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Social recognition beyond employment. refugees embedding deskilling and restructuring identity

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ABSTRACT

Employment is considered the primary sphere of social recognition. However, for refugees this source is often unavailable due to phases of unemployment and deskilling. This article explores practices for sustaining a desirable status and recognition via alternative spheres by analysing Chechen refugees' interpretations of their employment trajectories, taking into account their status in the region of origin, where many had to abandon employment and education. After this biographic caesura, they perceive 'enforced idleness' during the asylum procedure as a second fracture. Accommodation centres in remote areas and exclusion from the labour market bring about homogeneity of their networks. Positioning themselves as a 'refugee subject' becomes central for the rebuilding of identity and for narrating the redirection of career paths. The results, based on interviews in combination with network drawings, reconstruct how refugees make use of their contacts for job-seeking and embedding disruptive life events.

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1. Conditions of origin and arrival

Flight often enters refugees' lives quite abruptly. The following sequence shows firstly that we have to rethink the assumption that refugees have one country in mind as a desired destination, and secondly how much effort is to be expected in order to embed this life event into one's biographical narration. In response to my question how the family decided specifically on Austria as their destination 24-year old Nura said:

Good question. I don't know, we somehow went in the direction of- I think we didn't even have a clear goal in mind, we just wanted to get out of the country. We just moved on and on. I don't know exactly ((laughs)) and we somehow stayed here. Yeah. I think we were simply tired. (01/01/17)¹

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This article takes into account the consequences of the life worlds of asylum seekers with regard to their working lives after being granted asylum by analysing employment histories of Chechen Convention refugees living in Austria. I argue that the everyday lives of asylum seekers, persons who have been granted asylum, and citizens with 'refugee backgrounds' should no longer be divided into different fields of research, as they are sections of one biography. Convention refugees have the same rights as Austrian citizens and are entitled to access the labour market; yet many of those who have lived within the receiving society for years still face problems finding a job. This marks the starting-point of this study on the refugees' interpretation of their biographic events.

The concept of *patchwork-identity* (Keupp 1997) defines self-perception as a dynamic accumulation of inner properties based on recognition by others. However, in consumption-centred societies, identity is typically connected to occupation. The research question here is how refugees narrate points of discontinuity, reconstruct their identities and achieve social recognition beyond the dimension of employment.

Firstly, the theoretical framework goes beyond the assumption of perceiving flight and the asylum procedure merely as biographical fractures, exploring them as events refugees make sense of. Secondly, the article discusses the status transformation from *asylum seeker* to *Convention refugee* and practices of (re-)structuring identity by means of five biographies. Finally, the findings are connected to explanatory models for refugees' search for a new status.

2. Theories of biographical fractures and exclusion

A biographic sociological perspective perceives *flight* as a life event and questions the continuity of the life-long label 'migrant', an ascription that has been applied in migration studies for years (cf. Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014). Flight marks a first fracture in biographical continuity as it enforces the abandonment of employment and education. Prior to that, war as a pre-caesura often leads to the collapse of the job market and educational system. Difficulties regarding language, recognition of qualifications and exclusion from the labour market during the asylum procedure represent the second biographic rupture. Despite the possibility of transnationalising their networks by maintaining contact with persons in Chechnya or other countries after the flight, asylum seekers' *physical* mobility is restricted due to their allocation to accommodation centres. Together with their experience of a limitation of *social* mobility after the asylum grant, this forms a third caesura.

Coe et al. (cf. 2011, 1) point out that migration as a biographical disruption may be stimulating to the imagination and thus, what first appears as a rupture can be turned into continuity through narrative. Even forced migration can function as a *problem-solving caesura* (Breckner 2009, 277).

Yet, Breckner studied biographies of refugees from Romania who arrived before 1989, while most Chechens arrived after 2000 and faced harsher conditions during the asylum procedure regarding social exclusion and segregation (cf. Schmidinger 2009). In addition to a tighter labour market situation, the political discourse apparent in the Austrian media coverage has depicted refugees as a threat to national security.

