

**ARTICLE**

# Investigating refugees' negotiation of professional possible selves

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**Abstract**

Many barriers threaten refugees' professional and social integration in their resettlement countries. Through semi-structured interviews and based on the concept of possible selves, we aimed to understand how 22 refugees aged from 18 to 35 and coming from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Somalia, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and Yemen constructed and negotiated their career plans considering contextual factors. Results show that forced migration impacted the participants in three different ways: some were still striving for the ideal, pursuing their ideal career plans, while others were revising them either by revisiting the ideal or letting go of the ideal. They used different strategies of reducing expectations, exploring new possibilities, delaying, or abandoning their ideal plans for more probable ones, considering their current situation and barriers (i.e., lack of language proficiency, refugee permits, recognized diplomas, or childcare solutions). We discuss concrete implications for practice and provide future research insights.

**KEYWORDS**

hybrid thematic analysis, possible selves, refugees

## INTRODUCTION

In Western societies, modern careers are characterized by constant changes due to globalization, digitalization, and the expansion of the free market economy, resulting in more demanding and competitive job markets (Coutinho et al., 2008) and a focus on paid work as the only valid way to contribute to society (Guichard, 2016). Access to the labor market and having a stable and linear

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career have become challenging, especially for immigrants and low-qualified young people who are particularly at risk of unemployment or underemployment (Arthur, 2014; Masdonati et al., 2019, 2022). Thus, young refugees are a particularly vulnerable population in the labor market demography. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (2023), 110,000,000 people were forced to flee their homes in mid-2023, and they estimate a total of 36,400,000 were refugees. Moreover, refugees are also facing multiple challenges, such as a lack of proficiency in the local language, a lack of network, limited access to housing and education, unrecognized qualifications, and stigmatization (Wehrle et al., 2019). However, sustainable access to the local labor market is crucial not only for refugees' social integration and financial independence (Yakusho et al., 2008), but also for their personal and social identity (Baranik et al., 2018).

Valuing and prioritizing sustainable employment might be experienced as a paradox for individuals who face barriers in accessing the labor market (Arthur, 2014), as is the case for refugees. Moreover, the number of years spent with temporary status in the host country reduces the opportunities for finding meaningful employment (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Contextual factors might therefore impact career choices and aspirations in the host countries as refugees experience a discrepancy between their aspirations and their actual job opportunities (Wehrle et al., 2019), which can lower their professional expectations. In this study, we aimed to understand the career choice process for refugees in their host countries through the concept of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & James, 2011) and how their aspirations are managed given the contextual constraints they face. Ultimately, with this investigation, we sought to encourage reflections on the role of career counselors in supporting refugees' professional and social integration.

## Career guidance for refugees

Several individual and contextual factors influence refugees' career development and well-being in their host countries (Yakushko et al., 2008). Among the individual factors, scholars have highlighted the influence of gender, country of origin, educational level, host language proficiency, personality traits, and experience of trauma (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Zacher, 2019). On a contextual level, gender expectations (Fedrigo et al., 2021), lack of recognition for credentials (Wehrle et al., 2019), lack of social network (Chen & Hong, 2016; Udayar et al., 2020), lack of opportunity, acculturative stress, and discrimination (Baranik et al., 2018) are all barriers to access in the labor market after resettlement. Although less abundantly, some research has examined refugees' career aspirations. For example, Tlhabano and Schweitzer (2007) showed that having experienced trauma and chaos did not lower the aspirations of Sudanese and Somali refugees after their resettlement in Australia, and these aspirations were marked by altruism and social utility. Ginevra et al. (2021) stressed that most future goals of male African refugees were related to well-being and safety, affiliation, and materialistic work, whereas self-fulfillment goals were less frequently identified. Among the same population, family obligations were also identified as influencing their current aspirations, as African refugees feel pressure to support their family members financially either in the host or home countries (Stebleton, 2007, 2012). However, literature remains scarce on this topic, and no research addresses specifically the aspirations of refugees from the Middle East, who represent a significant segment of current forced migration.

