



# Young refugees' and asylum seekers' career choices: a qualitative investigation

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## Abstract

A major challenge for refugees and asylum seekers is social and professional integration. Using constructivist and capability approaches, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 young refugees and asylum seekers enrolled in an integration program in French-speaking Switzerland about their career choices. Following consensual qualitative and phenomenological approaches, we focused on their life trajectories (the situation in their home country, triggers behind their flight, arrival in Switzerland) and their current situation (resources and barriers). From their career plans, interests, and values, we formed three profiles (the vocation seekers, the altruists, and the work lovers) to characterize how they constructed their careers.

**Keywords** Refugees · Career choices · Capability approach

## Résumé

**Choix de carrière de jeunes réfugié·e·s et requérant·e·s d'asile : Une enquête qualitative** L'intégration sociale et professionnelle est un défi majeur pour les réfugié·e·s et les requérant·e·s d'asile. En utilisant les approches constructiviste et des capacités, nous avons mené des entretiens semi-structurés sur les choix professionnels de 14 jeunes réfugié·e·s et requérant·e·s d'asile faisant partie d'un programme d'intégration en Suisse romande. S'appuyant sur les approches de recherche qualitative consensuelle et phénoménologique, nous avons investigué leurs trajectoires de vie (situation dans leur pays d'origine, éléments déclencheurs de la fuite, arrivée en Suisse) et leur situation actuelle (ressources et barrières). À partir de leurs projets professionnels, de leurs intérêts et de leurs valeurs, nous avons établi trois profils (les

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passionnés, les altruistes et les amoureux du travail) pour caractériser la façon dont ils construisent leur carrière.

## Zusammenfassung

**Die Berufswahl von jungen Flüchtlingen und Asylbewerbern: Eine qualitative Untersuchung** Eine große Herausforderung für Flüchtlinge und Asylbewerberinnen und Asylbewerber ist die soziale und berufliche Integration. Unter Verwendung des konstruktivistischen Ansatzes und des Befähigungsansatzes führten wir halbstrukturierte Interviews mit 14 jungen Flüchtlingen und Asylsuchenden, die an einem beruflichen Integrationsprogramm in der französischsprachigen Schweiz teilnahmen. Nach konsensualen und phänomenologischen qualitativen Ansätzen fokussierten wir auf ihre Lebenswege (Situation im Heimatland, Auslöser der Flucht, Ankunft in der Schweiz) und ihre aktuelle Situation (Ressourcen und Barrieren). Aus ihren Laufbahnpfänen, Interessen und Werten bildeten wir drei Profile (die Berufssuchenden, die Altruisten und die Arbeitsliebenden), um zu charakterisieren, wie sie ihre Laufbahn konstruieren.

## Resumen

**Las decisiones profesionales de los jóvenes refugiados y solicitantes de asilo: Una investigación cualitativa** Uno de los principales desafíos para las personas refugiadas o solicitantes de asilo es la integración social y profesional. Utilizando enfoques constructivistas y de capacidades, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a 14 jóvenes refugiados y solicitantes de asilo inscritos en un programa de integración en la región francófona de Suiza, con el fin de explorar sus decisiones profesionales. A partir de enfoques cualitativos y fenomenológicos de consenso, nos centramos en sus trayectorias vitales (la situación en su país de origen, los factores desencadenantes de su huida, la llegada a Suiza) y su situación actual (recursos y barreras). A partir de sus planes de carrera, intereses y valores, formamos tres perfiles (los buscadores de su vocación, los altruistas y los amantes del trabajo) para caracterizar y determinar cómo construyeron sus carreras.

## Introduction

Social and professional integration is a challenging process for many refugees and asylums seekers (R/ASs) (Yakushko et al., 2008). Once they arrive in the host country, they have to apply for asylum status and possibly for family reunification while adapting to the language and culture of the host country (Zacher, 2019). Work is among the most important ways in which to rapidly integrate into the host society (Newman et al., 2018). However, immigrants are more vulnerable in the labor market and suffer from a higher rate of unemployment and underemployment compared with the local population in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries (OECD, 2019). This vulnerability is increased for R/ASs, a specific category of immigrants for whom migration is forced and generally traumatic

(Hynie, 2018; Schultheiss & Davis, 2015). R/ASs are also overrepresented in the informal economy (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2016).

To better help these individuals to cope with their challenging situations, many countries have implemented relevant policies during the past few decades (OECD, 2019). Vocational and educational professionals have also developed theories and tools to help R/As to construct their careers in their new realities while considering their past experiences, refining their identities, and giving new directions to their lives (e.g., Abkhezr, 2018; Schultheiss et al., 2011). With education and employment being pivotal for a sustainable integration (Zacher, 2019), this study focused on the career construction of R/ASs in the Swiss context. More specifically, we sought to understand how they make their career choices in the light of their life trajectories and present situations, and considering contextual constraints.

