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## Examining Non-EU Migrants and Refugees' Agency When Navigating the British Labour Markets

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# Chapter 3

## Examining Non-EU Migrants and Refugees' Agency When Navigating the British Labour Markets



Francesca Calo and Simone Baglioni

### 3.1 Introduction

The UK context presents a very challenging environment for the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Across the past decades, the legislation has been mainly based on increasing border control and decreasing entitlements to migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in an overtly admitted attempt to discourage immigration towards ‘fortress Britain’. A clear example of this attitude has been the very recent controversial deportation policy to Rwanda. As a consequence of such a policy narrative and legal framework, scant attention has been placed upon strategies of integration and inclusion. The findings of a set of biographical interviews we conducted pre-Covid-19 (the last interviews were conducted online at the beginning of March 2020) with migrants and refugees confirmed the image of the British context and of the country’s labour market as one that newcomers can hardly access. This is particularly the case for migrants moving in sake of humanitarian protection who experience not only personal challenges and vulnerabilities, but even more constraining legal and administrative barriers, preventing them, for example, to have their capacities and skills duly recognised and valued or to work for a long period (as is the case of asylum seekers). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how migrants and refugees cope with the difficulties of accessing the UK labour market, how their agency – intended as a set of capacities that allow individuals to exert self-determination when dealing with circumstances, including difficult ones – intertwines with the British context and therefore what strategies they put in place to

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realise the opportunity to be included in the UK social and economic system. We also discuss turning points, that is, crucial junctures in the life of our interviewees and how these have generated revelations (epiphanic moments) about the opening (or closing) of personal or contextual opportunities.

We begin by providing a brief overview of the national context, focusing upon specific critical issues that were raised during the 3 years of our research. We then briefly outline the methodology and provide an overview of the interviews conducted and newspaper articles collected. The chapter then investigates through the analysis of the data stemming from our biographical interviews how migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers perceive their integration into the labour market and what have been individual barriers and enablers in their path towards employment. We then conclude by exploring a typology of the factors that triggered turning points and epiphanies.

### **3.2 Britain the Fortress: Barriers and Enablers for the Integration of Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers**

Migration has been a contentious policy issue and public terrain in the UK for decades and even more in the 2000s (Geddes & Scholten, 2016). In fact, it has been mobilised as a rhetorical rallying point for those seeking to garner popular support for the leave campaign during the country's most important political event of the 2010s: the Brexit referendum. Much of the anti-EU rhetoric was channelled through an anti-migrant discourse which oscillated between, on the one hand, portrayals of foreigners as exploiting the country's welfare system and, on the other, as migrants stealing jobs (Dennison & Geddes, 2018).

However, in the interstices of such a contentious debate, there has been space for the political elite to recalibrate the narrative of migration to better fit the country's history and the demands of the labour market which are both undeniably interwoven with migrants. Such a refocusing of the political narrative of migration (through decades of conservative government) has borrowed from a mainstream policy discourse of 'deservingness' and therefore has developed alongside an assumption that migrants are allowed settling in the country should they 'deserve' it. Newcomers must prove their 'being worth' their host country (Calò et al., 2022; Sales, 2002). Much of this deservingness is framed around their capacity to contribute to economic growth, and thus being economically self-reliant (Calò et al., 2021; Mayblin & James, 2019). Accordingly, when one looks at how the political elite has conceptualised the barriers for migrants' integration in the labour market, such barriers are portrayed as the outcome of migrants' inadequacy to the requests of the British labour market such as migrants not being proficient in English, having a scarce knowledge of the UK job market, and a limited understanding of the UK culture (Bloch, 2008; Mulvey, 2018).

In full contrast with the anti-migration rhetoric elaborated at central governmental and policy level stands the narrative of migration promoted by policy implementers at local levels and third-sector organisations. They instead identify as the main barriers of integration into the labour market of newcomers the restrictive and punitive policies promoted at central level as well as the poor capacity of integration services such as English courses for non-native speakers (Caló et al., 2019a, b, 2022).

Scholars have assessed immigration policies as the most critical issue for the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the labour market (see for example Bloch et al., 2015; Mulvey, 2018). They have been described as very restrictive, bureaucratic, and expensive for both migrants and employers (Anderson, 2010). Moreover, experts have stigmatised these immigration policies' focus on attracting primarily high-skilled migrants, thus reducing the accessibility to the UK labour market for those who do not have highly specialised skills or are not filling high-earning positions (Bloch et al., 2015).

