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Professional intercultural communicative competence and labour market integration among highly-educated refugees in the Netherlands

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Abstract: In the last decade, thousands of forcibly-displaced people have sought refuge in the Netherlands. Many of them are highly educated, and their integration into the host society's labour market could improve their own quality of life as well as making a significant contribution to the country's economy. However, refugees face many challenges in their search for employment. This is the first exploratory study of the role that professional intercultural communicative competence (PICC) plays in highly-educated refugees' integration in the Dutch labour market. Interviews and focus groups were used to collect data from refugees who had already successfully integrated into the Dutch workforce as well as from newcomers who were still in the process of achieving this. Content analysis was performed on the data, using rounds of deductive and inductive coding and analysis. The findings indicate that the development of PICC (including resilience) plays an important role in helping refugees overcome the challenges they face. The article discusses the implications of the findings – should they generalise – in terms of PICC training offered to refugees themselves (as part of their language courses) and to professionals who work with them, with the aim of facilitating and promoting the refugees' labour market integration.

Keywords: highly-educated refugees, intercultural communication, intercultural communicative competence, labour market integration, resilience

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Professionelle interkulturelle Kommunikationskompetenz und die Integration von hochqualifizierten Geflüchteten in den niederländischen Arbeitsmarkt

Zusammenfassung: In den letzten Jahrzehnten haben tausende vertriebener Menschen in den Niederlanden Zuflucht gesucht. Viele von ihnen sind hochqualifiziert und ihre Integration in den niederländischen Arbeitsmarkt könnte sowohl für die Lebensqualität der geflüchteten Menschen selber als auch für die lokale Wirtschaft von Nutzen sein. Geflüchtete Menschen sind jedoch bei ihrer Suche nach Arbeit mit vielen Herausforderungen konfrontiert. Dies ist die erste explorative Studie der Rolle von professioneller interkultureller Kommunikationskompetenz in der Integration von Geflüchteten in den Niederlanden. Die Datenerhebung fand in individuellen Gesprächen und Fokusgruppen statt, in denen sowohl erfolgreich integrierte Geflüchtete befragt wurden als auch Geflüchtete, die sich noch im Integrationsprozess befanden. Inhaltsanalysen der Daten wurden mit deduktiver und induktiver Kodierung durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass professionelle interkulturelle Kommunikationskompetenz (einschließlich von Resilienz) eine wichtige Rolle dabei spielt, Geflüchteten bei der Bewältigung ihrer Herausforderungen zu helfen. Der Artikel erörtert die potentiellen Implikationen der Ergebnisse dieser explorativen Studie. Der Schwerpunkt der Erörterungen liegt auf Kommunikationskompetenz-Training nicht nur für Geflüchtete selber sondern auch für die Fachkräfte, die den Geflüchteten bei der Integration in den Arbeitsmarkt behilflich sein sollen.

Schlagwörter: hochqualifizierte geflüchtete Menschen, interkulturelle Kommunikation, interkulturelle Kommunikationskompetenz, Integration in den Arbeitsmarkt, Resilienz

Competencia comunicativa intercultural profesional e integración en el mercado laboral entre los refugiados altamente calificados en los Países Bajos

Resumen: En la última década, miles de personas desplazadas han buscado refugio en los Países Bajos. Muchos de ellos son altamente calificados y su integración en el mercado laboral podría contribuir significativamente a la economía del país y mejorar su propia calidad de vida. Sin embargo, los refugiados enfrentan muchos desafíos en su búsqueda de empleo. Este es el primer estudio exploratorio del papel que juega la competencia comunicativa intercultural profesional (PICC) en la integración de refugiados altamente calificados en el mercado laboral neerlandés. Se utilizaron entrevistas y grupos focales para recopilar datos de los refugiados que ya se habían integrado con éxito, así como de los recién llegados todavía en el proceso de integración. Se realizó un análisis de contenido, utilizando rondas de codificación y análisis deductivo e inductivo. Los hallazgos indican

que el desarrollo de PICC (incluyendo la resiliencia) juega un papel importante para ayudar a los refugiados a superar los desafíos. El artículo analiza las implicaciones de los resultados en términos de la formación en PICC ofrecida a los refugiados (como parte de sus cursos de idiomas) y a los profesionales que trabajan con ellos, con el objetivo de facilitar y promover la integración de los refugiados al mercado laboral.