Refugees experience major life transitions impacting not only their professional but also their personal and financial spheres. In this context, career choices do not only reflect their personal interests but are rather "a complex reasoned choice balancing many factors depending on what people value" (Robertson, 2015, p. 79). For example, these factors might include the need for housing or fulfilling one's family needs. Hooley et al. (2019) pointed out the excessive focus of career guidance on individuality and concepts such as agency. These are important in the field but tend to blame individuals for structural issues that might result in fatalism and the perpetuation of inequality. Through the case study of a young Somali immigrant student in the United States, Watkinson and Hersi (2014) highlighted

the importance of a comprehensive approach of career counseling recognizing sociocultural and contextual forces. Besides, Sultana (2022) emphasized the crucial role of considering exclusionary social structures and advocating refugees' socio-professional integration.

## Possible selves

Career choices can be studied through an identity perspective and the concept of possible selves. Identity refers to all the characteristics people use to describe themselves when answering the question, "Who are you?" (Vignoles et al., 2011). Different aspects of identity coexist, interact, and intersect with each other, and form a dynamic system within the self. These characteristics have meaning and are based on individuals' personal traits or social roles (Ibarra, 1999). Conceived as a component of identity, possible selves refer to representations of the self in the future and "represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears, and fantasies" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). They can be shaped by social comparisons, experiences, past behavior, or accomplishments, and social contexts can influence the perceived probability of achieving them (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). Unlike the concept of aspirations, possible selves allow people to articulate expectations, hopes, and dreams, as well as non-desired states (Hardgrove et al., 2015). They include a collection of different selves covering whom people would ideally like to become if everything was possible (ideal self), would like to become considering their reality (desired self), are afraid to become (feared self), or feel they are expected to become (ought self). Possible selves help individuals to understand how to manage transitions and changes, and represent a way to free individuals from feeling limited in their current choices (Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007). In this sense, ideal or desired selves could be conceived as goals and therefore have a strong motivational function (Manzi et al., 2010). However, we assume that possible selves can also have a negative effect on individuals' aspirations depending on the perceived discrepancy between their ideal or desired selves and their actual situation and achievements.

A few recent studies investigated migration and asylum issues through the lens of possible selves. Stevenson (2018) studied the impact of forced displacement on refugee women's career possible selves and how they managed to pursue desired futures despite facing structural barriers. Mkwanzani (2022) explored young Zimbabwean refugee women's perceptions of education and its contribution to their desired selves in South Africa. Stingl (2021) conducted biographical interviews to explore the possible selves and labor market outcomes of refugees in Switzerland. Her findings suggest that immigration regulations pressure refugees to use strategies of downsizing, postponing, and redirecting possible selves to reduce the gap between their dream jobs and their reality. Participants in this study were more inclined to accept low-skilled jobs with precarious working conditions.

## Study context and aims

The current study was carried out in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. According to the Geneva Convention, refugee status shall be granted to "any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable [...] to avail oneself of the protection of that country" (Swiss Confederation, 2022, personal translation). In 2022, around 24,500 people applied for asylum in Switzerland, mainly coming from Afghanistan, Turkey, Eritrea, Algeria, and Syria (Secrétariat d'Etat aux migrations, 2023). In Switzerland as in many other countries, this population faces major challenges, such as barriers to access to the labor market and financial precarity, especially for those who are still waiting for a decision, are not recognized as refugees, or granted with asylum (Atitsogbe et al., 2020).

In this study, we aimed to gain an understanding of refugees' career choice processes and how they possibly adapt them when arriving in the host country. More specifically, based on the concept of

possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the following research questions guided our analyses: (1) How did refugees articulate the eventual tensions between ideal and desired selves? (2) What were their specific strategies in terms of compromise and renegotiation of their desired selves?