Today's situation of asylum seekers is characterised by *organised disintegration* (Täubig 2009, 45) including processes of segregation and racist marking, especially in peripheral areas (cf. Pieper 2008, 12), as well as by *bureaucratic labelling* linked to the constraint of asylum seekers' mobility (cf. Witteborn 2011, 1149). The lack of NGO-run counselling centres in rural areas leads to a dependency on legal information by municipal authorities (cf. Scheibelhofer and Luimpöck 2016). In Austria, asylum seekers lose their aid money if they leave the assigned accommodation or the federal state for an extended period and face harsh restrictions when accessing the labour market. Refugees pass through a contradictory labelling process connected to the hegemonic discourse on asylum: On the one hand, they are marked as twice traumatised, during the flight and the asylum process (cf. Salis Gross 2004). On the other hand, they are facing diffuse accusations of misuse of social benefits. In the *frame of misuse* (Langthaler and Sohler 2008, 17f.), refugees have to correspond precisely to the image of neediness because there is only a binary reaction: pity or accusation.

A lack of opportunity for interaction with the local population impedes diversification of refugees' networks and creates an image of the asylum seeker as the 'total other', which fuels racist feelings of threat (cf. Ahmed 2004, 26f.). Even though ethno-national categories may be secondary principles of classification only, they have an impact; hence literature refers to the important role of networks for the activation of social capital for job seeking (Cederberg 2012) and the risk of their ethnic homogeneity for hindering upward-mobility (Smith 2005).

'Enforced idleness' during the asylum procedure brings about similar consequences as long-term unemployment, namely passivity and reduction of social contacts (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel [1933] 2004). It seems contradictory that refugees – after being granted asylum – are facing expectations by the receiving society to quickly access the labour market. Equating integration and employment seems inconsistent as it is seeking to make migrants 'both self-sufficient and autonomous by illiberal means' (Joppke 2007, 16). The gap between societal expectations and the actual job opportunities is widened by the interviewed refugees' intrinsic hopes for upward-mobility in Europe and their concern about disappointing relatives who remained within the Russian Federation. Along with other functions, work is the primary source of social recognition and identity based on self-perception and perception by others regarding occupational role, work tasks and the feeling of contributing to

society (Semmer and Udriš 2004, 159). Whereas citizens whose status is secure tend to seek social recognition outside the established sphere of employment, asylum seekers struggle for ascent to exactly these spheres within the *circle of excluded ones* (Honneth 2013).

3. Methodological considerations

Up to now, refugees' perspectives on challenges regarding employment and their networks have been rather neglected in extensive labour-market surveys. *Reflexive migration research* (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014) questions comparing the data of migrants with the 'local' population. Nevertheless, in this context it does make sense to have a specific look at refugees' employment biographies, as they are structured by the transformation of their legal status. Furthermore, transnational approaches have been calling for overcoming *methodological nationalism* (Wimmer and Schiller 2003), a pattern in research that conceives the nation-state as a sole unit of analysis and thus reinforces the assumption of the nation as the natural political form. Therefore, refugees' biographies and their networks – both transnationally spanned between the contexts of origin and arrival – are the units of analysis.

Chechens are the largest group of convention refugees in Austria after being forced into migration by two wars in 1994–96 and 1999–2009. They are heterogeneous regarding their level of education. Furthermore, there was a shift in values in the Chechen society, as 'work' and 'education' were considered less important after the wars. Parallel to that, a majority stated that women should not participate in public life – compared to a more liberal perspective before the wars (Bersanova 1999 as quoted in Cremer 2007, 10–24). This conservative turn is related to a revitalisation of norms based on religion and tradition in Post-Soviet Chechnya. The Chechen code of traditions *Adat*, which was established long before Islam was brought to Chechnya, consists of norms regarding intergenerational- and gender-relations (sometimes contradictory to the Qur'an) and emphasises the obligation to support clan members. Despite a social construct and a current tendency of Chechens to turn to Sharia-laws, *Adat* is still a major societal institution with implications for individuals (Jaimoukha 2005).

In order to reconstruct what refugees assess as a successful or failed employment history, an interpretative research design is required. Identity-building is a process of which those involved are unaware, thus a Grounded Theory-based research style (Glaser and Strauss 1967) can bring to light latent contents. Problem-centred interviews applied as biographical interviews (Witzel 2000) allow a prospective and retrospective analysis in life course and a reconstruction of occupational orientations. A combination with unstructured *ego-centred network drawings* (Scheibelhofer 2006) visualises practices for overcoming fractures by making use of networks. A contrasting comparison of cases

shows how refugees interpret flight as a life phase and use contacts in the job-seeking process.