Palabras claves: refugiados altamente calificados, comunicación intercultural, competencia comunicativa intercultural, integración al mercado laboral, resiliencia

1 Introduction

As a result of wars, persecution, and human rights violations, there are currently more than 70 million forcibly-displaced people worldwide (United Nations Refugee Agency 2019). In recent years, particularly the member states of the European Union (EU) have seen increasing numbers of newly-arrived refugees. In the mid-2010s, when conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa were driving more and more people to flee their home countries and seek refuge in the EU, many began talking about a "European refugee crisis" (e.g. Tomkiw 2015). In 2015, the influx of refugees reached a hitherto unprecedented scale: That year alone, the EU received over 1.2 million first-time asylum applications (Eurostat 2020). Most of these were made in Germany, followed by Hungary and Sweden (European Parliament 2015). Yet even in the Netherlands, the context of our study, over 43,000 people requested asylum status that year (van der Meer and Bax 2016) – a sizeable figure considering that, with only 17.4 million inhabitants, the country's overall population is much smaller than that of many other EU member states (Statistics Netherlands 2020).

The integration of refugees has thus for some time now been an important topic on the political agendas of countries across the EU, who have supposedly been attempting to "strike a balance between their humanitarian responsibilities and their economic burdens" (Kogan 2016: 335).[1] However, the main focus has

1 Like others (e.g. Scheibelhofer and Täubig 2019), we would argue that the humanitarian aspect does not play a sufficiently large role in many contemporary debates. Moreover, it is highly questionable whether enough is being done to address the root causes of people having to flee their home countries in the first place. Regrettably, a more detailed discussion of these issues goes beyond the scope of this paper.

been on the challenges posed by the arrival of refugees; and much less attention has been paid to the potentially tremendous benefits of their successful integration – benefits not only to the refugees themselves but also to their host societies. Many refugees in the EU are in fact highly-educated professionals: They used to work, for example, as lawyers, doctors, engineers or teachers in their home countries (Ganassin and Young 2020). Consequently, they could potentially participate in the labour market and make a significant contribution to the European economy, thereby ameliorating host societies' struggles with problems such as ageing-related "demographic deficits" and workforce shortages among local populations (Critical Skills for Life and Work 2019).

Participation in the labour market is key to refugees' successful integration in a new country: Being employed not only "leads to some level of economic self-sufficiency, but it also [constitutes] a critical element of building social connections with the broader community" (Hebbani and Khawaja 2019: 909). Labour market participation thus reduces refugees' long-term financial dependency on the host society as well as facilitating their integration in other domains of life (Pajic et al. 2018). Little is known specifically about the employment trajectories of highly-educated refugees. However, recent research in the Netherlands and several other EU countries (Buimer et al. 2020) indicates that highly-educated refugees face the same challenges as refugees in general. In general, refugees' integration into the host society's workforce tends to be difficult, and despite differences in social context and labour market structures, refugees across EU member states face comparable challenges and barriers to finding employment (Martín et al. 2016). Many of these challenges are of an administrative nature, and they include legal constraints regarding employment before refugees are granted a residence permit, the time and effort involved in the recognition of foreign credentials, and further bureaucratic hurdles (Pajic et al. 2018). Other challenges relate to cultural differences and language skills (RISE 2013) as well as the lack of recognition in relevant social networks (Scheibelhofer and Täubig 2019). Moreover, refugees face substantial barriers as a result of racism and discrimination from members of the host society (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2017).[2] Refugees therefore "do not start off from the same level playing field" as the rest of the population (Hebbani and Khawaja, 2019: 921). Consequently, they experience unemployment at a much higher rate (Vončina and Marin 2019); and if