## METHOD

A qualitative approach was adopted to understand refugees' career choice processes, given its sustainability in studying complex emerging phenomena within the world of work (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). Specifically, we used a hybrid deductive-inductive approach on the whole sample (e.g., Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

### Participants and procedure

We conducted semi-structured interviews lasting from 25 to 84 min with 22 participants (10 women and 12 men) aged 18–35 ( $M = 24.8$ ;  $SD = 4.2$ ). They arrived in Switzerland between 2014 and 2018, coming from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Somalia, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and Yemen. All of them had left their home countries to flee war, persecutions, life threats, or forced military service. Half of the participants were enrolled in a pilot program for young newcomers to Switzerland, providing personalized coaching, language courses, and career guidance. The other half were recruited through a state organization for refugees providing financial and administrative support from social workers. By the time of the interview, 14 participants were unemployed and looking for a job or training, five were studying (i.e., one participant was in high school; one was following a preparatory year to enter university; and three of them were enrolled in a VET program), two participants were enrolled in an integration measure provided by a regional refugee integration center, and one was working on call at a restaurant. We recruited participants through convenience sampling (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). We carried out the interviews at our university's counseling center ( $N = 20$ ) or remotely ( $N = 2$ ), and fully transcribed participants' responses with their consent. We conducted correspondence and interviews in French, with most participants' fluency levels estimated between elementary and intermediate. All participants' demographic characteristics are described in Table 1, using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. We conducted this study with the approval from the ethical committee of the authors' university (E\_SSP\_102019\_00002).

### Interview guidelines

The interview was divided into four parts: the first part addressed demographic information; the second part focused on the participants' professional experiences, their expectations, and the purposes attached to work before arrival in Switzerland; and the third part investigated the same aspects but in their current situation. The last part covered participants' career plans in Switzerland by asking questions such as "What are your goals for this year? And in 2 or 3 years?" and "What would be your dream job and why?" For this study, we focused on career plans, namely the fourth part of the interview guide (Supporting Information Annex), which connected to the professional possible selves. We considered that the questions addressing participants' dream job inform about their ideal selves, and the questions about their future plans addressed their desired selves. We put special emphasis on asking questions that were understandable to non-native speakers. For participants with an elementary level of French, we ensured mutual understanding by regularly rephrasing our questions and mirroring their answers throughout the interview without changing the essence of our questions.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of participants.

Participants	Age	Gender	Origin	Family status	Time in Switzerland	Integration program
Alina	18	F	Iran	Single, no children	2Y 6M	No
Haya	22	F	Syrian Kurdistan	Married, one child	2Y 6M	Yes
Isaias	23	M	Eritrea	Single, no children	3Y	Yes
Karim	21	M	Afghanistan	Engaged, no children	3Y	Yes
Tekle	22	M	Eritrea	Single, no children	2Y	Yes
Kiraz	21	F	Turkish Kurdistan	Single, no children	4Y	No
Baqir	22	M	Afghanistan	Married, one child	2Y	No
Besna	22	F	Syrian Kurdistan	Married, two children	5Y	No
Yasir	23	M	Somalia	Single, no children	3Y	Yes
Afran	23	M	Syrian Kurdistan	Single, no children	2Y	Yes
Diric	23	M	Somalia	Single, no children	3Y	Yes
Samuel	26	M	Eritrea	Single, no children	2Y 6M	Yes
Mebratu	24	M	Eritrea	Single, no children	3Y	Yes
Hakima	24	F	Syrian Kurdistan	Married, one child	3Y	Yes
Tahan	24	M	Turkish Kurdistan	Single, no children	2Y	No
Sayid	27	M	Syrian Kurdistan	Married, two children	2Y	Yes
Semret	26	F	Eritrea	Single, no children	5Y	No
Farah	27	F	Iran	Single, one child	4Y	No
Salma	27	F	Yemen	Single, no children	2Y	No
Maria	30	F	Ukraine	Married, two children	5Y 6M	No
Faven	35	F	Eritrea	Single, two children	6Y	No
Nedim	35	M	Turkish Kurdistan	Married, two children	2Y	No

Note: Pseudonyms are used for the participants' names. The amount of time spent in Switzerland is provided in years (Y) and months (M).