The development of the theoretical sampling is led by a theory-generating question (Hermanns 1992, 115): How do refugees narrate the points of discontinuity (related to migration) in their stories and how do they make sense of them? Therefore, the conditions of origin and arrival form central theoretical categories, specifically the structure of the life phase as an asylum seeker (duration of the asylum procedure, quality and location of accommodation, access to education). Moreover, the sampling refers to a reflection of additional relevant aspects, such as educational background, age/socialisation in pre- or post-Soviet Chechnya, gender (in terms of division of labour) and involvement in a workplace or experiences of unemployment.

The depth of a qualitative, biographic approach to a limited number interviewees ($n = 12$) within the article's remit affords several insights that a larger quantitative study might not be as able to achieve. The interviews were combined with network drawings and conducted between 2014 and 2016. Five were selected for the present paper by considering the theory-generating question. Thus, the selected biographies show a variety of biographic answers on how to regain social recognition.

Due to my command of Russian, the interviewees could switch between languages. Polylingual and transcultural aspects are a vital part of the research: The analysis requires caution because switching can be induced by the interviewer asking comprehension questions. This contribution takes into account transcultural aspects concerning self-presentation towards a non-migrant, as interviewees felt the need to explain culture-specific norms, which form their biographic answers to flight-related life events.

4. Results: practices of restructuring identity

The data shows that the exclusion from the labour market is being continued even after the formal access to it is granted. Therefore employment cannot be used for (re-)forming identity or (re-)gaining social recognition after biographic fractures. The interviewees pointed out how they try to make use of their networks to overcome discrimination on the job market, but also in how far they reflect the precarious working conditions in co-ethnic small-scale enterprises. However, this is very often the only alternative they see. Operators of small accommodation also assist asylum seekers in finding jobs, a crucial role which has been underestimated so far. As the transnational component of their networks is extended, due to the earlier confinement of their mobility in the region of arrival, their network resources in Austria are rather poor concerning potential job-seeking. Despite contact with relatives in high professional positions in the Russian Federation, their co-ethnic network contacts in Austria are affected by unemployment or deskilling. At this point, the transnational

character of ‘flight’ – as a biographical interface structuring networks – becomes crucial: The interviewees interpret the participation in the labour market as failed, especially with regard to their higher socio-economic status before the war and as they can look back on prior stages of their flight, which they had used for upward mobility. Of course, attempts aimed to embed disruptive life events via networks or narrations are difficult to distinguish from unconscious processes. Five cases show that flight is neither a singular point within a biography nor automatically related to downward-mobility. At first sight, the nomination of stages of biography seems linked to the emigration to the nation state Austria. In fact, it follows the interviewees’ perspective. Despite the transnationality of their life worlds, they interestingly seem to systematise their biographies in categories of nation-states. In their narrations, they connect biographic stages to the crossing of borders or to obtaining a new legal status, which brings them closer to the status of a citizenship. Political discourse on immigration, which implies the granting of citizenship as the last step towards full integration, has a clear influence on refugees’ narrations.

4.1. Employment as a sphere of recognition

Viktor’s employment history displays a rather ‘classical’ idea of identity building. He is a refugee who found a stable and relatively well-paid job as a floorer. He came to Austria as a teenager in 2005 and thus had to abandon his high school education in Chechnya. Abruptly, he had to take on a grown-up’s responsibility, when he organised the flight for his family due to his language skills.

He starts his narration with his occupation, which is a hint to the central role it plays for his identity. Several times he mentions how pleased his boss is, though he was sceptical about employing a Chechen at first and thereby openly addresses his experiences with specific prejudices towards Chechen men. The beginning of the interview displays the centrality of employment for his self-presentation:

I’m Viktor, from Chechnya. I’m since nine and a half years in Austria. Well, at the age of 15 I fled, from Chechnya, across Poland to Austria. Yeah, I’m relatively well integrated into this society. I’m not a citizen yet, but I feel relatively comfortable. I finished my apprenticeship and now I’m a floorer. I’m permanently employed at the company. (01/10/15)

His permanent reference to his virtual possibilities for a higher education, which he would have had in Chechnya, forms his identity. In addition, he broaches the issue of his mother’s downward-mobility. She works as a cleaner in Austria but had a higher position in food quality inspection in Chechnya.

