of the world). Following the Geneva Convention in 1951, the French government established the OFPRA body (French office for the protection of refugees and stateless persons) to ensure the legal protection of incoming refugees. It also commissioned the association 'France Terre d'Asile / France Land of Asylum' to

organize the reception of refugees alongside other partner structures. Since then, thousands of refugees have been welcomed to the country.

Currently, France ranks eighth among European Union countries in terms of the number of registered refugees and asylum seekers relative to its overall population. In 2020, France was the second most-demanded EU country, with 89,400 applications for international protection, behind Germany (148,200). Twelve percent of these asylum seekers have been granted refugee status (HCR, 2021).

Many observers consider France's efforts to integrate refugees to be derisory, however (Pursch et al., 2020). Beyond the numerical importance of refugees in France, a more salient motivation for our research is the 'exceptional' status of the foreigners' integration model in France. Broadly, the French framework encourages adherence to the values of the French Republic (freedom, equality, and fraternity) and respect for laicity. Everyone, whether French or immigrant, should be viewed and treated as a person rather than as a member of an ethnic group. This has given rise to the concept of '*French integration*', promoting 'assimilation' (complete adherence to and identification with French culture), as described above, rather than inclusion or 'insertion' (upholding immigrants' culture of origin) (Sargent & Larchanché-Kim, 2006). It often translates into banning conspicuous religious symbols in public spaces with the intention of protecting privacy, being able to choose from diverse lifestyles, and the injunction to 'live together' (Costa-Lascoux, 2006).

Many researchers believe that assimilation derives from an imperialistic attitude since it undermines one's home identity (Lochak, 2019), thereby erasing diversity (Rochcau, 1987). It has gradually become politically incorrect. In fact, the term 'assimilation' has almost disappeared from academic terminology (Safi, 2006). The assimilation model, together with increasingly restrictive French immigration policies (Sargent & Larchanché-Kim, 2006), presents major obstacles for migrants, and for refugees in particular. It can entail exclusion and lead to indignation, resulting in some authors noting 'the failure of the French model' (de Wenden et al., 2005). Problematising such practices, Akoka (2020) discusses how OFPRA, whose initial function was to assist refugee integration, has gradually become a bureaucratic control body responding to a requirement for 'individual persecution' (p. 194).

Overall, although regulations oscillate between permissiveness and active control, certain elements have remained invariable; mainly the systematic valuation of what is national and the 'rejection' of otherness (Mathieu, 2016). These policies often involve antagonism and paradoxes that might affect refugees' identity-making process. We suggest that in relation to their acculturation efforts, this might in turn shape the socio-professional pathways refugees endeavor:

Civil society and refugees

In recent years, migrants' rights and dignity have largely been protected by local, regional, and national NGOs (Taran, 2001). Research has shown that Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) s provide considerable support for Syrian refugees in Turkey, giving them crucial information about their rights and thus supporting their social integration at local level (Aras & Duman, 2019). Advocating for migrants' and refugees' human rights, Taran (2001) identified several ways in which NGOs can help refugees, such as dealing with discrimination and xenophobia, and providing access to resources such as housing. Notably, NGOs provide basic services covering safety, humanitarian aid, health, well-being, and welfare. They also enhance migrant capacities through human development (particularly language skills), economic development, and employment (mostly by providing vocational training), acculturation (by offering voluntary work), and social capital (including civil contributions by migrants and cultural citizenship) (Garkisch et al., 2017).

In this study, we collected data from three NGOs in France involved in promoting refugees' human and economic development, acculturation, and identity making, beyond the initial settling-in period.

Data collection

Based on a qualitative methodology, our study explores 'life stories'. Life story interviews correspond to a qualitative method whereby informants are encouraged to recount narratives that recall aspects of their lives (Bertaux, 1981). By invoking personal conceptions of the past and the readily interpretable nature of the open interview outcomes (Tagg, 1985), life stories cover an emotional and embodied dimension, wherein researchers and interviewees alike get caught up in fluid interactions with the 'flesh' of words (Gaulejac, 1987, p. 17). In our case, this approach seeks to give voice to the multiple, conflicting opinions, values, beliefs, histories, and subject positions (Sonn et al., 2017) that refugees navigate.

The practical application of narrative methods mainly entails semi-structured or open-ended life story interviews (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2021). To navigate length and data interpretation challenges, we drew inspiration from Balán's life story framework (Balán & Jelin, 1980), organising topics as immigrational, occupational, educational, and family histories.

We conducted 26 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with refugees and heads of NGOs – 'Singa', 'Français Langue d'Accueil/FLA', and 'Wintegreat' – (Table 1), who help refugees to integrate academically, socially, or professionally in France. The NGOs acted as 'door openers' for us to enter the field, putting us in touch with refugees and providing information on

their socio-economic context (Peneff, 1990). In addition, five of the refugees interviewed were recommended by refugees we already knew. The refugees we interviewed were from six different countries with distinct social origins and demographic features. Since our goal was to gather testimonies about refugees' lives, both during and after their journey, we only interviewed refugees who had been in France for at least 2 years (4.5 years on average), had been granted 'refugee status', and had experienced different situations, including trauma, forced exile, and more 'stable' conditions. We invited the interviewees to describe pivotal moments in their journey, including their last years in their country of origin, their arrival in France, and their relocation experiences. The questions sought to draw out events (the reasons for their forced departure, living conditions, and professional status), their feelings about these events, their behaviors (resources used, choices made, strategies adopted), and their present life.

To capture in-depth impressions and feelings, we conducted the interviews in the language with which the refugees felt most at ease – French, English, or Persian – since we are fully or nearly native in all three languages.

We also interviewed the partner NGO heads before and after contacting the refugees: before, to collect information on their environment and social context (Peneff, 1990), and after, to compare our ideas with those of the 'experts' (Sanséau, 2005). These interviews helped us to enter the field and to get in touch with refugees supported by the NGOs, providing us with crucial insights into refugees' struggle to live and work in a country of exile such as France. More specifically, they enlightened us with regard to three interwoven difficulties encountered by refugees – administrative hurdles to stay in France legally, language and cultural barriers, and feelings of isolation. We discuss these issues in more detail alongside our analyses of the main interviews.

We ended the interview stage when we reached data saturation. We then transcribed and translated the interviews (which we audio-recorded to ensure full engagement with the material), analyzing them both separately and together (comparison and cross-validation) until we reached consensus (Sanséau, 2005).