## Analyses

Our analysis strategy included a deductive-inductive thematic analysis (e.g., Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) executed by the first author with the second author being auditor. The first and second authors are researchers in vocational psychology and career counseling, and aged between 31 and 48 years. The first author is a female postdoctoral researcher specialized in asylum who has experience in qualitative research and thematic analysis specifically; the second author is a male university professor in vocational psychology and an expert in qualitative research. They both also have experience as career counselors with marginalized populations (i.e., migrant people and low-qualified young adults). In the first step, we deductively coded the participants' answers based on the possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The answers to the question about their dream jobs were coded as ideal self and the ones about their short- and mid-term goals were coded as desired self. We based our analysis on various criteria to determine whether participants' ideal and desired selves were the same or different. Ideal and desired selves were coded as different in the two following situations: (a) when the participant cited more than one occupation as ideal self with no explicit hierarchy between them; (b) when they cited the same occupation as ideal and desired selves but added one or more occupation as alternatives in desired self. This step resulted in two distinct groups based on whether participants' ideal and desired selves were similar or different. We labeled the first group that identified the same ideal and desired selves "Striving for the Ideal."

The second step of thematic analyses exclusively focused on participants for whom the ideal and desired selves were different, which suggested a vocational compromise in terms of occupational field. The aim of this second step was to determine the extent of this compromise. For this purpose, we inductively divided them into two subgroups based on the scope of the compromise (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding criteria were as follows: (a) if the desired and ideal selves were in the same occupational field, we considered the compromise to be rather small, and we coded it as being part of the second group “Revisiting the Ideal”; (b) if the participant cited more than one occupation as an ideal self and chose one of them as a desired self, we coded that compromise as “Revisiting the Ideal”; (c) if the participant cited the same occupation as ideal and desired self, but added another career option, we coded the compromise as “Revisiting the Ideal”; (d) when the ideal and desired selves referred to distinct occupations in different fields, we coded as the third group “Letting go of the Ideal.” Beyond this classification in terms of compromise, a feeling of urgency to integrate socially and professionally into the host country emerged as an important explanatory factor to apprehend the differences in how participants constructed their career plans. The feeling of urgency was then inductively integrated into the thematic analyses. All analyses were submitted to the external auditor for validation and all final decisions were made consensually. A selection of extracts and citations from the interviews were translated from French to English. The external auditor double-checked the translations to make sure they remained faithful to the original transcriptions and professionals proofread them to ensure linguistic quality.

## Trustworthiness

We made sure to keep a record of all the different steps and decisions along both inductive and deductive procedures, following Korstjens and Moser’s (2018) guidelines to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research. We offered a detailed description of the different steps of analysis and criteria to address the transparency of the data. We attempted to preserve the adequacy of the data and minimize the impact of our biases in the interpretation by immersing in the data, supporting our results with participants’ quotes, and submitting findings to an auditor (Morrow et al., 2012). Our strategy to address power issues consisted in the careful explanation of our roles and the purposes of the study, and making sure that participants felt comfortable during the interview and free to stop the interview at any time. Despite these efforts, we acknowledge that they might have persisted and hindered the required symmetrical relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004).

## RESULTS

To address our first study aim, we divided our participants into two groups based on the amount of tension they reported regarding their possible selves and, more specifically, between their ideal and desired selves. We formed a first group called “Striving for the Ideal” with participants who were pursuing their ideal selves and did not identify any alternatives. In the second group called “Revisiting the Ideal,” participants identified different plans as their desired selves, implying that their arrival in Switzerland triggered an opening to compromise to reduce the tensions or a search for new alternatives. In the last group “Letting go of the Ideal,” participants drastically changed their plans to be more in line with their current situations. Participants of the second and third groups used four strategies to reduce the tensions between their ideal selves and their actual possibilities. We described each strategy at the end of the presentation of the groups to address the second study aim. Table 2 shows participants’ desired and ideal selves, as well as the group to which they belong. Three participants (i.e., Afran, Farah, and Yasir) were not classified as the information was either incomplete or impossible to code.

TABLE 2 Participants' ideal and desired selves.