Viktor introduced a photo of himself as a teenager, taken during the asylum procedure, into his narration. In it he is wearing hip-hop clothing and displaying himself with a grim look. As a 16-year-old, he refused to attend German classes and quit school because he was discriminated against, and also because he felt over-qualified since he knew most things already. In the end, he made friends with a local voluntary German teacher and is now proud of speaking German without an accent. The polite young man in his mid-twenties was wearing an elegant shirt of an expensive brand at the interview. His self-presentation reinforces his narration of being a productive member of this society and successfully gaining ground in the labour market despite discrimination.

His network drawing shows how relevant workplace is for his emplacement. Working colleagues are as important as friends and family. Because of his knowledge of his own unprivileged starting position for his career, Viktor can draw a satisfying balance. His relatively high income and appreciation by his boss, colleagues and his – to a large extent jobless – social environment of co-ethnics guarantee him a desirable status and social recognition. His self-portrayal as a well-paid craftsman, who would hold a university degree if his educational career hadn't been interrupted, outlines his primary identity. Ethnic belonging and religion recede into the background. He explains that he has to keep in mind how to please his co-ethnic environment. The older generation often cling to Chechen traditions in his view, whereas the younger ones adhere to religion-based norms. For this reason, Viktor even has to remember different forms of salutations and codes of behaviour. He refers to necessary transcultural knowledge even within his own ethnic group from the vantage point of an 'outsider within', referring to the processuality of the affiliation as an outsider (Becker [1963] 2008). Even though he claims to be 'well integrated', positioning as a migrant subject is required as a central element of his biographic narrative because it explains disadvantage within his career path.

4.2. *Increasing one's status via motherhood*

Amina is fifty years old, mother of five children – two of them adopted and already grown-up. She came to Austria in 2006 and was granted asylum two years later. Thus, we can assume that her identity concepts were already built in the context of origin and her socialisation was structured by everyday life in the Soviet Union.

She openly addresses oppression against women in Chechnya: Her husband, whom she was forced to marry, did not want her to take on employment. However, during his absence due to his participation in battles in another region, she held a job as a shopkeeper. The evident double burden of employment and reproductive work as a single mother stays completely

unmentioned in her narration. Instead, she perceived her job, and specifically her own wage as a source of autonomy.

*My husband didn't want me to hold a job. Well, we had five kids (...). When the war started- my husband fought in the first war. When he was at war, I worked there in the shop. I was so happy. I earned my OWN money. ((laughs)) That is a completely different feeling! I, I felt whole, like a **full** woman. (22/08/14)*

She explains her chronic back pain and other handicaps as consequences of the flight that had lasted several months. Illness takes a central place in her narration and functions as a legitimization for the non-participation in the labour market and for her disengagement from educational opportunities (language courses etc.). The discourse on refugees' biographies regarding 'unwillingness to integrate' clearly has an impact on her narration and depicts the dynamics between subjective acting and societal structures. The family is on welfare, as her grown-up daughters are jobless, her youngest son struggles at secondary school and her husband has only occasional jobs. Although identity was formed by professional occupation before the flight, it could not be transferred to the context of arrival. Instead, alternative spheres of social recognition were explored: Her adopted sons, who stayed within the Russian Federation and hold high job positions as engineers, were clearly used within the narration to express pride. Success and recognition are detached from the personal biography and shifted to the family as a collective. She substitutes the failure of her own career by success in being a mother and uses motherhood to generate a desirable status. She emphasises the upbringing of her sons as a reason for their success. She reinforces and illustrates her narration by her network drawing: Her own mother is the core, although the instruction was to put the ego in the centre. The line continually sets herself next to the centre. Neither her own father nor her husband, with whom she lives together, are depicted. Her drawing counters the traditional Chechen patriarchal family, where the family dynasty is continued by male descendants only. Amina's network provides stable contacts and social support despite lacking social ties other than relatives: Having many brothers and sisters herself and giving birth to three children and adopting two more, offers Amina density of social relations. Thus, motherhood becomes the structuring moment of her social contacts and a life task.

4.3. Religion and ethnic belonging

Chava is 25 years old and came to Austria as a teenager. Her biography is affected by many fractures, directly and indirectly connected to war and flight and shows the complexity and multi-causality of identity-building processes. Her parents had a divorce when she was a baby. Due to the traditional legislation, she had to stay with the father's

family. As her father was working in Russia, later fought in the war and was imprisoned for some months, she grew up with her grandmother and her aunts. Her father remarried, had children and decided to migrate to Europe with his new family, whereas Chava had to stay back with her grandmother. After her grandmother's death, she lived with her aunts in a refugee camp in Azerbaijan. After her father and his new family were granted asylum, Chava could directly enter Austria in the course of family reunification. Therefore, she was able to skip the phase as an asylum seeker. However, her father came down with tuberculosis after the flight, which had led them through rivers in winter, and died one year after their reunification: a dramatic life event for Chava, who had been longing for a life together with him.