Data analysis

Following our analysis of the life stories (Joyeau et al., 2010), we used comparative analysis to develop a precise and rich framework that captured recurrences between different situations and to illustrate 'how' 'things' were articulated (Bertaux, 1997). The coding process was developed by means of an inductive framework and concerned latent as well as manifest meanings. Each researcher first coded the interviews separately to bring out first-order concepts, subsequently grouping them into

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Refugees								
No.	Participants	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Current Job/status	Previous Job/status	Residency in France at the time of interview	Affiliation to NGOs
1	Ahmad	M	30	Afghanistan	Reception and orientation manager; FLA	Unemployed	6 years	FLA
2	Sonia	F	31	Rwanda	Unemployed (Entrepreneurship project)	Student	5 years	Singa
3	Ashraf	M	33	Afghanistan	Carpenter	Carpenter	6 years	FLA
4	Walid	M	39	Syria	Unemployed (Entrepreneurship project)	Management consultant	3.5 years	Singa
5	Hamed	M	42	Palestine-Syria	Entrepreneur—media	Journalist	3 years	Singa
6	Shahram	M	33	Afghanistan	Head chef	Chef	3 years	FLA
7	Alisan	M	28	Afghanistan	Head waiter in a large restaurant	Store owner	5 years	FLA
8	Maryam	F	30	Afghanistan	Human rights activist	Consulting in economic law	2.5 years	Singa
9	Ismail	M	33	Iran	Journalist and entrepreneur	Political activist	7 years	Singa
10	Mehrab	M	34	Afghanistan	Assistant manager of a chain supermarket	PhD student in agriculture	6 years	FLA
11	Majid	M	32	Iran	Unemployed	Political activist	6 years	Not Affiliated
12	Daruis	M	36	Iran	Journalist	Journalist	6 years	Not Affiliated
13	Sohrab	M	24	Afghanistan	Student in French	Student	2 years	Wintegreat
14	Amir	M	35	Iran	Filmmaker	Cameraman	4 years	Wintegreat
15	Sarah	F	33	Iran	Student	Student	5 years	Not Affiliated
16	Tahir	M	32	Iran	Journalist	Journalist	6 years	Not Affiliated
17	Jana	F	27	Russia	Student activist	Political activist	3.5 years	Singa & Wintegreat
18	Aliya	F	33	Syria	Journalist	Student	6 years	Singa
19	Anna	F	38	Iran	Unemployed	Housekeeper	5 years	Not Affiliated
NGO Heads								
No	Participant	Gender	Age	Job/status			NGO	
1	Paul	M	35	Head of Employment Department, FLA			FLA	
2	Mark	M	55	Head of FLA			FLA	
3	Jean	M	28	Director/Co-Founder Singa			Singa	
4	Nadia	F	26	Paris Regional Director; Singa			Singa	
5	Armand	M	31	Co-president and Co-founder; Wintegreat			Wintegreat	
6	Pierre	M	30	Co-president and Co-founder; Wintegreat			Wintegreat	
7	Sam	M	58	Mentor; Wintegreat recruitment program			Wintegreat	

second-order concepts (see Tables 2a and 2b). We then analyzed the data using mixed thematic content analysis, applying categories developed from theoretical propositions about the relations between social identification, acculturation, and the respondents' verbatim. This approach revealed emergent topics, enabling us to develop the proposed socio-professional trajectories. We define refugees' socio-professional trajectory as the different processes refugees adopt in relation to their

social and professional integration in a host country context and with regard to the civil society support provided, rather than in terms of refugees' fixed profiles.

The trajectories we describe help us to understand and 'theorize' the socio-professional paths taken by refugees given their positioning within contextual dynamics, without claiming that these depend on refugees' personal traits, characteristics, profiles, or personality. Instead, we recognize the systemic and

Table 2a. First and second order themes: losses, hurdles, and obstacles

Sample of Verbatim	First order themes	Second order themes	Third order themes
When you leave your country, you have to be ready to accept everything. I picked up dog droppings to make money. For 6 months, I was taking the train every morning at dawn near Trappes to be at a job insertion with alcoholics and mental patients. I wasn't in my place but I'm glad I did it.	Financial insecurity	Loss of economic resources	Tangible and intangible losses, hurdles, and obstacles
You're looking for a house, a suitable house which is the major issue actually because nobody wants to rent to you unless you have a CDD [a short-term contract] and a guarantor and so it's complicated. If you don't have like a comfortable place, it's hard to be creative or to think properly or... it's hard. Environment is very important.	Housing difficulties		
The evening of my arrival I slept in front of the station, the next day I was told that I was going to make an asylum request. I was the 50th in the queue. I had an appointment 2 months later at the prefecture, which gave me another appointment a month later again. I slept in a tent in Jaures. They took my fingerprints, accepted my asylum application and sent my story to OFPRA who summoned me after a year and a half.	Obtaining the refugee's status	Administrative obstacles	
I wanted to change my status in entrepreneurship but I was a little afraid because the administration is complicated in France. I was hesitating [just to create a current account at the post office, I went there six times, each time there were excuses to deny me an account]. That time was very painful because I lived in the street, so I ran out of time and courage to think about my career path, and I stayed in the same job.	Heavy administrative procedures		
Even if we can have economic capital, we don't have access to the network, and other things. You have to be active in the society you live in to create social capital. It took five years in France to reach the point where I was 20 years old, not even! Competencies and intelligence are not sufficient... Being successful has many aspects related to environment and society.	Limited social network	Loss of social resources	
I have a feeling of sadness; It's been six years since I saw my wife. I would bring her and learn French if I had a magic wand. I would work in building.	Loneliness		
I stopped applying for normal jobs, and that was very critical because we live with the minimum wage like the lowest that we get from government aids and this is not a very nice feeling [he laughs, embarrassed]	Occupational downgrading	Professional downgrading	
I was working on the black, in a library and as a barber, I also wrote articles in some Persian news websites. I couldn't even get a job as a dog walker. Because I didn't have money I couldn't take French lessons, so even if there was a good job, I couldn't take it because I couldn't speak French.	Difficulties finding a job		
The very first day I was shocked because I couldn't understand anything! I went to a course, I paid 800 euros for three months but I couldn't understand anything because the quality of the method was bad. Then I didn't have any money (...). Employers don't take foreigners who don't speak good French, but how will they learn and integrate if it's not by working with the French? 80% of Afghans don't speak French. They work on the black, are poorly paid and stay among Afghans or Pakistanis.	Difficulty to learn French	Linguistic and cultural barriers	
I used to speak like a book, using subjunctive, but I had to learn spoken French, to lessen my language. Social codes are important to learn. I had to learn, to let go of my nice French, to learn the 'vouvoiement', to write 'veuillez bien agréer', 'voilà', I had to detox myself from some expressions, to shake hands, to make the 'bises'. I've learnt some codes only after 5 years, I was prepared to be teased about having four brothers, etc.	Different cultural codes		
People have stereotypes about refugees, because in the media they show refugees who are desperate, but they can be doctors, lawyers, anything. I did an interview, and in the training session, they asked 'which word do you associate with refugees? Hunger?': everybody raised a hand. 'Poor?': everybody raised a hand. 'Entrepreneurship?': two people!	Stereotype and stigmatization	Discrimination and stigmatization	
I don't know if we can call it discrimination. It's extremely complicated. Subjectively, yes. It's related to my refugee status. People helped me a lot in other projects. They weren't mean. But they systematically considered me unskilled or less qualified than them because of my refugee status.	Perceived discrimination		

Table 2b. First and second order themes: Acculturation Processes and Identity Work