Despite such a restrictive policy context, experts and migrants appreciate the integration strategies elaborated by devolved authorities such as the Scottish one and the services provided by third-sector organisations (Calò et al., 2021). However, due to the lack of funding attached to these initiatives, their contingent nature, and the low number of organisations providing formal employability services or skills development services, our interlocutors often described them as 'fragmented and residual' and thus falling short in terms of their accessibility (Calò et al., 2021).

In light of these two different approaches and narratives we can say that there are various challenges newcomers must overcome to be able to access the labour market and become economically self-reliant: they must learn or even master the language to a sufficient level; possess the legal status that allows them to work – a complex task which requires navigating the bureaucracy of the UK Home Office; and, ultimately, they must find someone who provides an opportunity for employment, that is, an employer who is persuaded about their suitability for that specific job and their right to work (Anderson, 2010; Bloch et al., 2015; Martín et al., 2016; Mulvey, 2018). While the literature has mainly focused on analysing enablers and barriers of integration in the labour market at the policy and services levels (see for example Calò et al. (2022)), scant attention has been given to the stories of migrants, their role and their agency in shaping their lives. It is then important to explore their agency through the voices and lives of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, which is the aim of this chapter. Exploring their lives and providing them with a space for their voices is important for understanding how the vulnerability-agency nexus works in different circumstances. The focus on epiphanies and turning points and the conceptualisation behind that can provide valuable information to policymakers and service providers to develop more effective public services and hopefully reshape a migration narrative more focused on addressing the real needs of individuals.

### 3.3 Methodology

We conducted a total of 11 biographical interviews involving migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Table 3.1 provides an overview of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers involved.

People involved present very different paths of migration, including economic migrants who have moved to the UK to study or work, refugees who have obtained their status through the asylum process, refugees who have been resettled through one of the resettlement programmes, and one asylum seeker who is still waiting for the refugee status. More than half of the biographical interviews involved women of working age (between 25 and 40 years old), while the other half involved men between 30 and 40 years old. Almost everyone interviewed achieved or is achieving in the UK or their origin country a high level of education (tertiary level). A wide range of nationalities was covered including Commonwealth, African, and Asian countries. Different recruitment strategies were used. The majority of respondents were found through the lead author's social and professional networks and word of mouth/snowballing. Civil society organisations helped identify potential interviewees and create a connection between them and the researchers. Participation in events organised by migrants' communities, faith organisations, and third-sector organisations were also helpful in recruiting participants and inform part of the research.

The majority of the interviews were recorded and transcribed 'intelligent verbatim'.<sup>1</sup> When it was not possible to record, extensive notes were taken by the researcher and reorganised in a document after the interview. The confidentiality and anonymity of each of our interviewees were protected throughout the interview process. In doing so, pseudonyms are used in detailing the stories and for quotes presented in this report. Any details that might disclose the identity of the interviewees are not reported. Ethical approval was requested and obtained from the SIRIUS Ethics Board and the ethics committee of the Glasgow School for Business and Society at Glasgow Caledonian University. Sensitive data were kept password-protected on the researcher's laptop. Data that participants requested not be disclosed in connection to their story were not used. After the interview transcription, the data were then imported into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software QSR Nvivo and an in-depth analysis following biographical interviews approach was undertaken. Turning points (crucial junctures in the life of our interviewees) and epiphanies (that is, revelations occurring after turning point, events that made clear to the interviewees how their life was affected for the bad – withdrawal epiphanies, as the event generated a self-retrenchment or a regression in career and personal life – or for the good – generative epiphanies, as the event offered opportunity for personal development or career progression) were selected and organised across themes, as reported below.

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<sup>1</sup>Intelligent verbatim is a type of transcription that omits all ums, ohs, laughter, and pauses throughout the conversation.