There was hardly any religious knowledge in her family – a vital point in her narration and self-presentation: She showed photos of herself at the age of 18, on which she was not wearing a headscarf but revealing clothes. Other pictures show her father with friends cheering with vodka under a pin-up poster, and her aunts wearing mini-skirts. In the refugee camp in Azerbaijan she started wearing a headscarf, explored religion during the flight and intensified the engagement with Islamic norms in Austria via websites.

I'm wearing my headscarf from that year on, in which my father died. It's not BECAUSE of my father's death. Uhm. It is like- But I don't wear it the way one should. It should cover even more. Even better, better, better.

They told me nothing about religion. Just the most important stuff. Only in Azerbaijan I noticed that a woman should wear a headscarf. In Austria I read and read in the Internet. And then I noticed that a lot of people do not understand their religion. They just believe in traditions and they have a mixed religion. I want to show you, when I was 18 ((shows a photo of herself without a headscarf, laughing)) (01/09/14)

Chava interrupted the interview for a prayer and used her narration to explain her interpretation of religious rules, but also the self-fulfilment and social recognition she gets from it. Still, her interpretation of religious codes is inconsistent: she goes jogging in tights, wearing a headscarf and sunglasses, but considers that indecent and states that if anyone recognised her, it would be a scandal within the community. She explained that religion was getting more and more important to her over the years, and also reflected on involved difficulties for job-hunting.

My friend is an accountant. She has an Austrian boss who says nothing about her headscarf. But in MY case, because I wanna be a cosmetician, I think I'll get problems because of the headscarf. Let's wait and see. God always helps me. But without a headscarf: No. I don't wanna. (01/09/14)

However, the family strongly relied on tradition-based rules. After her father's death, Chava's relatives persuaded her to marry fast, as a woman

should not live without a male protector. She evaluates her marriage as unhappy and violent. Also, she was forced to quit school in Austria because her husband wanted children instantly.

*And everyone keeps telling me, you are **alone** and alone without a father, marrying is better, it's better when there's a man around. And traditionally and so on. I thought, **YES**, that **IS** better for me. And so. [After] two years I met my ex-husband and we married and so. Then I thought, graduating school for me is **NOT** possible, because he wants **KIDS**. And this is why (...) I let this go. Then I worked at some (...) Arab company. But this was no good work. My husband caused trouble and stress, because he was very **jealous**. (01/09/14)*

Nevertheless, Chava found a job, but in contrast to Amina, her work was never fulfilling or a source of self-determination, but rather exploitation and a double burden, as her husband did not help with the household or parenting.

One primary alternative sphere for social recognition can be religion, which might bring about prestige within the social environment. A religion-based moral lifestyle is used for constructions of difference to the older generation, who have less inventories of knowledge in this respect. Intense occupation with religion and ethnic belonging started only in the area of arrival and was especially prominent in Chava's biography, who arrived as a juvenile. The data shows that adolescence as a parallel transformation process, in addition to the transformation process from asylum seeker to a refugee of official status, intensifies the search for identity.

4.4. Flight as a multiple caesura of upward- and downward-mobility

Husein is in his mid-thirties and came to Austria in 2002. Two years after his arrival he was granted asylum, but all in all his flight lasted for years.

The first stage of flight led him to a neighbouring country, where he started a successful entrepreneurship as the owner of an internet café. After some months, he went back to Chechnya assuming that it would already be safe. Back there, he found out that people were too scared to be out in the streets, so Husein decided to flee to a safer region in Chechnya, where many internally displaced persons lived. Again, he opened a café which was especially successful *because of* the refugees there, who needed internet access. After a while, he worked for a local TV channel. Because of his financial success he was able to bring his family:

And back then, I had already made real money. I bought machines. Then, I married, [...] I brought her and my parents and the stuff. It went all very very well. I worked as a cameraman. (03/01/15)

The operator of the asylum accommodation in the small town, where Husein's family lived as asylum seekers in Austria, helped him to find his first job as a groundskeeper at the local sport stadium. Husein ironically had

to give up that job, because the Austrian Integration Fund provided his family with a flat in Vienna. The employment agency refused to recognise his qualifications: He was told he could not work as a wedding photographer without vocational training, but the financing for such training was denied. Instead, he was sent to other courses. Husein (03/01/15, 20f.) retrospectively concludes: 'Somehow they never checked and understood, what I needed'. Today, he is jobless, still works occasionally for the stadium and has had jobs as a security guard for probationary periods.