2nd Themes	Trajectories 1st Themes	Adjusting	Enhancing	Detaching
Acculturation Processes	Developing interpersonal network	<p>'I don't have any contact with Afghanistan, I've got a little more with Iran (through Facebook). My thing is France'.</p> <p>'I probably wouldn't have refugee status if I hadn't volunteered. I also have a lot of friends thanks to volunteering, who I meet every Sunday at football (...)'</p>	<p>'I don't hesitate to meet people, understanding codes makes life easier. No barriers to talking, meeting, living with people. If they aren't well, it's their problem, as long as they don't aggress me. Meeting people of every nationality, colour, religion, or social class is my driving force'.</p> <p>'I had the skills to connect with other people and make a very good network. In life you have to run. Stay in touch with my people, be nice even if you don't want to'.</p>	<p>'I don't connect very well with the French because of their culture. They shape their relationships with people close to them from school, and then they don't let others in. One of the biggest problems of first-generation migrants is being stereotypically judged. Also, entering French circles is extremely hard. They invite you with other migrants, for example'.</p>
	NGOs resources	<p>'I want to stay in France, so French is necessary. A friend took lessons at FLA. It was written 'the inscriptions are closed' on the door, I entered anyway and I insisted to put my name down, which was accepted. This is how I started to learn French'.</p>	<p>'I'm very sociable and I always try to talk to people and make friends. I made my social chain myself. I found my French friends through NGOs and through other friends'.</p>	<p>'I started to learn French at FLA in 2011. I took classes for a month but it was too cold so I went to the library to see videos and movies; I didn't care about learning French, why learn French? To sleep on the street?'</p>
	Navigating linguistic and cultural challenges	<p>'People are unfamiliar with Afghanistan, they only know the jihadists, the Taliban. But, as for me, even when I talk to customers and laugh with them, they think I'm from Italy or an Arab country. I'm close to them'.</p> <p>'I love the French language and this gives me access to French culture, French charm... I love the history of France, I know its architecture. Every morning I stop in front of the Opera and ask myself: 'how was it built at the time?'</p>	<p>'I met a lot of people on Tinder! It's great for learning social codes!'</p> <p>'Learning French was difficult at the beginning. I tried hard during the first two years. I took courses, I talked to French people, I read books. Working in associations helped a lot. At the beginning I used a lot of body language to make people understand what I needed. Pronunciation was very difficult for me at the beginning, but now I speak well! It even impacted my English!'</p>	<p>'The first 6 months I refused to speak French, I didn't understand why people don't speak English. I was angry'. I had never been closed-minded. But I don't want to be the same as them. I even resisted learning the language. Even resisted in terms of fashion, even if I liked the clothes. Now I also resist sometimes because I don't want to be like a French person'.</p>
	Connecting to the host society	<p>'When you don't know the language, you feel the people are humiliating you. But when you learn the language and the culture, you realize it's not that bad. Now that I have friends, I feel maybe 1% of French people are racist'.</p>	<p>'You have to be active in society to create social capital. I spent five years in France to reach the point where I was when I wasn't even 20 years old! Skills and intelligence are not enough. Success involves many factors linked to the environment and society. That's why I chose a French partner; she studied at [a very prestigious school] and in the U.S., and her brother was at [a very prestigious school]. They have a huge network'.</p>	<p>'The humiliation is huge, especially in state agencies. When you can't speak well, and they interrupt you... and the police talk to people rudely. But, everything works perfectly for the French people's queue!'</p> <p>'One of the biggest problems of first-generation migrants is being stereotypically judged. Also entering French circles is extremely hard. They invite you for example with other migrants'.</p>
Identity Work	Developing professional self-efficacy in the French context	<p>'I lost everything. I had to start from zero. But I told myself that you came here, you are here, you made a mistake, you have to face it, and you have to learn the language and work here... nothing is impossible. I work very hard, also on Saturdays and Sundays I do all the work on my own'. I work well</p>	<p>'When I arrived in France, I explored the field for my project. I wanted to empower myself so I went to university. While studying, I did some exploratory research and I put the data together; like a self-incubating phase'. I couldn't work for one year and a half, but I tried to meet the people who are in power... I tried to</p>	<p>'I don't like France for living. I don't feel connected to this land. I have no feeling to France, no history. I don't feel for it. I feel a stranger. I don't think my feelings will change. What bad luck! I had offers, but the types of positions that I got were way too junior compared to my previous job, to something that</p>

Table 2b. *Continued*

2nd Themes	Trajectories 1st Themes	Adjusting	Enhancing	Detaching
		<p>and a lot. I do alone in a weekend what three people do in a week. In life, you have to run. Stay in touch with my people. Be nice even if you don't want to be'. 'When you leave your country, you have to be ready to accept everything, I picked up dog droppings to make money. For 6 months I took the train every morning at dawn near Trappes to work in an insertion job with alcoholics and mental patients. I wasn't in my place, but I'm glad I did it, I won contacts'.</p> <p>'The boss offered me to a job as head waiter, will you be able to do it?' I replied: 'No one is born president or alcoholic from the womb of his mother, so I'll learn'. He told me that I did well because I smile, laugh, and even when I don't understand the words, I know how to pretend to understand'.</p> <p>'I'm very happy at my job. It's great working in this restaurant and with this manager. And, within two years, I doubled my salary. However, in the future, if I can, I'd like to open my own restaurant and employ refugees and asylum seekers who can't speak French very well'.</p>	<p>change my mind, to aim (in my head) at meeting people who are in power, even if they are higher than me. I wanted them to transmit to me what they have in their heads, to learn from them, and fortunately it worked well'.</p> <p>'For me, success means being at the top in my field. For example, in politics, it means being the president of the republic... I want to be the best in France and in Europe'.</p> <p>'I had a few job offers from the Iranian-related media, a full time job, but I didn't accept... because I wanted to have a professional career in France. I could see some friends who worked in the Iranian section of big news agencies who were very isolated. However, I wanted to develop my career here in France, or even internationally. I didn't want to stay isolated in the Iranian media'.</p>	<p>I had 8–9 years ago. I couldn't convince myself. I'm 39 years old, not 20 or 30'.</p>
	NGOs support	<p>'In Wintegreat, I was suddenly faced with people from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, etc. The teachers and students were French. I had a French friend! He was in love with Iranian cinema [like me]. He invited me to a jazz concert. I came out my Iranian community for the first time! I went to a concert that none of my Iranian friends went to! I was in a non-Iranian zone for the first time, I couldn't communicate at all. I was uncomfortable. But it was really good'.</p>	<p>'[Singa] helped me to feel good about my refugee status. They sent me to events combatting refugee stereotypes. I met other refugees who have qualifications'.</p>	
	Navigating perceived discrimination	<p>'I never felt discrimination. Sometimes I felt a little, but later I realized that it wasn't really discrimination'.</p> <p>'No, I didn't feel discrimination. It's true I'm Afghan. My boss jokes with me. He asks me, '[Mehrab] where are you from? Italy?' But sometimes some clients are mean'.</p>	<p>'I don't know if we can call it discrimination. It's super complicated. Subjectively, yes. It's related to my refugee status. People helped me a lot in other projects. They were not mean. But they systematically considered me unskilled or less qualified than them. Even now in my own start-up, 80% of the time, my colleagues disagree with my opinion first. I always need to insist to be trusted. I think this relates to my status'.</p>	<p>'I don't really talk about being a refugee. Because in the business world, they don't want to see your emotions. I don't tell them that I'm a refugee, because I don't want them to hire me from pity, but for my abilities'.</p> <p>'You lose your dignity because, during the asylum-seeking administrative process, you have to prove that you suffered enough. It's a degrading process to wait, you lose your confidence'.</p> <p>'Sometimes you wish you weren't a refugee. I'm 31 and people think I'm lazy and know nothing [because I'm unemployed]'.</p>

structural underpinnings that shape the racializing and stigmatization experiences of marginalized individuals located at different intersections of gender, race, and class, among other identifiers of difference (Mandalaki & Prasad, 2022). Our analysis also recognizes the role of civil society support, which enables refugees to navigate the socio-professional contexts of host countries, examining the behaviors (and not traits) refugees need to navigate the socio-professional integration processes.