### **Refugees' and asylum seekers' integration challenges**

Both refugees and asylum seekers are part of the larger immigrant population. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2011) defined *refugees* as individuals “who are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and unable to return there owing to serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity, or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order” (p. 19). *Asylum seeker* refers to individuals who have applied for asylum and are waiting for the host country's decision. A recent UNHCR report highlighted that a record 70,800,000 people have been forced to flee their homes worldwide. Among them, 25,900,000 are refugees who have fled conflict or persecution, and more than two-thirds of these people come from five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia (UNHCR, 2018).

Researchers have highlighted that participating in the local economy is a significant help for sustainable integration into the host society (Newman et al., 2018; Yakushko et al., 2008; Zacher, 2019). Work also represents an opportunity to learn about the culture of the host country, create networks, and increase one's social capital (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). At the same time, scholars have reported that refugees encounter difficulties when entering the labor market, as forced migration reduces their chance of already speaking the host language and limits their economic resources and capital (Hynie, 2018). This might explain the high unemployment rate of this population all over the world (e.g., Abkhezr, 2018; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018).

### **Barriers—and resources—to professional integration**

Several studies in the fields of work and vocational psychology have identified some contextual and personal barriers to the career construction and professional integration of immigrants or refugees (Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Yakushko et al., 2008; Zacher, 2019). Among these contextual barriers, authors have stressed the nonrecognition of formal qualifications or work experiences, the refugees' or asylum seekers' lack of work permits, discrimination, and poor networks (Chen & Hong, 2016).

Moreover, immigrants and refugees are often forced to accept precarious, risky, and demanding jobs involving many work hours for low wages (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Schultheiss & Davis, 2015). Personal barriers to immigrants' and refugees' career construction mainly refer to a lack of knowledge about the host country language, culture (Chen & Hong, 2016), and labor market; a lack of work experience and career goals (Amundson et al., 2011); and uncertainty related to their statuses (Jackson & Bauder, 2014). Although this population seems to face many barriers, R/ASs often also have resources that they can count on to overcome adversities. In this sense, the literature stresses the importance of resilience, psychological capital, coping strategies, proactivity, career adaptability, social support, and religion for dealing with these barriers (e.g., Campion, 2018; Newman et al., 2018).

### **Refugees' and asylum seekers' career plans and aspirations**

Constructing or reconstructing a career, and thinking about career choices and goals after arriving in a host country is a challenge for R/ASs, especially because the concept of a career itself is not transcultural but rather specific to the Western context (Abkhezr, 2018). However, research on their career development is scarce. Massengale et al. (2019) showed that economic constraints and the acculturation process (e.g., incorporating the values and behaviors of the new environment) have a negative impact on the career choices and career planning of R/ASs. Hatoss et al. (2012) and Stebleton (2012) showed that family obligations, such as the duty to financially support their families, can either limit or encourage these individuals' career aspirations. Finally, Tlhabano and Schweitzer (2007) showed that the situations of Somali and Sudanese refugees' countries of origin influenced their aspirations in Australia, and participants had high aspirations despite having experienced chaos and trauma. They also identified altruism and social utility as common denominators in refugees' aspirations; participants often aspired to become doctors, nurses, or psychologists.

### **Theoretical framework: career construction and capability approach**

Our theoretical framework consists of the articulation of the constructivist approach to careers and the capability approach. Both approaches address the issue of agency (Bandura, 2001), seen as "a process of intentional action and action regulation, which operates in the social ecology of opportunities and constraints" (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019, p. 136), in deferent but complementary perspectives.

The constructivist approach to careers invites the consideration of individuals as active agents who progressively design and build their trajectories (Savickas et al., 2009). Although some authors refer to the concept of a career as a construct resulting both from objective (e.g., activities, job positions) and subjective (e.g., work aspirations, needs, values) experiences throughout one's lifetime (Greenhaus et al., 2010), Savickas (2013) mainly insisted on the impact of its subjective counterpart. According to Savickas, a career is a subjective construction emerging from the meaning that individuals attach to their past and present experiences, as well as their future aspirations. Careers thus reflect individuals' representations of

their self-concepts, which are constantly redefined through their interactions with their environments. Guichard (2009) added that the construction of a career is to be situated within a person's construction of his or her existence. He introduced the concept of *subjective identity forms* (SIFs) to describe the multiple selves—ways in which to be, behave, and interact—that individuals construct and use in various contexts. A person's current SIFs, including his or her occupational one, are intertwined and result from past SIFs. Moreover, both past and present SIFs shape self-anticipations, including career plans. Finally, all of an individual's current SIFs are organized to form a system.

In the capability approach, the term *capability* is composed of the *functionings* (i.e., actions and states) that the person values (Sen, 1992). Functionings can be elementary (e.g., food, health care, and housing) or more sophisticated (i.e., community participation and self-respect). Capability refers to the freedom to achieve, or the effective opportunity for a person to mobilize his or her chosen functionings within a given context. From this perspective, a career choice results from a “complex reasoned choice balancing many factors depending on what people value” (Robertson, 2015, p. 79). Sen also distinguished the notion of *achievement* from the *freedom to achieve*: the first term refers to what is effectively accomplished, whereas the second one covers all of the existing possibilities, or the *freedom to choose* (Picard et al., 2015). According to this approach, individuals' choices are not just a matter of personal aspirations. Rather, they are also subject to contextual constraints that reduce the range of possibilities. Sen's concept of *adaptive preferences* is also pivotal within the capability approach. It designates the adjusted choices made according to the norms and expectations of the environment, suggesting that in some cases, people's career choices do not necessarily reflect their real aspirations but rather default or expected choices.