Groups	Participants	Age	Gender	Ideal self	Desired self
Striving for the ideal	Alina	18	F	Ophthalmologist	Same
	Kiraz	21	F	Psychologist	Same
	Besna	22	F	Clothing designer and saleswoman	Same
	Baqir	22	M	Locomotive pilot	Same
	Isaias	23	M	Medical assistant	Same
	Salma	27	F	Founder of an NGO in politics and education	Same
	Sayid	27	M	House painter	Same
	Faven	35	F	Nurse	Same
	Nedim	35	M	University professor in psychology	Same
Revisiting the ideal	Haya	22	F	Hairdresser, esthetician, pharmacist	Esthetician
	Tahan	24	M	Doctor, nurse	Medical assistant
	Mebratu	25	M	Businessman	Mechanic, businessman
	Samuel	26	M	Truck driver	Driver, ticket inspector
	Semret	26	F	Hairdresser	Hairdresser, childcare worker
Letting go of the ideal	Karim	21	M	Fireman	Electrician, mechanic
	Tekle	22	M	Manager of Eritrean restaurant	Horticulturist, boat pilot, security guard
	Diric	23	M	Computer scientist, teacher	Driver, logistician
	Hakima	24	F	Lawyer	Saleswoman
	Maria	30	F	Accountant	Cashier, or any job

Note: Three participants were not part of these results as they did not meet the criteria (see Section 3).

## Striving for the ideal

For the first group, there was no difference between ideal and desired selves. It was composed of nine participants, five women and four men. In general, the ideal self seemed to represent a well-defined choice that triggered motivation and guided their actions. Faven explained how she chose to become a nurse in Switzerland, which was her ideal and desired selves: "He [social assistant] gave me some choices: logistics, kitchen, cleaning, medical assistant. I like cooking, but not working in a restaurant (laughs) "... cleaning too, it's not very complicated, so I chose medical assistant, then to be a nurse."

For Salma, Sayid, and Nedim, their ideal selves were a continuation of their past and were the same as their former occupation or field of study in their home countries. For example, Nedim wanted to start a Ph.D. in criminal psychology back in Turkey and was planning to restart his studies in Switzerland to achieve his former goal of becoming a university professor: "That's my goal, when I get to 45, to be a university professor. Finished doctorate, finished bachelor, finished master."

Here, the choice was made according to the ideal plans, which means that participants of this first group were not discouraged to pursue their professional ideal selves. However, most of them were still in the initial phase of choosing or preparing the implementation of their career plans, as Alina explained: "Well, I wanted to study health in fact in high school. Nurse or ophthalmologist... something like that "... because I like to help people, you know?" Therefore, they could possibly be pushed

to reconsider their ideal plans if they face new difficulties in the future. In contrast to the other groups, most participants in this group (i.e., seven out of nine) had ideal selves that were oriented towards social utility (i.e., in the health and social sectors). This observation might indicate that the persistence to follow an ideal career plan could depend on the type of occupation chosen.

## Revisiting the ideal

The second group was composed of five participants, two women and three men. For some of them, the ideal and desired selves were the same, but they mentioned an additional desired self that served as a plan B. For others, the ideal and desired selves were different, but the alternatives cited as desired selves stayed within the occupational field. Ideal and desired selves were then similar in terms of occupational field, but different in terms of prestige or qualification requirement. For example, Tahan's ideal self was to become a doctor or a nurse, as he stated: "When I was a kid, I used to watch movies. All that doctors, nurses, I think "... they do something for humans "... which is very good. I would also like to [help others through work]." In Switzerland, his desired self was to become a medical assistant as he would like to work in a hospital, without having to go to university.

Three participants of this group seemed to perceive their arrival in Switzerland as an opportunity to discover occupations that fit their interests, without feeling urged to integrate socio-professionally. For example, Haya and Semret did not have any professional experience in their home countries—Haya was not necessarily planning on working after her studies in Syria, and Semret fled Eritrea after being forced into military service following compulsory school. Tahan was mostly involved in political actions in Turkey. The short-term goal for the three of them was to first explore possibilities and enroll in a vocational education and training program (VET), as Tahan explained when describing his current career plans: "I'd like to start a VET "... but first I must choose an occupation "... that's why I want to go through [an integration measure] to discover other professions."