Thus, the suggested trajectories seek to propose an intelligible framework that enhances understanding of the pathways and processes refugees endeavor as they engage in their socio-professional adaptation in France. We present our findings next.

Findings

Our field research confirms that refugees coming to France are exposed to (often unimaginable) economic, social, administrative, professional, cultural-linguistic and discrimination-related obstacles, losses, and difficulties. We attempt to identify some of these challenges, which are obviously interwoven and are not hierarchical.

A lack of economic resources can include housing difficulties and financial insecurity, even for wealthy refugees who live on their savings. Administrative hurdles involve long-drawn-out processes to obtain refugee status and other laborious administrative procedures (like opening a bank account). Refugees might also miss the social capital left behind, experiencing feelings of loneliness and limited social networks. Professionally, finding a job commensurate with the qualifications held is highly challenging, while linguistic and cultural barriers (learning French and cultural/behavioral codes) are costly (when possible) both in time and energy. Finally, refugees are exposed to stigmatization and/or discrimination: their identities as refugee or foreigner, are often discredited, subjecting them to unequal treatment in the professional sphere. Interestingly, they are perceived differently across different groups of refugees. In line with previous research (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Wehrle et al., 2018), we consider discrimination and its perception to be the main identity-related obstacles that threaten a coherent self-concept and thus trigger the need for cultural and professional identity work.

In the following sections, we use interview verbatim to describe refugees' different socio-professional trajectories, taking into consideration the dynamics between perceived discrimination, acculturation strategies, and professional identity positioning regarding ethnic and host identities. We identified three main trajectories: *Adjusting*, *Enhancing*, and *Detaching*.

Socio-professional trajectories of refugees in France

For each socio-professional trajectory, we first describe perceived losses and resources. We then explore acculturation

processes and identity work, discussing how they shape each socio-professional trajectory. Our research also revealed the role of civil society (NGOs) in this process. It is important to observe that since the trajectories described are dynamic, it is possible that different refugees engage with processes related to more than one trajectory and/or change trajectories over time.

'Adjusting' trajectory

'Adjusting' perceived losses & resources

Refugees endeavoring the *Adjusting* trajectory appear willing to do 'whatever it takes' (Azzara, 2015) to find a job, relying mainly on psychological and social resources to cope with perceived discrimination:

When I lived in a tent in the street, I learnt French by writing each word five times and repeating it. In Iran, I had my home and my store. But I came here, and I had nothing. I lost everything. I had to start from scratch. But I told myself: 'You came here, you are here, you made a mistake, you have to face it, and you have to learn the language and work here'. Nothing is impossible. (Alisan, 28, Afghan)

They appear to avoid, ignore, or downplay feelings emerging from their perceived ethnic and refugee profile related to discrimination when interacting with others, including employers:

I never felt discrimination. Sometimes I felt a little, but later I realized that it wasn't really discrimination! (Maryam, 30, Afghan)

When you don't know the language, you feel that people are humiliating you. But when you learn the language and the culture, you realize it's not that bad. Now that I have friends, I feel maybe 1% of French people are racist. Sometimes you don't understand them, so you think they're racist. (Amir, 35, Iranian)

No, I didn't feel discrimination. It's true I am Afghan. My boss jokes with me. He asks me, '[Mehrab] where are you from? Italy?' But sometimes some clients are mean. (Mehrab, 34, Afghan)

Refugees using *Adjusting* strategies also seem alert to acculturation processes offered by NGOs not only in terms of cultural practices, such as language acquisition or choice of friends, but also in terms of cultural knowledge, which helps them to become immersed in the French culture. They try to reduce the flow of information related to their ethnicity to encourage others to focus on their professional skills and competencies instead:

In Wintegreat, I was suddenly faced with people from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, etc. The teachers and students were French. I had a French friend! He was in love with Iranian cinema [like me]. He invited me to a jazz concert. I came out of my Iranian community for the first time! I went to a concert that none of my Iranian friends went to! I was in a

non-Iranian environment for the first time. I couldn't communicate at all. I was uncomfortable. But it was really good. (Amir, 35, Iranian)

While the loss of tangible factors relating to quality of life may seem more important, refugees endeavoring an *Adjusting* trajectory appear to suffer most from loss of access to basic privileges in a new country. This includes the bureaucratic obstacles they have to overcome ('*I waited 23 months to get refugee status. I spent six months on the street*'. Mehrab, 34, Afghan), loss of civil rights ('*I went to the post office six times. Each time they found excuses to deny me an account*'. Sohrab, 24, Afghan), unemployment ('*They don't employ foreigners who don't speak good French*'. Alisan, 28, Afghan), or housing difficulties ('*When I arrived, it was very painful. I wasn't expecting all that. For a year, I found myself with people sleeping on the street. After a year and a half on the street, the prefecture housed me*'. Shahram, 33, Afghan). They cultivate endurance and relational skills to find a job; they get promoted, make friends, learn French, and integrate slowly but steadily. They work hard to 'connect' with others, using their perception and sense of humor. Their propensity for interpersonal relations and their perseverance to learn French and French rules of conduct help them to develop contacts quickly. They also develop a more internal locus of control ('*Everything was settled in a couple of days instead of six months for my residence card because I was smart*', Alisan, 28, Afghan), and rely on 'positive accidents' ('*I was so tired that I gave my CV to the same shop twice, so the director noticed me and gave me the job*', Alisan, 28, Afghan), opportunities, and/or 'chance' ('*All my colleagues have good degrees but are not department heads; it's the opposite for me. I'm very lucky*', Mehrab, 34, Afghan) to facilitate their integration.