Whereas the constructivist approach to careers recognizes the influence of social interactions on individuals' identities and knowledge, the capability approach focuses on broader social influences and how they impact career choices. We consider both approaches to be relevant to exploring R/ASs' agency regarding career issues. On the one hand, adopting a constructivist approach is insightful because newcomers' past selves and complex trajectories might significantly shape their possible selves. This approach also allows for an understanding of the uniqueness of each life and career path (Zacher, 2019). On the other hand, the capability approach appears to be relevant because R/ASs' career decisions are under important contextual (e.g., political and normative) influences but also because the approach is not culturally specific (Robertson, 2015). The ability to act and implement plans thus depends on both personal histories and resources, such as adaptability, and contextual constraints, expectations, and norms. These two angles of approach seem to be consistent for apprehending the dynamic interrelations between structure and agency (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019), and therefore, they provide two complementary perspectives for understanding R/ASs' career construction.

## Context and aims

Given the many challenges that young refugees and asylum seekers must overcome to integrate into the labor market, we chose to focus on their career construction using their experiences in Switzerland as an example. In 2017, 93,056 individuals migrated to Switzerland, which ranks second after Luxemburg regarding the ratio of foreign-born population members among the OECD countries (OECD, 2018). In 2018, 15,255 asylum requests were submitted in Switzerland, mostly from people coming from Eritrea, Syria, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Afghanistan (Secretary of State for Migration [SEM], 2019). Although the Swiss economy is generally considered to be healthy, it remains more difficult for foreign workers, young people, and under-qualified workers to access the labor market (Masdonati et al., 2019). Since 2008, new policies aimed at hosting, mentoring, and assisting R/ASs have been developed not only for sustainable social and professional integration but also for justice and equity (SEM, 2008). As one of the first steps, these integration programs are aimed at helping these people to rapidly construct their career plans with the support of professionals, such as teachers, social workers, and career counselors.

In our study, we aimed to understand how R/ASs in the French-speaking part of Switzerland construct their career plans through the lenses of the capability approach (Sen, 1992) and the constructivist approach (Guichard, 2009; Savickas, 2013). More specifically, we sought to investigate (a) how this population managed to construct career plans considering their life trajectories, dealing with perceived barriers and resources along the way, and (b) how their types of career plans can be grouped to form profiles considering their career choices, interests, and values.

## Method

To access young R/ASs' experiences, we adopted a qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured interviews. The phenomenological approach allowed us to identify whether participants shared common ground (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, we aimed to produce knowledge by describing the essence of a phenomenon (Gaudet & Robert, 2018).

## Participants and procedure

Fourteen young R/ASs (five women and nine men) aged between 19 and 25 ( $M=22$ ;  $SD=1.77$ ) participated in this study. Some of them had already received their asylum permits, whereas others were still in the asylum process. Nine participants were Eritrean, four were Syrian, and one was Somalian, and all were newly arrived in Switzerland—six months before the interview. Most of them were single without any children. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities and were assigned with respect to their origins and religious confessions (Table 1).

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Origin	Family status	In Switzerland since/in the integration program since
Fikru	19	Man	Eritrea	Single, no children	July 2016/December 2016
Isaias	20	Man	Eritrea	Single, no children	May 2016/December 2016
Tekle	21	Man	Eritrea	Single, no children	March 2017/May 2017
Zula	22	Woman	Eritrea	Single, no children	July 2016/December 2016
Arsema	23	Woman	Eritrea	Single, no children	April 2017/May 2017
Samuel	23	Man	Eritrea	Engaged, no children	February 2017/April 2017
Sophia	23	Woman	Eritrea	Single, one child	September 2016/December 2016
Abraham	24	Man	Eritrea	Single, no children	June 2017/July 2017
Amanuel	24	Man	Eritrea	Engaged, one child	July 2016/February 2017
Haya	20	Woman	Syria	Married, no children	April 2017/May 2017
Tarek	21	Man	Syria	Single, no children	March 2017/May 2017
Sami	23	Man	Syria	Single, no children	June 2017/September 2017
Sayid	25	Man	Syria	Married, two children	March 2017/May 2017
Helen	20	Woman	Somalia	Single, no children	May 2016/December 2016

*Note.* Pseudonyms are used for the participants' names

The participants were enrolled in a state pilot program promoting the integration of young newly arrived R/ASs, which provided intensive language classes and support for long-term integration. The research was part of the evaluation phase of the program, which the coordinator requested, and the participants were recruited on a voluntary basis. A preparation session was organized with all of the participants and with the help of three interpreters (Arab, Somali, and Tigrinya). During this session, we described the main goals of the study and asked for their consent. All of the participants agreed to be interviewed. Two members of the research team conducted semi-structured interviews lasting from one hour to one hour and 50 min in French without interpreters at our university counseling service. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed with the participants' consent.