**Table 3.1** Demographic information on Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers (MRAs)

Pseudonym of Interviewees	Date of interview	Age	Gender	Family Status	Country of origin	Migration year	Education (primary, secondary, tertiary)	Current occupation in host country	Occupation in country of origin	Languages the individual speaks
John	23/10/2018	Early 40s	M	Married with children	Sudan	2012	Tertiary	Student	Public sector official	English, Arabic
Valerie	27/10/2018	Mid 30s	F	Married with children	Iran	2009	Tertiary	Unemployed	n.a	English, Persian
Jack	27/10/2018	Early 40s	M	Single	Iran	2011	Tertiary	Student and waiter	Civil servant	English, Persian
Maria	01/11/2018	30s	F	Married with children	Pakistan	2002	Tertiary	Not working	n.a	English, Pakistani
Danielle	29/10/2018–10/03/2020	30s	F	Married	Somalia	2008	Tertiary	Policy officer	n.a.	English, Arabic
Susan	1/07/2019	30s	F	Married	Malaysia	2011	Tertiary	PhD student	Banker	English, Malay
Sofia	1/07/2019	30s	F	Married	Turkey	2006	Tertiary	PhD student	Secretary	English, Turkish
Julie	8/07/2019	30s	F	Married with children	Algeria	2015	Tertiary	Not working	Customer support	English, Arabic, French
Tom	18/07/2019	30s	M	Single	Iraq/Iran	n.a.	Tertiary	Not working	n.a.	English, Farsi and Kurdish
Anita	1/04/2020	30S	F	Married	Egypt	2015	Tertiary	Student	Not working	English and Arabic
Artur	27/03/2020	30S	M	Single	Jamaica	2017	Tertiary	Student	Banker	English

### 3.4 The Voices of Migrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers in Fortress Britain

Four different themes were identified across our respondents: trauma/vulnerability, skills acquisition, entrance in the labour market, and resilience. Each related to major epiphanies and turning points explored in the following sections. Pieces from the stories of Susan, John, Jack, Maria, Anita, Danielle, Artur, Sofia, and Valerie are used to explain the different themes.

#### 3.4.1 *Trauma and Vulnerability: Solitude and Precarious Temporality*

Solitude was one of the main vulnerabilities outlined by our informants. Loneliness in facing a completely different legal, social, and economic system was often expressed by our informants as one of the vulnerabilities they had to endure. For Artur, for example, a 30-year-old man who came to the UK to pursue a PhD, solitude played an epiphanic role in his migration experience. He recalls that his migration path was not ‘a smooth transition’ and that the only information available to him on arrival was that he had ‘14 days to go to the post office to get [his] biometric’. It was the first time he was living outside his country and he was ‘expecting something more’ – that ‘there would be a person to help [him] to integrate in a new space’. Instead, he realised that he had to navigate the new context alone, counting only on his own capacities, from finding out how to register with the doctor to understanding the legal implications of his student visa. The ‘shock of the integration process’ was an epiphanic moment which instilled in him a sense of temporality. He felt that he was ‘integrated enough to function’ while he was living in the country but because he was only a student with an ‘expiration date’ on his visa ‘there was no need for further integration’. At the time of the interview, he did not know how this feeling would affect his life, whether it was what we call a generative or withdrawing type of epiphany, that is, if this situation would push him towards others and embracing the new society or if that would push him to ‘withdraw’ into his self. He was still in the process of understanding it, but he was sure that it could represent a key barrier in exploring possible job opportunities and, overall, the opportunity to stay in the UK.

Other interviewees point to the feeling of precarious temporality as something generating a ‘withdrawing epiphany’. In fact, a sense of temporal precarity attached to their settlement in a country based on a non-permanent legal status affected their willingness to integrate and questioned their choice of living in the UK. Such a sense of temporal precarity was perceived as a vulnerability. For example, Anita, a 25-year-old woman who moved to the UK to study, described her several experiences at the UK border as almost traumatising:

They make you feel that you are just a guest, they investigate you, you are a guest, they always ask a lot of questions, like are you going back home to get a job? Sometimes when

you finish the border there is another desk with other people, you see looking at me. They will pick me out of the crowd, is it racist? Is it because I am not white? What is this about? They try to make it friendly but it is not, they stop you and they ask what are your plans for the future, they really make clear that I am not welcomed to stay as long as I want.

The feeling of precariousness was also aligned to her (temporary) migration status and the instrumental process of renewing her visa several times. Each time she had to start from scratch and sometimes even go back to her own country and apply for a visa from there. All such experiences were epiphanic in how they revealed that she would 'always be a temporary person, on the edge, without a home, not welcomed'. This feeling made her question her choice of living in the UK even though she loved the community where she lives and 'considers it as home', she is uncertain about her life in a country where she does not feel welcomed. Hence, in Anita's case, the security checks and level of personal scrutiny she repeatedly went through can be considered as both emotional and instrumental factors that triggered epiphanies which have both enabled her by training her resilience and determination. However, they have also constrained her by leading her to doubt her decision to settle in the UK.