'Adjusting' acculturation

In terms of acculturation, an *Adjusting* trajectory requires an investment in time and energy to learn the language, the customs, and the socio-cultural codes (from drinking wine to keeping quiet about religion). Albeit interacting with their country's nationals, refugees endeavoring this trajectory actively meet people from the host country, learn the language, and broaden their social circle. Once exposed to NGOs, they rely heavily on the resources offered to draw on the host country's values, language, and written codes:

Having only Iranian friends kept me away from the language and the culture. At Wintegreat, I suddenly met people from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, etc. and the teachers and students who were French. I made French friends! My mentor, buddy, and coach were my favorite people in the world! My coach really encouraged me a lot. I was in a non-Iranian environment for the first time, I couldn't communicate at all. I felt uncomfortable. But it was really good. My mentor [at Wintegreat] was an economics student. He helped me a lot, especially for the application. And my buddy who took me to concerts was very sociable

and warm, he was in love with Iranian cinema [like me]. (Amir, 35, Iranian)

In this sense, NGOs provide meaningful support for refugees, helping them to learn the language and social codes, to expand their network, and to connect with the host society:

Knowing how to relate to others is essential to learn a language, to integrate, and to find networks. Professional success doesn't depend on high qualifications, but on interpersonal skills, networks, and understanding how things work. Some refugees make the effort to get these keys. They accept that there's no returning to their home country: 'I'm here, I'll stay here'. (Mark, 55, Head of FLA)

An *Adjusting* acculturation strategy thus involves refugees relying heavily on the resources provided by NGOs, often surpassing their comfort zone in order to integrate more fully:

When I came to France (after Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria and Germany, where I was arrested), I wanted to stay, so learning French was vital. A friend of mine took me to FLA. On the door it said: 'Registrations closed, no vacancies', but I went in all the same and insisted on them putting my name down. That's how I started to learn French. (Ahmad, 30, Afghan)

Growing identification with French society does not erode attachment to refugees' ethnic identity, but it appears to limit it to the 'private' sphere. Indeed, their different cultural identities appear to be in constant 'hierarchical' interplay, resonating with research explaining how a person's original identity is often transformed through interactions with another culture (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000):

I learnt this here in France: if you're in the system, you can get everything, the cultural system, assimilation. If you assimilate, you're in the system. Otherwise, you're out of system. (Aliya, 33, Syrian)

Refugees also develop a 'contact and participation' acculturation strategy (Berry, 1997), associating with other cultural groups, seeking daily cultural interactions, and developing assimilation strategies (Berry, 1997).

'Adjusting' identity work

Refugees following *Adjusting* strategies work hard to be considered as trustworthy, competent workers, who frequently go beyond what is required:

I work 36 hours a week, and I also work 2–3 hours more every day. At first, I spoke bad French and more English. Then the director talked to me more and trusted me, and after a year, he made me section manager. I sometimes ask him when I'm going to be the store director. He says, 'soon, soon!' (Ahmad, 30, Afghan)

They highlight their professional skills, presenting a 'dominance' approach (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), to overcome refugee related stigmatization. They try to cut information flows linked to their refugee status and develop a richer picture of themselves that transcends categorization and stereotyping. They respond to misrecognition or discrimination through an everyday morality (Lamont & Mizrachi, 2013; Sayer, 2005) that leads others to trust them as conscientious and honest. In so doing, they reduce the distance between 'them' and 'us', defining themselves, both in private and in public, as individuals ('I, Mehrab, the hard worker, the one my boss can count on') rather than as a collective ('we the Afghans', 'we the Muslims', 'we the refugees'). As Lamont and Mizrachi (2013) observe, people sometimes neutralize symbolic boundaries to better integrate society and improve their chances of entering the labor market, while retaining their collective identity in the private sphere. By downplaying their ethnic and refugee identities and, with civil society support, by investing in acculturating through learning the language, culture, and social codes of the host society, refugees in this trajectory avoid remaining in an 'ethnic enclave':

My boss told the other employees: look, this is an Afghan who came four years ago, try to work just half as much as he does. I don't like talking to people like this, but he told me that I should be proud of myself! (Alisan, 28, Afghan)

The diverse social identities (such as refugee, foreigner, Muslim, Syrian, French citizen, and professional) of refugees in the *Adjusting* trajectory co-exist, with professional and host culture affiliation being more salient than ethnic and refugee ones. To acculturate, they assimilate the host culture and seek to develop a strong sense of 'belongingness' to the host country, while also keeping a sentimental affiliation with their cherished country of origin. As their primary source of recognition, professional development appears prevalent in their identity-making process, reflecting what the literature calls a 'good worker identity' (Turner & Norwood, 2014).

Overall, we suggest that these refugees engage in parallel processes: (1) they foster acculturation by strong affiliation with the local culture and by downplaying their ethnic status; and (2) they mitigate perceived discrimination by emphasizing their professional competencies. Throughout this process, NGO support is crucial to empower them to enrich and affirm their social, cultural, and professional skills.

'Enhancing' trajectory

'Enhancing' perceived losses & resources

The second proposed trajectory is undertaken by refugees who feel a loss of status due to perceived discrimination. From

respected and recognized individuals at a certain social and/or professional level, they become 'nobodies' (Tahir, 32, Iranian). As such, they experience the refugee status as imposed, stigmatizing, and degrading:

I'm from a very respectable family in Syria. I introduce myself once and everything goes well. When I came to France, it's like I'm zero; just a number. I don't like it when they treat me as if I want to steal something from them. (Aliya, 33, Syrian)

[I] was working in the most prestigious newspaper in Iran. I was earning the highest salary. I was recognised in my field. I had a high-quality life. I came here, and I became no one. I had to start from below zero. I was seen as illiterate because I couldn't speak the language. Because you're a refugee, people think of you as an opportunistic migrant. You lose your social class, your social position. (Tahir, 32, Iranian)

I don't know if we can call it discrimination. It's extremely complicated. Subjectively, yes. It's linked to my refugee status. People helped me a lot in other ways. They weren't mean. But they systematically considered me as unskilled or less qualified than them. Even now in my own start-up, 80% of the time, my colleagues disagree with my opinion first. I always need to insist to be trusted. I think this is linked to my status. (Ismail, 33, Iranian)

To overcome this loss of status, refugees in the *Enhancing* trajectory develop hope and self-efficacy, which they use to deploy social and cultural resources.

They mainly rely on cultural and social resources to develop specific competencies and find novel ways to acquire such resources, such as partnering with resourceful French people:

You have to be active in society to create social capital. I spent five years in France to reach the point where I was when I wasn't even 20 years old! Skills and intelligence are not enough. Success involves many factors linked to the environment and society. That's why I chose a French partner [for work]; she studied at [a very prestigious school] and in the U.S., and her brother was also at [a very prestigious school]. They have a huge network. (Ismail, 33, Iranian)

In some cases, they appear willing to experiment with novel – at the time – social networking mediums, such as dating websites¹ to make connections with the host society and improve their linguistic and cultural knowledge:

I met a lot of people on Tinder! It's great for learning social codes! I arranged three meetings a day just to talk! You meet all kinds of people! (Jana, 27, Russian)

¹. At the time of this interview, dating websites such as Tinder were less popular in French society. More importantly, these mediums were mostly used for the sole purpose of 'dating'.