2 As a consequence of their forced displacement, many refugees also deal with medical problems (Vončina and Marin 2019) and the psychological consequences of traumatic life experiences (Pajic et al. 2018).

they do have work, they often "find themselves in low-skilled, minimum-wage jobs for which they are over-qualified" (Ganassin and Young 2020: 1). It takes a long time for this so-called 'refugee gap' to diminish: Konle-Seidl and Bolits (2016) found that after 15 years, refugees across EU countries had only reached a 70 % employment rate – and even after that time, many were still not fully integrated into the host societies' labour markets.

It is widely assumed that in all intercultural contact situations, *intercultural communicative competence* (ICC) plays a crucial role (see e.g. Young and Sachdev 2011; Ganassin and Young 2020). Someone with ICC is "able to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. They are able to negotiate a mode of communication and interaction which is satisfactory to themselves and the other" (Byram 1997: 71). While much ICC research has been conducted in different contexts around the globe, there is a paucity of studies investigating the role that ICC plays in refugees' integration in their host societies – and especially with regard to their professional integration. The only notable exception is Ganassin and Young's work (2020), which focuses on the UK context and has resulted from the same international collaborative project as the work we present here. This Erasmus+ project, called *Critical Skills for Life and Work* (CSLW), had as its overall aim to investigate highly-educated refugees' ICC in order to help enhance their employability and social integration (for details, see the project website: cslw.eu). The participating project partners were Austria, the Netherlands, and the UK. Here, we focus on the data from the Netherlands.

Most refugees who came to this country in 2015 arrived from war-torn Syria (43 %; van der Meer and Bax 2016). Estimates suggest that about a fifth of the Syrians in the Netherlands hold a university degree, and it is assumed that many more are highly educated but were unable to obtain their diplomas because of the war (Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau 2018). Yet while municipalities throughout the Netherlands provide basic support for such refugees, and the newcomers receive instruction in the Dutch language, they are not given any systematic ICC training – and their long-term integration into the labour market is, for the most part, an individual responsibility (Huddleston et al. 2015). Refugees who arrive in the Netherlands with the intention of staying for a "lengthy period of time" are expected to complete a civic integration process, which entails learning about Dutch culture and the job market as well as acquiring the Dutch language (Government of the Netherlands n.d.). Refugees are officially considered to be integrated after passing the national integration exam (Ministry for Education Culture and Science n.d.). While loans are sometimes granted, under the Civic Integration Act (2013), refugees themselves have so far been responsible for the completion of their civic integration process – which means they have been re-

sponsible for choosing and financing an integration course (Rijksoverheid n.d.–a).[3]

The research presented here constitutes the first known study of professional ICC among highly-educated refugees in the Netherlands. While the study is exploratory in nature, it expands our knowledge in an important way by focusing not only on highly-educated refugees who have already successfully achieved their integration into the host society's labour market (as Ganassin and Young, 2020, did in the UK) but also considering those who are still in the process of forging new careers (which, to our knowledge, has never been done before). The research question we aim to answer is: Does refugees' professional ICC play a role in how they tackle the challenges and barriers they face in their integration process in the host society's labour market?

To provide the necessary theoretical background, we begin by outlining the key concepts that are part of ICC before explaining the methodology of this study. We then provide an analysis of professional ICC among both, refugees who have already successfully integrated into the Dutch workforce as well as those who are still in the process of achieving this. The discussion of the findings focuses on the role of professional ICC in this process, and – under the proviso that the findings are very tentative – the potential implications they can be seen to have for measures aiming to support refugees' integration in the host society's labour market. We discuss not only measures that focus on the promotion of professional ICC amongst the refugees themselves but also amongst those who frequently interact with them.