In sum, participants of this group used two distinct types of strategies. On the one hand, some of them reduced their expectations in terms of occupational prestige, length of studies, and qualification requirements. On the other hand, three participants considered the arrival in Switzerland as an opportunity to discover new ideas of professions: "My brothers decided to open a cybercafé, where people could play video games. I was repairing computers "... I didn't find it interesting "... Now I'm interested in being a medical assistant. I'd like to work in a hospital. I'm interested in any job in the health sector." In both cases, the strategies to reduce the tensions between their ideal plans and their actual realities consisted of broadening their range of possibilities and considering alternatives to their ideal occupational selves that could still be satisfying.

## Letting go of the ideal

The third group was composed of five participants, two women and three men. For them, the compromise was major as the ideal self was delayed or abandoned. This was the case of Hakima, who abandoned her ideal self to become a lawyer (corresponding to what she was studying in Syria), for a desired self to become a saleswoman in Switzerland. Karim explained that his ideal self was to become a fireman, but there were a lot of requirements to register in this training, constituting barriers. He stated: "For me, fireman is not possible now, because they requested permit C [residence permit] "... a VET "... to have a B2/C1 French level, they ask for a lot of things." His desired self in Switzerland was to become an electrician or a mechanic because he completed internships in these fields and enjoyed them.

Participants of this group seemed to have balanced many extra-professional aspects of their lives (e.g., language proficiency, family obligations, financial constraints, local labor market needs, and likelihood to get a job in a specific field) to consider new career plans as desired selves. Their ideal



selves were not considered as desired selves, and, in contrast to the previous group, most participants shared a sense of urgency to integrate the labor market in the host country. This sense of urgency likely led them to make larger compromises in their career plans. However, some of them explained that they kept their initial idea in mind, but only as a possible long-term career plan. For example, Hakima reported a feeling of urgency to work to integrate socially, improve her French, and take care of her children. Even though she still hoped to become a lawyer in Switzerland one day, her short-term goal was to become a saleswoman: “I love law, I love to work as a lawyer “...” but it’s not easy (laugh) “...” because I’m a mom, it’s a lot of stress “...” but maybe later on.” She also explained why saleswoman seemed more appropriate for her at the moment: “it’s easier for me because of the language, maybe she [a saleswoman in the food industry] doesn’t have to speak a lot.” For Maria, working as an accountant in Switzerland seemed unrealistic at the moment because of language barriers. She explained that she had to stop her intensive French course because her family did not have a childcare solution for her baby, and her husband was completing intensive French classes during the day. Finally, Karim had provisionally sidelined his ideal self of becoming a firefighter to opt instead for a career as an electrician or mechanic. His goal was to maximize his chances of entering the labor market or starting a VET program.

In sum, this group implemented two types of strategies. The first strategy was to abandon their ideal selves to prefer a more balanced choice, taking into account other current life challenges, as Hakima and Maria explained. The other strategy, described by Karim, was to prioritize occupational fields that correspond to local labor market needs as a more efficient way to overcome barriers and get a job in Switzerland.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we first aimed to explore refugees’ career choices through the articulation between their ideal and desired selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Results showed that, for the refugees who participated in our study, forced migration impacted career plans in three different ways. A first group of interviewees strived for their ideal selves as there was no discrepancy between the ideal and desired selves. Thus, the arrival in the host country did not prevent them from pursuing their ideal plans. A second group revisited their ideal career plans: their ideal and desired selves were either the same, but associated with other alternatives, or different in terms of prestige or qualification requirements while remaining in the same occupational field. A third group of participants seemed to have let go of their ideal career plans for a completely different desired self, because of language, financial, or administrative barriers. The feeling of urgency to integrate into Swiss society and the labor market emerged as an important factor in explaining refugees’ negotiation of their professional selves. The more they felt pressured to enter the labor market, the more they seemed inclined to make compromises in their career plans and abandon their ideal selves.

Our second research question aimed to identify the strategies used by refugees to negotiate the tensions between their ideal selves and current career options. Four strategies emerged from our analysis: (1) to choose an alternative career in the same field of their ideal selves, but reducing expectations in terms of prestige, length of study, and qualification requirements; (2) to explore new ideas of occupations as satisfactory alternatives while also keeping the ideal self as a possible long-term career plan; (3) to abandon the ideal self in order to focus on current challenges in other life spheres; and (4) to prioritize occupational fields or occupations that could offer a more efficient way to enter the labor market.