‘Enhancing’ acculturation

Refugees endeavoring *Enhancing* trajectories also try to engage with the French culture – and sometimes language – but not to the same extent as *Adjusting* refugees since their acquaintances, dominant language, and sometimes, entrepreneurial projects are mainly linked to their country of origin and/or refugee status. They represent a bidimensional pattern of social identification (Berry, 1997) and acculturation (Dovidio et al., 2009), merging different social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) to derive in-group identification from membership in two salient social groups, the ethnic and host ones. They strive for ‘cultural maintenance’ (Berry, 1997) as they consider their cultural characteristics to be equally important:

I had a few full-time job offers from the Iranian-related media, but I didn't accept. I wanted to have a professional career in France. I had some friends working in the Iranian section of big news agencies who were very isolated. It was financially, professionally, and emotionally very difficult to refuse these offers, but I wanted to avoid being isolated in the community. I want to work for a French or international public, where I belong. (Ismail, 33, Iranian)

Since they interact every day with French people and become an integral part of the larger social network, we suggest that refugees in the *Enhancing* trajectory are likely to achieve integration (Berry, 1997):

When I arrived in France, I explored the field for my project. I wanted to empower myself so I went to university. While studying, I did some exploratory research and I put the data together; it was like a self-incubating phase. It took time and was risky. There was no guarantee about the next step. And I'm 42. I'm restarting my life, still questioning myself, and this creates internal tension too. Am I going in the right direction or not? This is where a mentor can be very helpful. (Hamed, 42, Palestinian)

Yet, their efforts to maintain both cultural identities often lead to ‘acculturative stress’ (Berry et al., 1987), requiring more time to change/adapt their cultural and values repertoire.

‘Enhancing’ identity work

Refugees in an *Enhancing* trajectory try to give meaning to their exile by linking the aim of their professional project with their refugee experiences. They use positive distinctiveness strategies to increase the status of their in-group and to advocate the value of difference. In addition, they are quick to put forward their refugee status by talking about its positive aspects, thus challenging simplistic or negative stereotypes (Creed & Scully, 2000). Their attitude reflects positivity by integrating their refugee ‘condition’ within their professional endeavors:

For me, success means being at the top in my field. For example, in politics, it means being the president of the republic! I don't think I'm successful yet. I want to expand my start-up to other countries and languages. I think if it becomes European, then I can say I was successful. I want to be the best in France and in Europe, and globally. And always be creative; a real specialist in one subject, instead of being a simple activist. (Ismail, 33, Iranian)

Here, civil society support is also seen as significant for navigating discrimination, enabling identity-making processes by helping to destigmatize tainted ‘labeling’ and to develop self-efficacy and hope:

The association [Singa] helped me to feel good about my refugee status. They sent me to events combatting refugee stereotypes. I met other refugees who have qualifications. The event was about doing the portrait of a refugee in the Place de la Republique! I was very uncomfortable at first. It said: Jana, Refugee! I went with a girl from university who came from a right-wing family. She didn't know anything about it! When she came and saw me, she was shocked! But it was positive. Her reaction was ‘You're a good refugee’ but the others aren't! Then I got many messages from people who took selfies with my portrait, and I started to be open about my refugee status! I can explain. I talk about false stereotypes of refugees and of the French. (Jana, 27, Russian)

In this sense, NGOs attempt to support the recreation of the refugee image and to facilitate identity work:

Our NGO helps refugees build a community with ordinary French people. They develop a sense of belonging and make new connections. Otherwise, they would be socially isolated... They can't fight against stereotypes and irrationality, but they can create a new image of themselves and it can generate a new reality. (Nadia, 26, Paris Regional Director at Singa)

To create an integrated professional identity, refugees in the *Enhancing* trajectory attempt to achieve simultaneous recognition of their social identities, either by harnessing the ‘intersections’ between their professional, refugee, ethnic, and host statuses, or by combining all these elements to create a sense of self:

I feel that Singa is trying to change things for refugees. I'd like to succeed, to be a role model for other refugees. I want to change the fact that refugees have no cultural knowledge. At some point, I'll tell people I'm a refugee to show them I can be professionally successful. I'm not a monster. I'm just like you. (Aliya, 33, Syrian)

The *Enhancing* trajectory appears to reflect an experience of uncertainty in relation to setting up new entrepreneurial projects, which demands acquiring and using novel economic and cultural resources. Overall, our analysis suggests that refugees endeavoring an *Enhancing* trajectory engage with efforts to foster identity work by relying on creative interplays between their professional, refugee, ethnic, and host statuses in

the context of NGO support. They appear to either bring their convergences into play (i.e., to inter-cross similar elements across identities) or to merge them completely to create a more 'inclusive' sense of self (i.e., to combine identities).

'Detaching' trajectory

'Detaching' perceived losses & resources

Finally, our framework proposes a socio-professional trajectory, which we call 'Detaching', endeavored by refugees who appear to grapple with the effects of discrimination, prejudice, and rejection. Refugees in the *Detaching* trajectory, much like those in the *Enhancing* one, often feel discriminated against by French citizens or employers. However, they do not necessarily try to prove the inadequacy of negative stereotypes or force others to reassess their status, attributing this discrimination to both refugee status and ethnicity:

The humiliation is huge, especially in state agencies. When you can't speak well, and they interrupt you, they don't let you finish, or you have to queue for five hours in the cold. And the police talk to people rudely. But everything works perfectly in the French people's queue! I think they try to humiliate immigrants on purpose. It happened so often that I believed that I deserved this humiliation. If someone talked to me respectfully, I was shocked! (Sarah, 33, Iranian)

They attribute this discrimination to both their refugee status and ethnicity:

I hear so many stories about refugees, especially with Arabic backgrounds and names. It's linked to terrorism. We feel it here. My kids hear it at school and they're unhappy. In the news every day, you hear the word terrorism and Islam. It becomes part of the kids' subconscious. So, they don't want to be associated with their Arabic background. It wasn't like this in England. Here, the social differences between Arabs and others are obvious. They usually don't have good jobs, a good income, or a good life. For me, this is quite alarming. In England, the mayor and members of parliament are from Pakistan. (Walid, 39, Syrian)

Anjum et al. (2012) offer a relevant explanation for this phenomenon: when refugees have substantial, but unrecognized economic resources and/or cultural means (i.e., academic and professional qualifications), they may feel a humiliating loss of status, which negatively impacts hopeful thinking, particularly when combined with ethnic discrimination:

People have stereotypes about refugees because in the media show refugees who are desperate. But they can be doctors, lawyers, anything... Another thing, I did an interview and in the training session they asked 'which word do you associate with refugees? Hunger...?' everyone raised their hand, 'poor?': everyone raised their hand, 'entrepreneurship?': two people raised their hand! You know, like all refugees, I spent money to come here, 5000 euros. We're not poor. (Sonia, 31, Rwandan)

A policeman once offended me by asking why I didn't stay back home. An employee in the prefecture told me 'a cat is always a cat; a dog is always a dog'. Nothing in the administration is clear, even when we tell the whole truth. (Ashraf, 33, Afghan)

Refugees endeavoring a *Detaching* trajectory suffer most from the loss of belongingness. They feel less connected to others and find it difficult to fit in:

I don't connect very well with French [people] because of their culture. Their relationships are shaped with people close to them from school, and then they don't let others in. (Sarah, 33, Iranian)

Sometimes, this feeling of disconnect is derived from considering the host society as an unreceptive out-group, given the structural barriers they experience. Consequently, despite being unfamiliar with the social codes, they often actively refuse to learn them or to engage with the host society:

I'd never been closed-minded. But I don't want to be the same as them. I even resisted learning the language. Even resisted the fashion, which I liked. Now, I also resist sometimes because I don't want to be like a French person. (Ahmad, 30, Afghan)

This is liable to result in fewer opportunities to develop relationships and/or obtain information about potentially useful resources:

I don't like living in France. I don't feel connected to this country. I have no feelings for France, no history. I know that there's a huge history in Europe. I understand the politics and elections. But, I don't feel for it. I feel a stranger. I don't think my feelings will change. It doesn't mean it's a bad place to live. It's just that I don't feel connected to this country in terms of its history, religion, etc. (Majid, 32, Iranian)

'Detaching' acculturation

Since they rarely feel encouraged to establish social connections with the host society, refugees endeavoring 'Detaching' trajectory often work in sectors that do not correspond to their qualifications but require fewer social and cultural skills (such as construction or catering). They thus develop what may be seen as a non-contact, non-participatory acculturation behavior (Berry, 1997), remaining mostly within their ethnic community, valuing original cultural affiliation, and avoiding outside interactions. Although the host culture influences them through situations that make them feel excluded and discriminated against, they mainly appear uninterested in developing strong host culture identification:

Their culture is not very interesting for me, so I don't try to integrate. I even become defensive. Because French people insist on their culture a lot! It disgusts me! Of course, there are good things, too. They are very critical, always looking at different angles. They are socially educated. I think that their being critical has influenced me. (Majid, 32, Iranian)

This can lead to a separation (Berry, 1997) of identities, a division between 'them' and 'us' based on membership of one 'dominant' category:

People here whine and are negative. It's different from Dubai or England. Here, everybody's so stressed. They want to fight you for no reason. They feel less happy compared to Dubai or England. Maybe life is more demanding. In Dubai, people don't pay taxes. We're not used to it, and we can't adapt. My kids are adapting, and they're aggressive like French kids. I don't understand. In Dubai, everything is so smooth and nice. (Walid, 39, Syrian)

'Detaching' identity work

For refugees in a *Detaching* trajectory, navigating interactions between their different social identities appears problematic, that is, identifying with one social group detaches them from the others (Gordon, 1964), somehow 'compartmentalizing' their professional and refugee status-related processes (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), and preventing their in-group identity development process from enabling a fulfilling sense of self. This also confirms the rejection-identification framework (Branscombe et al., 1999), which posits that when individuals become targets of prejudice and stereotyping by the majority group, they tend to identify more strongly with their ethnic group to counterbalance the negative psychological consequences of perceived discrimination:

One of the biggest problems for first-generation migrants is being stereotypically judged. Also entering French circles is extremely hard. For example, they invite you with other migrants. They put you in categories. They don't mix the categories. It's hard to find French friends. My close friends are Iranian. I only have one close French friend (Tahir, 32, Iranian)

In the context of the structural barriers they experience, refugees in a *Detaching* trajectory seem to develop complex and ambiguous feelings of home and belongingness (Sonn et al., 2017). As with the *Enhancing* pathway, they feel that French citizens or employers have a negative attitude toward them. Yet, they do not appear to try to change their attitude or disprove negative stereotypes to enhance their status, leading to a snowball effect of loneliness and sadness:

I don't really talk about being a refugee. Because in the business world, they don't want to see your emotions. Sometimes they understand later. Sometimes when they question my lack of professional experience, I tell them that I'm a refugee because I don't want them to hire me out of pity but for my abilities. Sometimes, they think you're traumatized, that you'll cry and you have no control. But, luckily, I have 10 years of residency. They don't talk about it, but everyone has stereotypes. (Sonia, 31, Rwandan)

The contextual uncertainty often leads them to opt out of the labor market and/or French society altogether. As refugees

with cultural, economic, and/or social resources not valued in or 'transferable' to France, they often find themselves in low-income, low-skilled, precarious professional situations, investing in their children's education and hoping to see the latter succeed professionally (Poullaouec, 2004). This corroborates the literature which observes that migrants withdraw from society when they face obstacles that lead them to operate outside existing structures (Al Ariss, 2010). In this sense, detachment from the host society spills over to their (lack of) links with civil society and dissociation from the NGOs. This dissociation combined with how some NGOs present their vision as '*only for those who make the effort*' (Mark, 55, Director FLA) and '*we test refugees' ability to dream big*' (Pierre, 30, Co-founder Wintegreat) could result in feelings of discouragement and exclusion.

The aforesaid might lead to a vicious circle – unfamiliarity with the language, cultural practices, social codes, institutional barriers – which may result in declining economic and professional resources, depletion of hope and optimism, loss of motivation, and sometimes surrender:

People's support changed my perspective. But recently I had some administrative problems, I changed my address, I was struggling as I discovered I couldn't get my allowances. Sometimes you wish you weren't a refugee. I'm 31 and people think I'm lazy and know nothing. (Sonia, 31, Rwandan)

Only when they start giving their exile a 'positive' meaning, a process often helped by civil society support, can an 'identity repair' process begin. And only when they begin to mourn the loss of their social and professional status do they seem able to reconcile their goals with the reality and experiment with more *Adjusting* or *Enhancing* attitudes.

Discussion

Our findings point to connections between identity work and acculturation strategies shaping the different socio-professional pathways refugees endeavor upon relocation to France. In the *Adjusting* trajectory, we observed that different social identities (including refugees, foreigners, Muslims, Syrians, 'French citizens', and professionals) co-exist 'hierarchically'. In the *Enhancing* trajectory, refugees rely on a form of interplay between their professional, refugee, ethnic, and host identities, either by bringing their convergences into play or by merging them into a more inclusive identity. In the *Detaching* trajectory, social identities are compartmentalized and the relations between different social identities seem problematic, that is, identifying with one social group detaches them from the others. Throughout these processes, refugees rely (or not) on various tangible and intangible resources provided by NGOs.

A major factor influencing refugees' identity work is precisely their being 'labeled' as *refugees* (Baranik et al., 2018;

Wehrle et al., 2018), which often reduces them to a 'fixed' identity instead of a plurality of selves. This can impact their identity-making process, potentially exposing them to traumatic or unfamiliar circumstances, which in turn enhance isolation and powerlessness (Zetter, 1991).

We therefore suggest dynamic relationships between ethnic and refugee identities; the more refugees consider refugee and ethnic-related discrimination to be an impediment, the less they merge and combine and the more they compartmentalize their identities. Specifically, those who manage to downplay perceived discrimination interact more successfully with the majority group (Crocker & Major, 1989). This mechanism appears more salient among refugees endeavoring an *Adjusting* trajectory, who appear to assimilate (Berry, 1997) the host culture. For fear of social stigmatization, they distance themselves from their ethnic groups and identify strongly with the host culture, highlighting their professional and cultural standing. Engaging in identity work enables them to trivialize and smooth out differences with the host society by 'adopting a 'thin' notion' of cultural identity (Ybema et al., 2012, p. 52) and by 'othering the self and adjusting to 'normal' others' (Ybema et al., 2012, p. 53) in the acculturation process (Sadeghi, 2019). During this process, refugees also emphasize their professional competencies over their ethnic and refugee status and rely strongly on concrete resources (i.e., language courses, learning socio-cultural codes, vocational counseling, mentorship programs, etc.) provided by NGOs.

Refugees in the *Enhancing* trajectory appear to navigate the acculturation process differently, experiencing loss of status when subjected to discrimination. However, rather than avoiding, hiding, downplaying, or ignoring this, they actively leverage social and psychological resources provided by NGOs to develop self-confidence and self-efficacy. This helps them to repair, reorient, and reconstruct their evolving sense of self and identification, and to balance status differences to construct an inclusive 'we' with the host society. To this end, refugees try to acculturate by means of integration (Berry, 1997), constructing their professional identity more holistically through a creative interweaving of their ethnic, host, and refugee 'condition'.