The sense of precariousness that Anita and Artur described is often only overcome after acquiring either indefinite permission to remain or British citizenship. The change in migration status makes job opportunities available to British and EU citizens also accessible to third-country nationals, thus becoming an instrumental turning point that reduces the sense of temporality. For example, Sofia a 25-year-old woman who moved to the UK to join her brother and study in college, described her acquisition of British citizenship (after 10 years of living in the UK) as a fundamental turning point. Up to that moment her willingness to travel abroad was restrained due to the restriction in the number of days she could spend outside the country. In addition, the types of jobs and organisations to which she could apply were very limited and often she had to accept underqualified jobs to pay for her studies or to continue to live in the country. She emphasised that thanks to acquiring citizenship, she could enjoy 'different experiences without having any restriction', but more crucially she 'could look like everyone else' when competing for a job and have the same opportunities as everyone else. She always felt as 'a second order citizen' who did not have the same rights and opportunities. Sofia was able to build up resilience from her 10 years as a migrant and as soon as she became a British citizen she began to take advantage of all the opportunities she found, starting, for example, to work in a position matching her qualifications and travelling in Europe with her partner and friends without having to worry about the number of days spent outside the UK.

However, not everyone's story is similar to hers. John, a refugee who moved to Glasgow with his wife and children, had always desired to work in the criminal justice field. To fulfil his ambition, he decided to resume his studies, although he was already middle-aged and with a family to support. At the end of his undergraduate degree, he decided to apply as a prison officer. However, he was never invited for an interview:



I applied five or six times just for prison officer. . .and I have more qualifications and they didn't invite me for the interview. And I phoned them why you are not calling me for an interview I am very qualified for this job just chasing you. . .and a lady told me because for this job you have to be a UK citizen. I am entitled to work in this country I have a paper. . .no. . . you have to be a full citizen. . .

The disappointment he experienced from being rejected several times – and not only in his sector of interest but also in other sectors – deeply affected his motivation and ambition, triggering a partial withdrawal epiphany: he decided not to apply for any permanent employee position and instead to develop his own business. He believes that people like him ‘should make their own job’, whether creating a social enterprise, running a kitchen, or providing new services and products. Only in this way, according to John, would it be possible for a refugee to be integrated in the labour market. Hence, John provides additional evidence that difficulties and perceived rejection do not facilitate a personal retrenchment from seeking economic fortune and employment integration, but changed the means to reach such goals, shifting it from obtaining paid employment towards testing his entrepreneur skills.

In other cases, the trauma of being treated differently by local people was so internalised that it became almost acceptable to the migrant self. Such an internalisation and acceptance of discrimination became a turning point in the life of some of the migrants because it led them to withdraw from the job market, as in Valerie's case. Discrimination emerged as the normality. For example, to Valerie it ‘made sense’ that she would not get the job when competing with a British citizen. Her motivation to find a job aligned with her qualifications and ambitions decreased and she ended up working for a beauty salon of a big retailer – a job that she considered aligned with her migrant background. In this case, discrimination turned from a contextual into a personal barrier, deeply affecting the impetus to find a job that corresponded to her skills and aspirations. A sense of precarity and solitude were deeply rooted in the trauma that our participants face. For some, this led to generative epiphanies that increased their resilience and the potentiality of becoming integrated. For others, conversely, the vulnerability became an insurmountable barrier that made them withdraw from the job market.

### **3.5 Acquiring Skills ‘Recognised’ by the Host Society: Language, Education, and Work Experience**

Migrants also identified the acquisition of skills and education in the UK, or in a similar context, as a fundamental condition for increasing their opportunity to find a good job. Hence, our interviews unveil that learning English, undertaking a qualification issued by a UK body, and building up a curriculum aligned to the UK serve as turning points. Danielle, a young woman who moved from a war zone to the UK for studies first and then applied for asylum, described learning English from a young age as a critical turning point affecting part of her life. Her father urged her to focus on math and English, pushing her to learn the language to the best of her

ability. Her level of English was then high enough to pass a test for obtaining funds to study at a prestigious university. The importance of learning the language was also highlighted by Julie, an asylum seeker who moved to the UK without previous English knowledge. She suggested that at the beginning, integration was difficult because she did not speak a good level of English. She explained that

if you don't speak good English you can't integrate. When you understand people, you have a good communication, and after that, everything becomes easy. You can then go to different organisations and you can do volunteering.