### Expectations versus reality

Refugee participants had different ways to manage their career aspirations after the resettlement. In line with Tlhabano and Schweitzer’s (2007) results, some participants (i.e., those belonging to our

first group) decided to strive for their ideal selves, most of them being associated with social utility and altruism. However, around half of our participants did lower their aspirations or change their ideal selves, which contrasts with Tlhabano and Schweitzer's findings. We could then hypothesize that the confrontation of reality and experiences after resettlement can either confirm or hinder initial career plans, and that pursuing an altruistic career plan might generate a stronger commitment.

In line with Oyserman and Fryberg (2006), our findings stressed that the formation of possible selves is influenced by external factors such as social contexts and concrete life experiences. The four strategies we identified to address our second research question are concrete illustrations of the fact that these external influences drive refugees to reduce, broaden, abandon, or delay their initial aspirations. Participants were indeed aware of these factors (i.e., language proficiency, high educational requirements, type of permit, lack or nonrecognition of diploma, and lack of childcare solutions) and took them into account when thinking about their future career in Switzerland. Our research thus partly corroborates Stingl's (2021) findings, showing that refugees in Switzerland tend to rethink their career plans because of several obstacles, notably administrative. In this context, constructing a career plan seems then a complex reasoned choice (Robertson, 2015), as refugees must consider several external barriers and negotiate the most satisfying—or less dissatisfying—solutions for their career. More broadly, these findings also empirically support the theoretical positions of Hooley et al. (2019) and Sultana (2022), who advocate a more systematic consideration of contextual constraints and structural inequalities in the field of career guidance and counseling.

## Challenged professional integration and career choices

Although the refugee participants had arrived in Switzerland 2–6 years before we met them, only five of them were in training, while one participant was working in precarious conditions (i.e., on call and underemployed). This observation indicates that the professional integration of refugees can be a long-lasting process. The integration program, of which half of them benefitted, provided intensive coaching to help implement their career plans (e.g., making internships and enrolling in a VET program), learn French and mathematics, and access other forms of support (e.g., housing, health, and administrative procedures). These participants were selected for the integration program because of their young age and likelihood of being granted asylum. They were therefore among the most privileged—or least underprivileged—refugees in Switzerland. While access to the labor market is already challenging for them, this task is even more critical for refugees who, like the other half of our study participants, did not benefit from this kind of support. This suggests that immigrants, and particularly refugees, are a population at risk of marginalization during the professional integration process (Masdonati et al., 2022), and intensive support structures may decrease this risk.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING

### Limitations

Methodological issues are salient when working with a population with whom the researchers do not speak the same language (Fedrigo et al., 2021; Udayar et al., 2020). This automatically implies challenges in terms of mutual comprehension of both verbal and nonverbal language, but also asymmetrical relationships. It is even more the case with the population of refugees who are seeking asylum in the given country. A possible desirability bias and the fact that the resettlement process implies many interviews with several professionals or volunteers working for various institutions and goals (i.e., authority responsible for granting asylum, institutions responsible for refugees' financial support, social and professional integration measures, training establishments, and voluntary associations offering support) may interfere with their narratives. Participants had therefore been asked to tell their

stories and answer questions multiple times, and they may have adjusted their narratives to correspond to local expectations and be perceived favorably. Moreover, despite the efforts made to counter this issue, there is a persistent doubt as to whether the role of the researcher is fully understood. Participants may experience distrust both regarding the researcher and the process, which jeopardize the relationship and therefore the quality of data. In light of these limits, we decided to avoid the use of interpreters in order not to increase this asymmetry further (Block et al., 2012). The study also presents a weakness related to the use of a deductive approach to classify the participants' career plans as they were not directly defined by them. Indeed, desired and ideal selves were coded by the researchers based on participants' dream jobs and career short- and mid-term goals.