### Interview guidelines

To carry out the semi-structured interviews, we used the narrative metaphor "Journey of Life" (Denborough, 2014). The interviews were divided into three parts corresponding to the past, present, and future, and they covered 15 questions (Annex 1). Each participant was asked to draw a pathway representing his or her life trajectory while telling the researcher about his or her life in his or her home country on the left side of a sheet of paper, his or her current situation in the middle of the paper, and his or her future plans on the right side. For the three steps, the participants were asked to identify positive and negative elements (e.g., pleasant memories, family, the loss of a friend, or sadness). The metaphor of the suitcase was used as a space for gathering the resources they identified (e.g., people or objects from their

memories). Along the same lines, the participants were asked to draw a compass in which they put the values that had been steering their lives. Combining storytelling and drawing helped with reducing language issues.

## Analysis

Analyses were based on the principles of consensual qualitative research (CQR, Hill et al., 2005). The research team was composed of eight researchers in counseling psychology from a Swiss university: two doctoral students, who were the coders; one professor, who was an expert in qualitative research; and two experienced career counselors, who were the auditors. Two master's degree students were also affiliated with the project. Most members of the research team were new to CQR and therefore received coaching from the professor during the entire process, which started with a training session and a selection of methodological readings.

The analysis took place in two main stages. We first proceeded to a horizontal analysis (Gaudet & Robert, 2018) to identify what the participants had in common regarding their life trajectories, their current situations, and their future plans. Then, we conducted a vertical analysis to understand each participant's career choice and plans, as well as his or her singular trajectory. At this stage, participants were grouped according to their similarities with respect to their trajectories and career plans.

Following CQR recommendations (Hill et al., 2005), our personal expectations and biases were discussed to avoid interfering with data analysis. The research team met once at the beginning of the process to share their biases, and some members reported their experiences with immigrants, whereas others recognized their limited knowledge about the population. The concrete analysis consisted of the seven following steps:

1. The five members of the team independently read two interview transcriptions. They met to discuss their biases and expectations and to have an initial discussion about the possible emerging themes. Then, each member had four transcriptions to closely read and identify the main domains.
2. The second meeting included the five members of the team plus the two master's degree students, who had already read all of the transcriptions as part of the process of their respective master's theses. The goal was to show them the domains that the five members had identified so that they could judge their accuracy.
3. The five team members were divided into two subgroups: three researchers worked in parallel on two new transcriptions to identify core ideas, and the other two members did the same with two other transcriptions. All five members met to explain their findings to the other subgroup and to find consensus on the core ideas retained.
4. Because of the language issues and the many interventions of the interviewer to repeat, explain, and make sure that he or she had been understood well, our material appeared to be difficult to split into segments. The team jointly decided to edit a two-page synthesis for each participant following a predefined plan,

which contained the main information from the transcriptions. Each team member wrote two syntheses independently and went through those of another member for validation.

5. The two coders used the MAXQDA 2018 software for the cross-analysis. They first worked on two syntheses and met to compare the codings, discuss the identified categories, and reach a consensus. Then, they coded the remaining transcriptions in parallel and often returned to the raw data to ensure that the coding was consistent with the discourse of the participants. The coders met several times during the process and set two transcriptions aside for stability check per the recommendation of Hill et al. (2005).
6. The coders presented the results of the cross-analysis to the other team members (except the master's degree students). All five members reached consensus on the labels and the organization of the domains, subdomains, and categories.
7. Two members conducted the vertical analysis individually and met to see which participants could form groups based on the types of their career plans. They presented the profiles to the other team members for validation.

## Trustworthiness

Based on Hill et al.'s (2005) recommendations, the newcomers to CQR were trained, and this was described in the method section. During the data collection process, we respected the recommended sample size for CQR (i.e., eight to 15 participants). We also ensured transparency by precisely describing the steps of the data analysis, and we ensured validation using team rotation throughout the entire process, along auditing and stability checks. Finally, we assessed the accuracy of our material by asking the coordinators of the integration program to read the synthesis and confirm the accuracy of the participants' descriptions. Efforts were made to diminish the potential power dynamics, for example, through the preparation session, where we clarified the aim of the study and the researcher's role (Kornbluh, 2015) with a "jargon free and nonpatronizing language" (Morrow et al., 2012, p. 107). However, we acknowledge that power issues might still influence the process and should be considered when interpreting the presented results.

## Results

The presentation of the results from the horizontal analysis follows a chronologic sequence reflecting participants' life trajectories and current situations first. Each of these domains is described, along with the subdomains and categories (see Table 2 for an overview). Considering these elements, we then grouped the participants into profiles according to their types of career plans and pathways through vertical analysis. Three profiles emerged from this second step: the vocation seekers, the altruists, and the work lovers.