Learning English in the community first and then in college gave her enough confidence to begin to think about undertaking a master's degree, and strongly reinforced the idea that 'you need confidence [to integrate]. If you are not confident, you can't go out and face people'. Participating in the English language classes was a turning point for Julie, giving her enough confidence to volunteer and start her integration path. This, in turn, helped her improve her language skills and feel good enough to enrol in a post-graduate course and think about a possible future working life in the UK.

With regard to the value of qualifications obtained in the UK for finding an employment, some of our respondents highlighted that the qualifications they had obtained at home did not result in finding a suitable job in the UK. Their perception was that only migrants with British qualifications had the possibility of finding a decent job without undertaking further education in the UK. Moreover, UK-acquired education was not enough: work experience gained in the country was also perceived as very useful for finding a job in the UK. Almost all respondents had to build a curriculum vitae that included both UK education qualifications and work experience. John, for example, despite qualifications from his home country, 'realised that [his] qualification back home was not suitable to find a job in the UK'. Once this epiphanic understanding of his new country of settlement materialised, he decided to enrol in a university and obtained a bachelor's degree; he is now planning to continue studying and obtain a master, that 'hopefully will help [him] to find a job' because he was not happy to work part-time in a job that did not suit his qualifications. He described his decision to enrol in further education to obtain a job in his field of interest as a 'hard way'. Most of his friends 'are working in security or some of them in restaurants'. They joined what he called 'a marginal labour market' because they usually have family commitments and need to send money back home. However, he hoped that in the longer term his decision would pay off.

### ***3.5.1 Entrance in the Job Market: Volunteering, Networking, and Discrimination or Lack of Knowledge***

Finding a first job in the UK was critical moment in the lives of all our respondents. Mechanisms and events that helped entry into the labour market were proper turning points. Our interviewees pointed out two main interrelated factors as enabling their

access to the job market: volunteering and widening their personal network. They also identified two mechanisms as obstructing factors to integration: employers' lack of knowledge of migration and scant knowledge of employment laws, and the impossibility of accessing specific jobs.

Our interviewees highlighted volunteering schemes as one of the most important activities enabling labour market integration. They indicated civil society organisations (CSOs) as providing a space where people with different pathways of migration could widen their social networks and obtain some form of work experience that is perceived as value by prospective employers.

Danielle, for example, identified volunteering as a turning point twice in her migration path. When she was still living outside the UK, she understood that volunteering helped her obtain the funds to undertake her studies (this was an epiphany in her personal development). In fact, she believes that the experience she had previously acquired while volunteering was considered as an invaluable asset by her studies' funders and one of the elements that made her CV competitive compared with others. She then continued to volunteer once settled in the UK during her postgraduate studies. At the end of her programme, one company – which was a partner in one of the projects she was volunteering with – noted her skills and CV. The company offered her an internship, first, and a job placement, after. She is now working in a position that matches her qualifications and skills, and she enjoys her job. She recognised that without the volunteering experience, it would have been much more difficult to find a job and most probably she would still struggle to obtain one.

For Tom, a young refugee who moved to the UK to join his brother, volunteering was a key mechanism for gaining work experience. He was active as a volunteer in different organisations since arriving in the UK. While volunteering, he read a leaflet that triggered a turning point in his life: it explained that there was a shortage of men taking up posts in childcare and education. He decided then to enrol in a course in the same non-profit organisation for which he was volunteering that offered a pathway to childcare. Subsequently, he obtained a placement opportunity and the possibility to progress to a college course. Therefore, the volunteering experience represented an enabling turning point in Tom's life which helped him better understand his professional ambitions and how to fulfil them.

Volunteering is clearly connected with opportunities of widening one's social connections; being able to rely on a network of personal ties and contacts is a condition *sine qua non* to find a job in the UK, like elsewhere. As Danielle explained, accessing the UK job market 'is not just finding the link and applying for jobs. It is all about network connection and experience in the country. So, it is not easy to create personal connections if you are not here since you are born'. However, mobilising networks to one's advantage is not always as simple as we might imagine – it may be a matter of people's social skills and character. But it can also depend on cultural aspects. At least this is what Anita thinks: for her, in her own culture to 'speak out and ask for support' is often discouraged, hence it becomes even more difficult to build that network of support that may be useful when one needs to find a job, for example. For Anita, the support of some of her contacts 'just

happened'. At the end of her study abroad, she felt that she did not have enough experience outside her home country and wanted to further improve her skills, 'learn a new path, be a better person, an independent woman who can find her independent life'. She had to start looking for something that could help her to extend her visa. She could have enrolled in another course but lacked the financial means to afford it. She realises now that she was lucky because people in charge of her study programme learned about her situation and decided to offer her the opportunity to undertake a paid internship. Hence, Anita's story shows that the widening of her personal network was a fundamental turning point to better understand what she wanted to do in life and to have the opportunity to realise it.