## Implications for practice

On a practical level, our study stresses the complexity of refugees' career choice processes, balancing between their ideal plans, compromises, and the barriers encountered. These findings confirm that career guidance has an important role to play and must place social justice at the center of interventions (Arthur, 2014). Career counselors can provide specific support for each of the three groups. For the *Striving for the Ideal* group, practitioners should offer interventions to implement an effective strategy to tackle the existing barriers in supporting refugees to pursue the achievement of their ideal selves. Interventions with the *Revisiting the Ideal* group should be directed toward the achievement of their desired selves, while planning a longer-term strategy to enable them to achieve their ideal selves. It thus maintains hope and allows them to cope with compromises, knowing that it may only be temporary. In addition, those wishing to explore possibilities should be offered a personalized career counseling interventions providing information on various options available. Finally, for the *Letting go of the Ideal* group, it is at the very least necessary to accompany the renouncement of refugees' ideal selves so that it does not prevent them from professional integration and avoids risking a disengagement from the work sphere. Moreover, they should also promote a broadening of the scope of possibilities from which to choose an alternative to the ideal plans.

It appears important to plan intensive support over time for all refugees, so that experiences such as internships or jobs open the possible selves rather than create barriers and challenges. It is also necessary to ensure that these experiences are emancipating rather than constraining. This implies interventions centered on the context (e.g., schools and training companies) rather than only on the individual. The strategies used by refugees to tackle barriers by adjusting their career plans and bouncing back from bad experiences can be considered positive signs of adaptability. However, in the light of our results and consistent with recent reflections in our field (Hooley et al., 2019; Sultana, 2022), we believe that valuing their adaptability without questioning the existence of structural or contextual barriers comes down to legitimizing—or even reinforcing—these barriers. Hence, individual support must be combined with advocacy counseling, which consists of acting on various levels (e.g., prevention, citizen actions for social justice) to promote socially just structures (Lewis et al., 2002). Finally, following the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) guidelines would allow career counselors to take complex interactions into account, such as issues of power, privilege, and oppression, during their interventions with refugees (Ratts et al., 2016).

## Future research

Our results highlighted the challenges of refugees' socio-professional integration into the host country, particularly when it comes to identifying and implementing a new career plan. Refugees' complex trajectories are a reminder that time plays a major role in the resettlement process as there are a multitude of factors at play when constructing their career plans. In line with Stingl's (2021) call, we believe that longitudinal studies with refugees are needed to better grasp the complexity

of their multiple transitions and their struggle to navigate long asylum procedures and to integrate into the host society. Moreover, interviewing refugee participants later in their resettlement process would probably allow them to express themselves more comfortably in the language of their host country and offer the possibility to retrospectively identify elements that have influenced their choices and trajectories. Our results also showed that altruist and socially useful career plans seem to be most resistant to compromise. The relationship between the type of career plan and the openness or reluctance to compromise would deserve further exploration in future research.

## CONCLUSION

This research provided an understanding of how refugees were constructing and negotiating their career plans during resettlement in Switzerland. Our results stressed that some of them were striving for their ideal selves after their arrival in the host country. In contrast, others made compromises using different strategies, such as downgrading their ideal career plans in terms of prestige or educational requirements, broadening their perspectives to find new ideal self, postponing their ideal plan, or abandoning it to opt for more marketable occupations. For some participants, the feeling of urgency to integrate socially and professionally seemed to play a role in the revision of their ideal selves. All in all, professional integration appears to be a long-lasting process, and refugees' career plans are threatened by diverse forms of contextual constraints, such as lack of language proficiency, qualification recognition, and childcare solutions. Our results thus confirm that refugees form a social group at risk of marginalization and whose access to decent work is often undermined. Consequently, this population requires broad and prolonged support, and contextual interventions are needed to reduce barriers to constructing and implementing career plans.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The study was conducted with the approval from the ethical committee of University of Lausanne (E\_SSP\_102019\_00002).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors no conflicts of interest.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Fedrigo, L., & Masdonati, J. (2024). Investigating refugees' negotiation of professional possible selves. *The Career Development Quarterly, 1–14*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12346>