**Table 2** Domains, subdomains, and categories

Domains, subdomains, and categories	Frequency label	<i>n</i>
1. Life trajectories		
1.1 Pre-migration situation		
Good memories with family and friends	Typical	12
Harsh living conditions	Variant	6
1.2 Reasons for leaving the country		
Repressive policies and authoritarianism	Typical	7
Conflict and destruction	Variant	2
1.3 Migration journey		
Arduous journey	Typical	7
Difficult conditions in the transit countries	Variant	3
Good memories despite everything	Variant	3
1.4 Arrival in Switzerland		
A complicated start	Variant	5
Living conditions described as positive	Typical	9
Valorization of school life	Typical	11
2. Current situation		
2.1 Barriers		
Adaptation to the new environment	Typical	10
Emotional barriers	Typical	7
Material dependence	Typical	7
2.2 Resources		
Social	General	14
Personal	General	14
Institutional	Variant	2

*Note.* Total  $n = 14$ . Each category was labeled either general (found in all participants or all but one of them), typical (found in half or more but with at least two omissions), or variant (found in at least two but less than half of all participants)

## Life trajectories

The life trajectory domain covers all of the information about the participants' pasts and is segmented into four subdomains: the pre-migration situation, the reason for leaving the country of origin, the migration journey, and the arrival in Switzerland.

### Pre-migration situation

The first subdomain includes two categories regarding the situation that preceded the participant's departure. Participants evoked good memories with family and friends, which included either peaceful moments shared with their families or play-ing with friends. For example, recalling good memories with her family, Zula stated: "We eat supper, together always, together... But she [her mother] asks us what to

do today, how it was going... mmm school... how things were going throughout the day.” The second category refers to the fact that the living conditions were also sometimes difficult due to war, the loss of freedom, or isolated locations. For example, Isaias spoke about the loss of freedom due to the compulsory military service in Eritrea: “Because always war... It’s not liberty as you want to talk... that wasn’t good.”

### **Reasons for leaving the country**

The second subdomain covers two main reasons that triggered the participants’ flights. The participants reported leaving due to the repressive policies and authoritarianism in Eritrea. For example, Arsema compared the military service to war due to the bad living conditions and the loss of freedom and rights. For Sayid and Haya, the destruction of their city in Syria was the trigger, which is the second category of reasons for leaving. Sayid mentioned this situation after the Islamic State occupied his city for four months: “It left in January, me at home, no home, finished... No home, no electricity, no water... no hospital.”

### **Migration journey**

The migration journey domain includes three categories. First, some participants experienced arduous journeys, describing them as difficult, dangerous, and traumatizing. Fikru explained: “It’s difficult Libya to Italy, very, very difficult, it’s the lake like that... agitated... Little boat, little boat.” Three participants identified difficult living conditions in transit countries. Samuel described the situation in Italy as frustrating, as he was forced to wait for 10 months after having already waited for 11 months in Sudan. Sayid mentioned a refugee camp made of plastic in Greece, where there was little food, no shower available, and people were falling sick. The third category includes good memories despite everything experienced. For example, Tarek reported that he enjoyed being with Syrians and Turkish people in the refugee camp in Greece, Sophia spoke very positively about the Italian police who saved her life during her journey, and Helen spoke about how a family in a transit country employed her to take care of the children, and she considered that group to be a second family.

### **Arrival in Switzerland**

This subdomain includes three categories related to participants’ arrivals in the host country. In chronological order, the first category reported is a complicated start and refers to difficult living conditions in the home for asylum seekers, acclimation to the cold Swiss weather, and adaptation to rules. After a difficult start, many participants described their living conditions as positive, which is the second category. For example, Haya was happy to live in a nice apartment with her husband; Zula and Helen got along well with their landlady and host family, and Arsema enjoyed sharing moments with other residents at her home. The third category is the valorization

of school life and refers to the various classes (e.g., French, mathematics, computer science, or sports) taken within the integration program.

### **Current situation**

The current situation domain covers participants' current resources and barriers.

#### **Barriers**

This subdomain includes three categories. Ten participants reported facing difficulties in adapting to the new environment (e.g., learning French), which kept them from finding jobs or internships. Some participants reported emotional barriers, including feeling isolated, lonely, and nostalgic, mainly due to their separation from their families. They reported material barriers, referring to the uncertainty of refugee status, the difficulty of finding a job, and financial difficulties. For example, Isaias had trouble paying his bills because he also had to take care of his sick father, and Zula reported that it was difficult to find housing because of the high price.

#### **Resources**

Most of the resources that the participants identified can be grouped into three categories: social, personal, and institutional. All participants reported social resources. A large social network comprising family members, friends, professors, social workers, neighbors, and landlords provided emotional support, strength, or concrete help with daily tasks. All participants also reported personal resources. They stated that they were aware of their qualities, values, and meaningful experiences. Among the various personal qualities, they reported, for example, punctuality, curiosity, kindness, optimism, and adaptability. The participants also listed many activities that they enjoyed doing in their free time, such as sports, cooking, reading, studying, going for a walk, going out with a friend, or helping people. Their institutional resources depended on their political statuses. For example, Isaias and Fikru identified having their residence permits as important resources for bringing them motivation and hope.