Difficulties accessing the labour market also generated epiphanies in the lives of other informants. Maria, for example, described employers' lack of knowledge of migration and employment laws as very stressful and detrimental for her willingness to continue to work. She pointed out that many companies do not know that the Home Office takes time to process visas, describing a specific event with a non-profit organisation that deeply affected her willingness to look for a job. While employed through a private agency placement in a large third-sector organisation – in a job she considered below her qualifications and skills but 'better than nothing' – she was also waiting for the renewal of her visa (a spouse visa). While her passport was with the Home Office, she received a call from the organisation asking for her visa, and then the organisation called the Home Office which was unable to provide the information needed. As a consequence, the organisation told her to stay home because according to them she did not have a visa. This episode represented for Maria an epiphany since she now understood how organisations' lack of knowledge could impact her life and led her to think that nobody should have had the right to talk to her in that manner given that she was only following the government procedure: 'Not every company knows visa policies, they don't know that the Home Office takes time to process [visa requests]], I had to explain to many people that this is the condition I am working with'.

### ***3.5.2 Resilience: A Potential Propellant for Inclusion***

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

C. P. Cavafy – Ithaka

Resilience and migration come together beautifully in Cavafy's poem which details in the last verses the agency capacity underpinning resilience. Agency has been defined as 'one's capacity to shape one's life and exploit opportunities or indeed

open up new possibilities for one's self and their family' (Triandafyllidou, 2019, 8). Resilience is one type of agency that migrants can use to change their own situation or rework their own circumstances (Triandafyllidou, 2019). In the integration in the job market as detailed by Bernsten (2016), it could mean, for example, working multiple jobs or switching between jobs on a regular basis. In the poem, it means using the experience acquired to rework one's circumstances.

Resilience was the propellant to facilitate integration into the labour market across all our stories. All the people interviewed had aspirations, motivations, and expectations – and for all of them these were important for finding a way to access the labour market. For some of the informants, resilience was also a key mechanism to overcome vulnerability and trauma often generated along the migration path.

Resilience was conceptualised in different ways and consequently was used differently by each informant. In some of our stories, resilience meant accepting an underqualified job or a job that was aligned to a stereotype associated with the country of origin. Susan, a 30-year-old graduate student, was working in the banking system in her own country before moving to the UK. She had a high social status, a permanent job in a high-skilled sector, and a good salary. When she moved to the UK to undertake a funded PhD, she decided to continue to work (the hours allowed by her visa) to help support her family back at home. The only easily and quickly accessible job that she could find was a position in a call centre. She described the experience of working there as a 'real experience of work'. Although the job was not difficult because the process was defined and clear, it triggered an epiphanic moment of her life that in the new country of settlement through the job she 'felt as an immigrant' and that due to her 'immigrant situation' she 'had to lower her level, to lower her ego' and accept a job for which she was undoubtedly overqualified. In Susan's case that revelatory epiphanic moment triggered a reaction of resilience that made her accept a job for which she was overqualified and motivated her to find a job aligned to her skills. The experience in the call centre gave her the impetus to continue her studies and reinforced her aspiration to work in academia, helping her achieve a (precarious) position in a university. Hence, her spirit worked as an agency enabler by keeping her working and studying with the aim to improve her life.

A similar conceptualisation of resilience but with different outcomes was identified by Valerie, a young woman who moved to the UK to join her husband. Her studies were in education and educational needs support, and she had hoped to find a job in this field because working with children was her highest aspiration. However, she could not find a job as an educator in the UK. She applied several times, including jobs for which she was overqualified, but she was never even invited for an interview. She identified her lack of English language proficiency and her legal status (not being a British citizen) as the main reasons for not being shortlisted for education-related jobs. Having a family and economic needs obliged her to accept the only job available: working in a beauty studio (providing waxing and other beauty treatments) for a department store. While navigating the UK labour market and testing her profile in sending in job applications, the multiple rejections she received and seeing the job placements of friends from her home country led her

thinking, as an epiphanic moment of her new life of immigrant, that there were stereotyped understandings attached to her culture of origin (being a young woman from a Middle East country) and gender labour divisions that pre-structured her options about employment sectors and occupations. Describing this epiphanic revelation, she says: 'I am working in something that is seen as related to our culture, so mostly Middle East people from Iraq, Iran, Pakistan which are working in beauty companies'. Her resilience lay in her acceptance of a job that nonetheless reinforced a stereotyped idea of migrants. She needed to work to support her husband and kids, and she accepted that what she would be offered was limited to employment in some specific sectors due to a stigmatised understanding of her capacities and competences as a young woman from the Middle East. She accepted that employment even if the sector offered 'no plan of future development nor career'.