Deskilling and a breakdown of his career plans led to the restructuring of his previously ambitious values based on work and education and that is why he now views employment only as a source of financial survival.

If I COULD, just help, just carry cables. Although-. Just, no matter what, just that I could work THERE [in the media industry]. Despite everything. (03/01/15)

Interestingly, he does not criticise discrimination but comes to the employer's defence when he claims that not even he himself would employ a Chechen. Furthermore, he makes use of constructions of difference to newly arrived migrants, who work for low-wages and minimise his chances of gaining a foothold on the labour market.

In Husein's biography, flight functions as an adverse multiple caesura. Twice he used it for biographical continuity and even upward-mobility, but the final stage turns into a collapse of career plans. Although a meaningful job has become virtually utopian for Husein, he refuses to let his identity be formed by joblessness and wants me as an interviewer not to perceive him as a jobless migrant but to see his manifold facets. Within his self-presentation he makes an effort to put emphasis on his well-founded knowledge of history and his genealogical research as well as his talent as a musician, showing self-made music videos. He rejects religion or ethnic codices as spheres of social recognition, as he emphasises that he celebrates Christmas with his family and goes out in clubs to make friends with Austrians, but at the same time considers that to be futile. His network consists of co-ethnics only:

*Austrians? Very FEW. Very FEW. Who, who's gonna make friends with us? ((laughs)) And you go to work and to someone, and THIS is why. It's not **us**, the system is like that. No acquaintances, because **NO ONE** has TIME ((laughs)). I live here since ten years and, because I'm jobless and **NOT** because I don't want to get to know Austrians. It's the other way around. I'm an open person. But there are simply **NO** possibilities to hang out with somebody. (03/01/15)*

When asked in the course of the interview, if he had any German-speaking friends, Husein would vehemently reject the accusation, permanently reproduced within the political discourse on immigration, namely that immigrants isolate themselves by having homogeneous networks. According to him, one reason for the separation of refugees and the autochthonous

population is that the former are jobless and therefore have hardly any opportunity to establish new contacts, whereas the latter go to work and have no time to make friends with the newly arrived.

4.5. Using future aspirations for self-presentation

Rajana came to Austria as an unaccompanied minor refugee in 2006, and already had A-levels. Her father died during the bombardments and she was forced into marriage in Austria instantly because of that circumstance. In 2008 Rajana turned 18 and was granted asylum. Coming from a middle-class family, she was ashamed of receiving welfare, as she was now grown-up and felt she should be a productive member of society. The couple availed themselves of their co-ethnic network and collected enough money to open a boutique for Chechen clothes:

*I got my own asylum grant and five months I stayed at home with my daughter and then we decided, that I can't study and I don't want to stay at home either. Because three years [...] I (...) had already been in Austria and I wanted to **DO something**. And so we took some money from relatives and friends and we opened a shop. (17/11/14)*

However, Rajana found out that this meant a triple burden, as her husband helped neither with domestic work nor with the shop. Furthermore, as the wife of the youngest son she had to do care work for her parents-in-law according to the traditional codex. Yet, oppressive determination of gender roles is more complex than it seems in the first place: It was quite possible for her to leave her six-month-old baby with relatives while on business travels without being shunned by her social environment. However, after giving birth to a second child, she could not manage the triple burden of her job, domestic work and care work anymore and consequently the shop was closed.

After she had a divorce, long-term unemployment followed and Rajana used the time to enrol at university. In the end, the employment agency forced her to accept a job below her qualification. Rajana clearly addresses discrimination, which occurred even on the second labour market:

*The social security office helped me to buy furniture. And little by little, I'm doing ok. ((laughs)). NOW I want to start **studying again!** I was receiving social benefits and I registered at the employment office. And they referred me to the second labour market. And there I was for half a year. And first [they] placed me to some socio-economic enterprise. But they wouldn't take me because of my veil. And they explained it like that: This was [...] only a transition job and they wouldn't be able to place me in the first labour market. (17/11/14)*

In contrast to Husein, Rajana is keeping up her career-based and educational orientations, even after years of deskilling. She experienced the chance of being successful once, and the potential for upward-mobility structures her identity.