#### **Career plan profiles**

The second step, the vertical analysis, focused on participants' career plans, which we understood and situated considering each participant's trajectory and current situation. We were then able to identify three career plan profiles: the vocation seekers, the altruists, and the work lovers (Table 3). In the following sections, we present each profile and illustrate them through the descriptions of three participants as vivid and compelling examples that represent them well (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is important to note that the three profiles are not mutually exclusive and may be subject to change over time. Participants were each indeed attributed to a type according to what researchers consensually considered to be dominant regarding

**Table 3** Career plan profiles

Profiles	Participant	Career plan(s)
Vocation-seekers	Haya	Beautician, translator, babysitter
	Isaias	Mechanic, cleaner
	Samuel	Mechanic, driver
	Sami	Mechanic, building decorator
	Tarek	Hairdresser
Altruists	Arsema	Nurse, cook
	Helen	Nurse
	Sophia	Pharmacist, nurse
	Zula	Nurse
Work-lovers	Amanuel	Mechanic, house painter, carpenter
	Abraham	Carpenter, heating installer
	Fikru	Mechanic, baker, house painter
	Sayid	House painter, dressmaker
	Tekle	Mechanic, gardener, carpenter

their specific ways of making career choices. This does not mean that other ways of planning their careers did not drive their choices to some extent. Moreover, we considered that some of them might switch from one type to another depending on their experiences, which indicates that the suggested typology is far from static.

### Vocation seekers

The first group, the vocation seekers, is composed of Haya, Isaias, Samuel, Sami, and Tarek, and it is characterized by career plans that are guided by their interests, regardless of their previous professional or personal experiences. We assume that they may have seen their arrivals in the host country as opportunities to follow their desires and find jobs they liked based on their career interests and values. In this group, nuances exist between Isaias and Samuel, whose career interests are precise, and Tarek, Sami, and Haya, who seemed to be at the beginning of their career choice processes. This difference might be explained by the fact that Isaias and Samuel arrived in Switzerland earlier than Tarek, Sami, and Haya did and therefore had time to plan the milestones to achieve their goals. For the moment, Tarek, Sami, and Haya know that they want to base their career plans on their interests. They have only vague ideas about the jobs they would like.

Sami, a young Kurdish from Syria, is a good illustration of the vocation seekers. His large family has been scattered across several countries. His sister and a few cousins live in Switzerland, but they reside in other cities and states where the norms and the language are different. He is very discreet about the reasons that led him to leave and about his migratory journey. In Syria, he decorated buildings and reported being good at work, which his parents valued. He preferred working than going to school. Because he likes mechanics and cars, he would like to become a mechanic, although he has no work experience in this field. He described himself as friendly and positive, and he is confident about the future. For him, working is simple and

pleasant. The only barriers he identified are learning French and not liking school. The next steps for him are to first speak French and then to work in mechanics.

### **Altruists**

The second group, the altruists, is composed of four women: Helen, Arsema, Zula, and Sophia, who share altruistic values. Their career plans are all in the social or care sectors (e.g., nurse, pharmacist, babysitter at a school). They all reported a strong willingness to care for or help others, which might come from their cultural and community values, as well as their past roles in their families. Faith and religion are very important to both of them, which might have influenced their career plans.

Helen's career plan is a good illustration of the altruist group. Helen left Somalia alone for a transit country after her parents had been assassinated. She worked for a family by taking care of the children. She greatly appreciated them, and the family became an important resource for her. Then, she had to leave this country, but during the migration journey, she met a woman, who became a close friend of hers. This friend was sick and had been hospitalized. Helen visited her often when they both arrived in Switzerland. Helen's career plan is to become a nurse. Her desire to take care of sick people might be related to her visits in the hospital, as well as her work experience with children in her transit country. She described herself as kind and positive, and the values of wellbeing, peace, and helping others are crucial to her. The next steps for her are to obtain a refugee permit, improve her French; and work and have a family.

### **Work-lovers**

The group of work lovers is composed of five men: Amanuel, Abraham, Fikru, Sayid, and Tekle. They all based their career plans on their love for work and were more interested in working in general rather than in specific occupations or sectors. They all had professional experience in their countries of origin, where they had to help and support their families. All had between two and four ideas for their occupations, and their career plans seemed to build on what they had done in the past. Each participant reported a positive relation to work.

Amanuel is a good illustration of the work lover group. He left Eritrea by himself to avoid the military service. However, he used to help his father with agricultural work while also going to school. His wife and daughter are also in Switzerland but in another city. His career plans are to become a mechanic, house painter, carpenter, or another manual occupation worker. He described himself as calm, kind, peaceful, and helpful, and freedom is a very important value for him. The next steps for him are to speak and understand French proficiently, to be reunited with his family as soon as possible, and, finally, to work, whatever the job might be. His dream is simply to work and be able to go on a holiday with his family.