In some of the stories, resilience meant accepting personal limitations and coming to terms with one's possibilities. Maria is a young woman living in London with her husband and a baby. She fled her country with her family when she was an adolescent. She had job experience and studies in the UK, and also married in the UK. She moved from the north of the country to London to follow her husband on his work trajectory and thus had the opportunity to explore the job market competition there. She described her life in London as very stressful, particularly because she applied to several jobs without any positive results. Seeing 'some people going to a couple of interviews and getting a job' while she was struggling so much was an epiphany for her because it made her question her skills and qualifications. She started to realise that Human Resource managers were expecting the candidates 'to do something extraordinary...they expected people to be perfect'. She detailed that doing marathons, being involved in charities, climbing mountains, and being widely travelled with a blog were typical activities that other job seekers promoted during interviews. Thus, she often compared herself with other candidates who came from migrant families, but frequently found that 'they were born in the system' and thanks to this, understood how to manage this tough competition. She realised that job market competitors were usually 'very talkative, skilful and very wise in terms of vocabulary' but especially they knew 'actors, television programmes, and football' – topics that were appreciated because it allowed them to 'interact quicker and better with colleagues'. All these reasons made it easier for them to find a job. Understanding why she was not selected during job interviews was a turning point in her life. However, in Maria's case, the epiphanic revelation led to a withdrawal from the labour market; in fact she decided to pull out from the 'job seeker' status and focused instead on family and home caring.

In other stories resilience was the mechanism that helped our interviewees achieve turning points that completely changed the course of their lives. Danielle decided to apply for asylum and stay in the UK at the end of her graduate programme. To be able to obtain the funds for studying in the UK, she had to face challenging travels and experiences. She had to undertake an English language test in a country neighbouring the one where she used to live and which was usually difficult to access from her country of settlement. Second, she had to visit the country of her nationality, a country she had never seen before having spent her life outside

of it and which was experiencing a significant difficult economic and social situation. She believes that it is the resilience she deployed to survive while passing through these challenging experiences without giving up to her goal of studying in the UK that helped her obtain the funds. She used these challenges as an example of her motivation to persuade donors that her will to pursue studies was well grounded:

That was one of the things I used in the interview, they asked why I thought I should get the scholarship, yes because I come to [the country of my nationality overcoming various difficult situations also in terms of personal security] for the first time, and my parents have not been in there in many years.

Thus, her capacity to exert agency by seizing opportunities despite very adverse circumstances changed her life, allowing her to obtain the funds and pursue her ambitions. She was then able to reflect on such turning points and realise how much her determination to succeed had helped her throughout her personal development journey.

### **3.6 Social Capital, Discrimination, and Temporality**

Thanks to our fieldwork, it was possible to identify what barriers and enablers of integration in the UK labour market were perceived as a turning point and epiphany by migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Our interviewees pointed to two different factors as common turning points and positive epiphany generators: volunteering and social connections. Two additional variables were pinpointed as important, but not critical, mechanisms to access integration into labour market and promote positive turning points: learning English and building a curriculum aligned to the UK context. Finally, three variables were identified as obstructing factors, negatively affecting the possibility of economic integration and generating withdrawal epiphanies: employers' lack of knowledge of migration and employment laws, discrimination, and the sense of precarity. Table 3.2 provides a typology of the actors and mechanisms triggering the turning points and epiphanies discussed earlier. Some (+) led to generative epiphanies while others (−) instead led to withdrawn epiphanies.

In some cases positive turning points have been created by accessing social networks of ties and acquaintances that provided work or work experience opportunities: such events generated epiphanic revelations about the importance of social connections in one's life and the further barrier newcomers face by the simple fact of living in a country in which by definition they are 'new' and therefore deprived of the same number and quality of social connections that native or long-term residents have. Such epiphanies fostered an awareness among some of our interviewees of the disparity of the situation and its effects on their professional and economic success, thus pushing them to act to mitigate such a disparity. For example, volunteering and civic engagement and involvement with educational training institutions emerged as formidable tools for expanding social connections in a new environment.