In the *Detaching* trajectory, refugees appear to experience strong discrimination related to both their ethnic and their refugee identities. To protect themselves from exclusion, they move away from the host culture and identify more strongly with their ethnic group (Branscombe et al., 1999). This identity work approach could be paralleled with the separation mechanism in Berry's acculturation model (Berry, 1997). Our findings also suggest that refugees in a *Detaching* trajectory often reject the refugee label and undertake identity work that is not conducive to developing a strong professional identity. This might be explained by inadequate access to the required (i.e., social and psychological) resources, potentially due to an absence of affiliation with civil society structures.

These findings suggest that identity work is not always expedient for reducing tensions and threats or strengthening a given identity, and can result in both positive and negative personal outcomes (Caza et al., 2018).

The trajectories that we identify are dynamic and can often be interdependent, overlapping, or successive. As explained here, they do not depend on refugees' inherent personality characteristics or traits, but on the intensity and direction of the contextual barriers they experience, and the social and psychological resources they have access to in their effort to acculturate and adapt to the labor market. Refugees may change trajectories or slide across different ones in view of the multifaceted complexities they encounter. These trajectories should thus be understood as evolving processes with often overlapping features. Of course, other factors, beyond identity-making and acculturation processes, may influence or moderate refugees' trajectories, but they were not included in the study.

The nature of the hurdles faced by refugees, whether administrative, linguistic, professional, economic, social and/or psychological, can vary between refugees. To help them overcome these hardships, non-state actors are crucial. Among other things, civil society offers language and cultural courses, vocational counseling, and psychological support. It provides a space for encounters between refugees, but also between refugees and French residents, thereby enabling refugees to develop a feeling of belongingness, and the possibility to identify with others and to develop ties with the host country.

Overall, our paper suggests that refugees pursuing different acculturation and identity making-processes benefit (or not) from the tangible and intangible resources provided by NGOs. More specifically, refugees in an *Adjusting* trajectory appear to rely more on the tangible resources of NGOs to develop an assimilation acculturation strategy, while refugees in an *Enhancing* trajectory take advantage of more intangible NGO resources to deal with refugee-related stigma, and to repair and reorient their various identities. However, refugees in a *Detaching* trajectory have difficulty building trust with NGOs, believing in and/or benefiting from the resources they provide. We recognize that other factors which go beyond the focus of this study, such as other civil society actors (beyond NGOs), the broader political context, previous socio-professional standing, and/or the socio-economic situation, as well as historical and environmental circumstances, could affect refugees' identity-making and acculturation processes in new contexts. Indeed, identity work needs to be situated within the larger socio-political and historical contexts in question and may also result in weak identities, disidentification, or a sense of self-alienation (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Moreover, from a relational perspective, a person's identity development process might impact those around them and influence social groups. In this sense, creation and dissolution of boundaries can unite groups, potentially leading to partnerships across cultural boundaries

(Ybema et al., 2012), which might aggravate or diminish refugees' socio-professional adaptation to host societies. Building on our findings, these processes could be explored further in future research.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our research contributes to the literature on identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Caza et al., 2018) by suggesting that to access social, cultural, and economic assets, as well as to overcome ethnic and refugee-related stigma and discrimination, refugees need to undergo extensive identity-making processes. Moreover, in a context in which they become the ultimate 'other', carrying the burden of the refugee label gives rise to distress and anxiety due to the conflict between how they see themselves and how others see them (Burke, 1991). In this sense, distancing oneself from a stigmatized social group is an essential means of identity work. We find that this distancing occurs either by rejecting the refugee label completely (in the case of *Detaching*) or by downplaying the refugee and ethnic status in favor of new professional and cultural identities (in the case of *Adjusting*). This supports the findings of Killian and Johnson (2006), who identified a Not-Me strategy (McCall, 2003) in their study of North-African female immigrants in France.

Our findings suggest that the *Enhancing* trajectory involves redefining the value associated with the refugee label, transforming it into a resource as refugees acculturate and navigate their professional life. Moreover, we move away from simplistic trait-based explanations and recognize that 'no identity work is performed outside of the multiple social categories in which individuals are positioned' (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016, p. 274).

From a practical point of view, our research proves that without logistical and psychological preparation before relocation, the transfer, accumulation, and deployment of social, cultural, and economic resources often depend on other factors. Specifically, we suggest that to overcome perceived discrimination, refugees need to acquire extensive social and psychological resources such as reliance on civil society. This resonates with what Pajic and colleagues (2018) call 'adaptive readiness'.

Further, despite the crucial role of NGOs in facilitating social integration, the impact of civil society on refugees and migrants' rights and quality of life has mostly been explored with regard to healthcare, typically early in the migration process (see Bradby et al., 2020; Pursch et al., 2020). Most research has referred to migrants as homogeneous populations, while little is known about specific NGO efforts to assist the integration of explicit migrant and refugee groups (Garkisch et al., 2017; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). Our research confirms the tremendous value of the social and psychological resources that NGOs provide through educational, cultural, and social activities. We invite future researchers to explore NGO best

practices further. It would also be of value to look for hidden normative pressures (if any) on refugees to meet implicit NGO expectations.

Overall, our research offers new insights into the literature on refugees' social and professional adjustment (Davey & Jones, 2019; Lee et al., 2018; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002; Wehrle et al., 2019) and vocational adaptation (Baranik et al., 2018; Yakushko et al., 2008). This does not imply the normative condition of 'good' or 'bad', 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' refugees. Rather, it recognizes the structural and systemic underpinnings that shape refugees' experiences in host countries, largely informing their ensuing trajectories. These concepts have rarely been used explicitly to explain the careers of people whose agency has been stifled (Pajic et al., 2018) and who need to transform their human assets into new forms of capital (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018) in order to navigate their socio-professional lives. Our proposed socio-professional trajectories help to provide a more global understanding of the process by taking into consideration the social, psychological, and cultural web within which the process unfolds.

We hope that policymakers, NGOs, and public and private organizations dealing with refugees and asylum seekers both upon their arrival and during their integration thereafter will consider our findings to enhance refugee adaptation processes. Our results show that to facilitate refugees' inclusion in French society, policymakers and legislators could go beyond linguistic and cultural resources and dignified accommodation and administrative means to develop a more precise understanding of refugees' needs, among which professional and career resources appear to play a significant role. Our findings also show that to achieve a coherent sense of self in a new and challenging environment, refugees require not only tangible but also psychological support, like aspiration, self-efficacy, and resilience, as well as social resources, such as having various contact points in their host community. Civil society plays a crucial role in this regard.

We suggest that to tackle social inequalities and to understand how refugees navigate their socio-professional trajectories in host countries, it is crucial to understand how they navigate the complex acculturation processes and subjective discrimination dynamics related to identity work. This is particularly urgent in an era of increased political tension that has given rise to extensive international mobility, whereby normative ways of thinking and acting overexpose vulnerable and marginalized populations.

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