## Discussion

In sum, the findings showed that R/ASs' life trajectories are marked by major events, such as pre-migration memories, the triggers of their migrations, difficult conditions and good memories during their migration journeys, and their arrivals in Switzerland, which were difficult at first but also a relief. Their current situations were composed of various barriers, such as adaptation to the new environment, emotional strain due to separation from or the loss of family members, and material barriers. They also had plenty of resources, mostly social but also personal ones, such as qualities, values, and career interests. Some also had institutional resources, such as their refugee permits. In the next sections, we discuss the results in view of what has been highlighted in the literature. Then, we analyze the profiles in light of our theoretical framework. Finally, we present the study limitations and future directions for research and practice.

### Overcoming barriers and planning the future

Our results only partially reflect the main barriers highlighted in the literature. Regarding contextual barriers, participants indeed did not mention discrimination, which is one of the most common barriers found in the literature (Chen & Hong, 2016). They were discreet about their migration journeys, especially the Syrians, and some participants reported cultural differences without qualifying them as discrimination. Our results were more in line with the literature when considering personal barriers. Many participants saw French proficiency as the first step for sustainable integration, which is consistent with Chen and Hong's (2016) findings. Some participants also cited uncertainty related to refugee status as a barrier, which is in line with Jackson and Bauder's results (2014). However, contrary to what has been shown in other studies (Amundson et al., 2011; Chen & Hong, 2016), the interviewees did not mention a lack of knowledge about the labor market, local culture, or work experience. Their physical health and mental health were not identified as current barriers, either. The support received from the integration program in which the participants were enrolled might explain the partial discrepancy between the literature and our results. The participants were also very grateful to participate in this program and thus might have minimized the negative aspects of their experiences.

The narrative tool invited participants to focus not only on barriers but also on resources, and the interviewees identified many of them, such as optimism, adaptability, and positivity, which can enhance coping strategies. Religion and faith, for a few participants, as well as social resources for many were also very important and might have helped them to cope with barriers, which is in line with previous studies (Yakushko et al., 2008). Particularly, social resources seemed to play a key protective role, a statement that also emerged in a previous study carried out in the same context (Udayar et al., 2020). Our results also support the crucial role of an adequate integration program for successful integration (Hynie, 2018).

Among their various life plans, their career plans appeared to be a priority for many participants—as a first condition for starting a family, for example. As already

mentioned, the participants identified French proficiency as the main barrier to their integration, and more specifically to the realization of their career plans, which is in line with Massengale's et al. (2019) observations. Our results also indicate the existence of three distinct ways of constructing future career plans: Vocation seekers are driven by their interests in specific occupational fields and their searches for vocations. Altruists are driven by their values and their need to help others. Meanwhile, work lovers aspire to work regardless of the occupation. Although the participants came from various countries, their countries of origin did not seem to have an impact on their career plans. Conversely, their career choices might partly depend on gendered roles. On the one hand, the altruist group is composed only of women who have prioritized the values of altruism and social utility in their career plans, which is consistent with Tlhabano and Schweitzer's results (2007). On the other hand, the work lover group is composed only of men who tend to reproduce the role of the male breadwinner that they already had in their countries of origin, regardless of their career interests. This may be linked to the pressure that refugees often feel to work quickly and become self-sufficient (Hatoss et al., 2012; Stebleton, 2012). Based on these results, we might assume that gender-atypical choices are probably a luxury that only native people, born and reared in Western societies, can afford.

### Relative freedom to choose

From a constructivist perspective, it seems that the participants' current central SIF is the "student" one. Indeed, they all described themselves as currently going to school and learning French. Linked to their current SIFs, each of them also had a major anticipated SIF of becoming a worker. This anticipated SIF is very common among adolescents and emerging adults (Guichard, 2009). More precisely, in our study, the altruists' and work lovers' anticipated SIFs were clearly linked to their past personal or work experiences and values. Altruists actualized their past SIF of being a caretaker in the family domain into the anticipated SIF of social or health workers in the career domain. Work lovers constructed their anticipated SIF of being a worker in the host country in the continuity of their past SIF of being a worker. On the contrary, vocation seekers' anticipated SIFs were not linked to their past experiences or values; instead, they were mainly based on their current career interests. Additionally, perhaps more than in other contexts, the workers' SIFs are to be situated within their SIF systems. Most participants' career plans depended on their priorities and needs in other life spheres, such as starting a family or leaving social assistance. In sum, in such a transition situation, constructing their SIFs is a way for R/ASs to adapt to their new contexts while considering their pasts. These findings support the pertinence of the constructivist approach to apprehend the situation of R/ASs globally, considering their pasts to understand their present and future situations.

Most participants' career plans could be qualified as conventional for the moment, which Sen (1992) referred to as elementary functionings. This result indicates that given the complexity of their migration trajectories, R/ASs just want and need to settle down in the host country no matter the occupation they enter. Another possible

explanation for this is that the options available to them are rather limited, and they feel implicit or explicit pressure to become self-sufficient. This echoes Sen's notion of adaptative preferences: R/ASs adapt their career plans according to the internalized norms of the host country. Thus, in theory, they have a large range of choices, but concretely, their career options are rather limited to relatively short trainings in domains that are generally close to what they have done before. Nevertheless, the integration program appeared to have opened up the participants' possibilities, as the vocation seekers suggested. Referring to Sen's (1992) capability approach, the integration program might, then, represent an environmental conversion factor, leading to greater capability when combined with personal resources.