Learning English as well as participating in educational activities to shape a CV more aligned to the UK context were considered important factors supporting the

**Table 3.2** Typology of Actors and Factor

Interviewees	Personal/Friends/ Family (micro)	Civil Society support (meso)	Educational Training Institutions (meso)	Professional contacts/ employers (meso)	State Policies (macro)
Artur			University lack of support (-)		State Policies (macro) Visa expiration (+/-)
Anita	Social capital (+)			Support of professional con- tacts/ (+)	The security checks and the level of personal scrutiny (-)
Sofia					Acquiring British citizenship (+)
Valerie				Discrimination (-) Lack of knowledge migrants' rights/legal knowledge (-)	
Danielle	Family support for learning the lan- guage (+) Determination to succeed (+) Social capital (+)	Volunteering (+)		(+)	
Julie	Social capital (+)		Community and college English courses (+)		
John	Social capital (+)			Discrimination (-)	Lack of recognition of abroad qualification (+)
Tom		Volunteering (+)	Community English and professional courses (+)		
Susan				Discrimination (+)	
Maria				Discrimination (-)	



good level of confidence necessary to try to be integrated in the UK labour market but were not considered fundamental factors for generating turning points.

We also encountered turning points generated by migrants' experiencing a repelling environment, an environment practicing direct and indirect discrimination. Such turning points have provoked both generative and withdrawal epiphanies, depending on the specific characteristics and story of the person involved. In some cases, a repulsive environment has led to migrants to question their migration choice. In other cases, they have reacted by becoming even more determined to attain economic success by opening their own path, starting an educational path, or imagining their lives as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, there have been cases in which a change in legal status (moving from a time-limited visa to a permanent status) has generated a turning point in the life of newcomers looking for a decent job as it has allowed them to be on an equal – at least formally – level compared with native and EU citizens. In the everyday reality of job seekers, this is tantamount to the opportunity to apply for a wider selection of jobs. Moreover, having a permanent permit to stay triggers other positive emotional developments related with the possibility to embark into a new personal-sentimental relation. Hence, the turning point provoked by a change of status has fostered a generative epiphany that contrasted the many 'withdrawal epiphanies' of temporality and precarity experienced by many of our interviewees when thinking about their situation as newcomers; they started to feel as part of the community instead of being only temporarily integrated.

All the stories we collected had something in common, which worked as the propellant to facilitate integration: resilience. Resilience was used to accept personal limits and underqualified jobs but was also at the same time the propellant to continue to look for integration in the UK job market. Hence, resilience has pushed migrants to bear with difficulties and strive for inclusion. On the other hand, many of our interviewees also faced vulnerability as consequences of their stories. Trauma and the resulting vulnerability tend to have a 'depressive' effect on personal agency, but when the vulnerability is overcome, and when participants are able to take advantage of positive epiphanic events, resilience can be generated.

### **3.7 Concluding Remarks**

Our biographic interviews unveil two different focal points related to labour market integration as particularly important in generating turning points leading to epiphanic experiences (positive and negative). Social capital was seen as the most critical enabler to access employability and foster the development of generative epiphanies. Almost all respondents had to start from scratch in building their social network – a network that did include third-country nationals but also local people who could help access employment opportunities.

Volunteering was used as an opportunity to develop social connections with the communities where migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers live. Experiencing direct

and indirect discrimination was the second focal point that our respondents centred on. Migrants and refugees often felt treated differently from British and EU nationals, and such experiences of discrimination generated epiphanies that led them to think they needed to be overqualified to have a chance to be selected for a job interview or a job position. The trauma of being treated differently from local people was so internalised that it became almost acceptable by the migrant self, conditioning their motivations, ambitions, and jobs they decided to accept. From being a barrier of the system, discrimination then became an individual barrier, affecting the lives of migrants and refugees forever.

Finally, resilience, alongside vulnerability were the outcomes of the turning points of our respondents. Rarely is the role of resilience and vulnerability considered by policymakers or are the specific barriers that newcomers encounter as a consequence of their particular experiences recognised. In our research, resilience and vulnerability play a critical central role in favouring or not the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers into labour market. Resilience acted as a propellant of integration, favouring positive labour outcomes while vulnerability acted as a barrier favouring negative outcomes. However, the learning process behind both resilience and vulnerability paths could be used to help other migrants integrate into the labour market, creating a virtuous circle of increasing resilience and better labour and societal outcomes.

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