It is important to note that *integration*, by definition, entails that individuals maintain a "degree of cultural integrity [...] while at the same time seeking [...] to participate as an integral part of the larger society" – and integration is thus distinct from *assimilation*, which entails individuals' participation in the larger society at the cost of having to relinquish their cultural integrity (Berry 2011: 2.6). The measures we discuss here are intended to promote integration, not assimilation.

3 Since 1st January 2022, the civic integration process has undergone changes due to the Civic Integration Act 2021. Now, municipalities have the responsibility to support refugees in their civic integration process, with the goal to facilitating faster integration and participation in the labour market (Rijksoverheid n.d.–b.).

2 Professional intercultural communicative competence

It is widely accepted that ICC can help individuals act in intercultural encounters, and over the last three decades, numerous models have been developed that focus on this (see e.g. Ladegaard 2018, for an overview). The most well-known of these models is the one by Michael Byram (1997, 2008; see also Byram et al. 2001), which focuses not merely on the linguistic side of communication but also on the cultural side – thus making it particularly pertinent in intercultural contexts (Matsuo 2014). Byram's ICC model is known for being pedagogically useful in formal language learning settings (see e.g. Chen 2009; Young and Sachdev 2011) while challenging models of language learning in which learners are evaluated by native speaker norms (see e.g. Davies 1991; Phillipson 1992). Instead, it focusses on the importance of engaging, through a foreign language, with speakers who have other cultural values, assumptions, and beliefs. Byram (1997: 38) notes that what distinguishes an *intercultural speaker* from a native speaker is their ability to establish relationships with others who have different cultural backgrounds; the fact that they can "manage dysfunctions which arise in the course of interaction, drawing upon knowledge and skills"; and their capability to "establish a relationship between their own social identities and those of their interlocutor".

According to Byram's model, there are five factors, also known as *savoirs*, which play a key role in ICC. The first is *attitudes (savoir être*), which is defined as "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram 1997: 91). This entails the ability to see the world from the perspective of an outsider who holds different beliefs and values. The second factor is *knowledge (savoir)*, which Byram (1997: 94) defines as the knowledge "of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction". This relates primarily to knowledge about how social groups and interaction processes function. The third factor, *skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre)*, comprises the "ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own" (Byram, 1997: 98). This highlights the importance of acquiring the skills needed for obtaining new knowledge and then integrating this with one's existing knowledge. *Skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire)*, the fourth factor, refers to the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices, and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram 1997: 98). This demonstrates the truly interactive aspect of the model. Finally, factor five, *critical cultural*

awareness (savoir s'engager), consists of "an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram 1997: 101). Ideally, this will lead to the acceptance of new ideas and values. Individuals who develop ICC – that is, *intercultural speakers* – can thus "effectively and appropriately mediate between world of origin and world of encountered difference" (Young and Sachdev 2011: 83).

Like most models, Byram's ICC model is not without criticism. For instance, some scholars berate the fact that it does not focus purely on linguistic aspects of communication, arguing that teaching "is best done through dialogue because culture is discourse" (Matsuo 2014: 19). Most researchers, however, value the inclusion of the cultural side of this model – especially because "teachers in different classrooms in different parts of the world still ignore the importance of teaching culture as part of language study" (Gonen and Saglam 2012: 29). Byram's model thus remains widely-used in foreign language didactics (see e.g. Abdullah and Tandiana 2019; Tran and Seepho 2016; Von Münchow 2015). While other models also include cultural components, the ICC model was deemed most suitable for the CSLW project – and consequently, this study – because it is co-orientational and considers "the ability of interlocutors to reach *mutual* understanding and a *shared* level of worldview as fundamental" (CSLW 2021, emphasis added; see also Spitzberg and Changnon 2009).