All in all, our results seem to confirm the relevance of the articulation of both approaches within our theoretical framework to apprehend the complexity of R/ASs' career choice processes. Thus, the constructivist approach of careers complements the capability approach with a more sophisticated understanding of individual dynamics and subjective careers. In contrast, the capability approach leads to a deeper understanding of contextual influences on individual pathways and choices, as well as how external forces channel these. In this sense, RASs' choices and pathways result both from the way in which they construct and attach meaning to their unique lives and careers, as well as from the opportunities and expectations that the institutional and social environments of the host country provide.

### **Limitations and future directions**

The main limitation of our study is related languages issues, which were frustrating for both participants and researchers. As a result, interviewers were often not sure that they fully understood the participants' experiences and had to repeat and explain the questions many times, switching sometimes from open-ended to closed-ended questions. A lot of efforts were made from both sides to overcome language issues and to access parts of their realities and career choice processes. Meanwhile, these issues might affect the quality of our data, which must therefore be approached with caution. We also attempted to reduce the potential gap between interviewers and interviewees, but a power issue might still have had an impact on the data collection process. Another limitation is linked to the fact that every participant had recently arrived (i.e., around one year) in Switzerland and therefore had just been enrolled in the integration program by the time of the interview. This represents a privileged situation that does not correspond to the situation of the majority of refugees. Therefore, our results are not generalizable to other contexts. A comparison with refugees who were not part of integration programs might be insightful. Furthermore, longitudinal research is needed to provide information about if and how participants were able to implement their career plans. Regarding their future, the Swiss social protection system is intended to ensure that refugees have referents who help them with studies, work, and housing as long as they receive social assistance. Thus, after the integration program, they could still benefit from social workers' support.

Despite these limitations, our results help to further our understanding of the challenges that R/ASs experience and how they construct their careers. Their career

plans are the result of a complex constellation of influences stemming from their singular backgrounds and trajectories, as well as their contextual affordances and constraints. Therefore, the main role of career guidance is to assist them throughout such a journey, valuing their resources with the aim of helping them to pursue and build satisfying careers while considering their contexts and other life spheres. Career counselors also have to systematically consider the contextual barriers that constrain R/AS career choice and development, as well as advocate and work to reduce them.

## Annex 1

### An extract of the interview protocol: questions were translated from French into English

#### Part 1: The past

- At the beginning of the path, note from where you came, including items such as country of birth, city where you grew up, the origins of your parents, the language you speak, your religion, etc.
- Who was there by your side at that time and who accompanied you for the rest of your trip (it could be persons, groups, animals, etc.)? Write their names on the path while describing who they are. Is there someone you would like to put in your suitcase and keep with you throughout the journey? What can these people say about your qualities, skills, and resources?
- Have you encountered any events—positive or negative—during this journey? If yes, could you tell me more about these events? What did you learn from them?
- Did you encounter any obstacles during your trip? If yes, draw them by rivers or mountains, and explain how you managed to overcome them.

Before going to the next part, ask the person if she/he want to add other resources she/he have in the suitcase (skills, interests, people, beliefs, etc.)

#### Part 2: The present

- In this circle that represents your current situation, write at the center some elements that describe your present (where you live, with whom, since when, what are you doing, etc.). Tell me more about them.
- Are there people to support you and give you strength right now? If yes, write their names all around the circle. If there are people who are important to you and want to keep them with you for the rest of the trip, write them in the suitcase. What can these people say about your qualities, skills, resources? (To put in the suitcase also).
- Do you encounter any obstacles now? Can you explain why these are obstacles and how you plan to overcome them.
- What is important to you right now?

- Draw a compass in the corner. When you're not sure where to go, you can look at this compass to find your way. It's your values, things that are important to you, all the things that are guiding your choices and decisions. What is really important to you that guide your action?

Before going to the next part, ask the person if she/he want to add other resources she/he have in the suitcase (skills, interests, people, beliefs, etc.)

### Part 3: The future

Begin with either (a) or (b)

(a) Where do you want to go in the end? What are your dreams and long-term wishes? Place them at the end of the path. Tell me about these dreams (for how long, why).

(b) What are the steps to go through to achieve these dreams? What do you have to do to get to the end of the road? (so we identify some short-term goals) Place them all along the way you have to go.

For (a) and (b) make them talk about personal and professional goals!

- What are the possible obstacles that you may still encounter in the future? And how do you think you could overcome them?

Final questions

- Would you like to add or complete your drawing? Would you like to share other things?
- To conclude, one last question: if you were a bird flying over this path, what title would you give it? Or if you want to present this drawing and explain it to someone else, what title would you give it? Or if you were to write a book about your trip, what title would you give it?

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