5. Conceptualising loss and reclaiming status

The status in the region of origin marks the beginning of the analysed occupational biographies, strongly connected to the socio-economic status, but also structured by life worlds, networks and vice versa. The second stage of the biographies is the loss of the original status due to flight and the asylum process. It seems fruitful to have a closer look at refugees' status passages, as status is a requirement for identity. The interviewees referred to expectations from the receiving society and from relatives within the Russian Federation, who often show more successful careers than the interviewees do.

The legal access to the labour market by the asylum grant can signify a bifurcation of refugees' biographies: Those who find a rather satisfying workplace gain social recognition from it and other ways of identity-building recede into the background. However, those who find themselves unable to regain their original status via qualified employment enter alternative spheres of social recognition. Which spheres are accessible in the first place depends on gender roles. War-caused absence of men can allow self-determination via occupation for young women, but they may also be forced into marriage due to flight-related loss of male relatives, which impedes continuity in their careers. Honneth (2013) defines three dimensions through which social recognition is sustained: Firstly, there is the socially regulated order of recognition, including the labour market. The second dimension is the struggle for recognition via the attribution of values. The merely private forms of recognition form the third dimension, which he characterises as pathological.

As shown by the five cases, the processes vary considerably due to different biographical structures and different coping-styles or coping-capacities. One possible way of biographic reorganisation is to change the hierarchy of values after years of unemployment. Here the dynamic role of working lives in refugees' biographies from their subjective point of view becomes visible. The biographic meaning refugees attach to work decreases. Instead, they perceive employment as a source of financial survival only and emphasise other aspects of life worlds, such as a religious moral-based lifestyle, which can entail prestige within the social environment. However, the interviewees also develop strategies to hide their religion in work contexts when they find it necessary (cf. Luimpöck 2018, 130). Motherhood is another way of raising one's status when children show successful careers, even if they live in the region of origin. The spheres – whether chosen deliberately or not – structure identity in the context of destination. A greater variety of opportunities is open to the highly educated: Those who gain recognition via their education or prestigious hobbies – even though not improving their financial situation, reject religion or ethnic belonging as foundations of identity-building. However, interestingly the interviewees – although being denied social recognition via work – do not push back the hegemonic discourse on the importance of work for successful integration.

The portrayed practices are attempts at gaining recognition when denied by external circumstances; nonetheless embedding biographical fractures contains many unconscious elements. Some 'windows of biographical opportunity' are strongly related to other life events besides flight. In addition to that, teenage refugees have to manage the transformation from adolescence to adulthood, which intensifies the process of identity construction, as it has to be built in the first place.

The entered sphere of recognition marks the final point of the delineated process, although identity restructuring may start all over again as soon as new opportunities arise. In all stages, everyday lives affect the process of seeking social recognition. Despite the different spheres, all cases share one common feature: Flight is a structuring moment for the development of a refugee subject, because it most likely redirects predestined career paths. Being a refugee becomes a permanent central element of identity, as flight is the main argument to explain one's own employment trajectory. The interviewees experienced differences including divisions of ethnicity and religion, two factors that structure social relations and are mapped in social networks. The receiving society, however, perceives integration as failed if they become the primary spheres of positioning and self-presentation instead of employment. However, migrants' involvement with and the emphasis on religious and ethnic belonging is co-induced by a lack of societal recognition for their 'multiple belonging' (Mecheril 2003). Based on Mecheril's statements, Querfurt (2016) shows, how being a migrant is interactively acquired through dynamic relationships and re-incorporated. Praxeological research perceives 'ethnicity as praxis' (Bröskamp 1993, 187) – as produced by migrants as well as by the receiving society. Following Bourdieu (1977, 113), this process describes habitus-specific self-staging as a *refugee subject*, but at the same time pointing out their socio-economic status in Chechnya. Future studies should address how a middle-class habitus, compounded in the context of origin, can be sustained in the social environment of arrival and if these processes will stay on an individual level or lead to the collective restructuring of social milieus.

Note

1. The quotations include false starts, evidence of a person thinking through ideas and stammering due to their language skills as the research method requires a word-by-word transcription following the guidelines by Rosenthal (1987).

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