In the CSLW project, the concept of the intercultural speaker was extended to professional contexts, with a particular focus on highly-educated refugees, and the term *professional intercultural communicative competence* (PICC) was introduced. Corresponding to Byram's five aforementioned factors, PICC refers to "key intercultural communicative skills, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and critical cultural awareness related to the process of successfully entering the professional sphere after a period of forced displacement" (CSLW 2019: 6). For anyone in professional employment, clear and effective communication with colleagues, clients, customers, and/or others is crucial. Since successful communication is based on "an ability to interact with others and to collectively reach understandings" (CSLW 2019: 6), highly-educated refugees thus require at least a certain amount of PICC to be able to navigate communicative encounters that involve cultural differences. Mere knowledge of the host society's language, however fluent, is not enough – interlocutors also need to be able "to listen and show that they have understood, to clarify meanings, to repair breakdowns and so on" (CSLW 2019: 6).

3 Methodology

The research presented here therefore investigated PICC among highly-educated refugees in the Netherlands with regard to the five aforementioned key factors, considering not only *advanced integrators* (AIs) – that is, highly-educated refugees who have already successfully transitioned back into the workforce, but also *early integrators* (EIs) – that is, those still enrolled in Dutch courses and still in the process of transitioning back into the labour market. Data collection took place in 2018.

3.1 Participants

While most of the EIs were from the same country, namely Syria, they had diverse occupational backgrounds (see Table 1).[4] Most of them had little knowledge about the Netherlands or Dutch culture before their arrival. The participants' levels of Dutch were similar: All had basic proficiency and were able to hold spoken conversations. The data do not indicate an effect of participants' language ability on their PICC – but this could be because there was so little variation.

The AIs also had diverse backgrounds (see Table 2).[5] As would be expected, their Dutch proficiency was noticeably higher than that of the EIs, with AI2 (who had been in the Netherlands a few years) holding intermediate level skills, and AI1 (who had been in the country much longer) being able to converse at a very high level. The data suggest that AI1's PICC was even higher than AI2's. Due to the small sample size, it is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions about the correlation between language skills and PICC – but nevertheless, our observation ties in with other researchers' finding that higher-level language skills are linked with higher PICC (Byram 1997, 2008; Byram et al. 2001; Ganassin and Young 2020)

4 To ensure their anonymity, participants are referred to by codes. These begin with EI for the early integrators and AI for the advanced integrators. Their personal details are presented here in a manner that prevents their identification.

5 We realise that a larger number of participants would have been preferable for this study. Concerted efforts were undertaken to enlarge the participant sample, but unfortunately no further refugees volunteered to participate. Moreover, one of the reviewers noted that, ideally, a third group of participants should have been included to shed further light on the role of PICC in the integration process – namely refugees whose integration into the labour market had been unsuccessful. However, since no further participants volunteered to participate in this research, the inclusion of such a third group was not possible.

Table 1: Participant details – early integrators

	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Number of years in NL	Previous field of occupation	Current field of occupation
EI1	Male	Mid-thirties	Syria	2	Administration, business, and management	Intern in the field of administration, business, and management
EI2	Male	Late thirties	Syria	3	Administration, business, and management	Volunteer for several organisations
EI3	Male	Late twenties	Sudan	3	Computing and ICT	Facilities and property services; intern in the field of engineering
EI4	Female	Mid-thirties	Syria	3	Education and training	Volunteer in the field of education and training; intern in the field of education and training
EI5	Female	Late thirties	Syria	2	Education and training	Intern in the field of education and training
EI6	Female	Early thirties	Syria	2	Student	Student in a different subject area

Table 2: Participant details – advanced integrators

	Gender	Age	Country of origin	Number of years in NL	Previous field of occupation	Current field of occupation
AI1	Male	Late fifties	Iran	26	Student	Managerial position in administration, business, and management
AI2	Male	Late twenties	Syria	3	Languages; education and training; security and protective services	Postgraduate student; employee in administration, business, and management

3.2 Methods and materials

Among the EIs, data were collected by means of focus groups because these provide insightful access to participants' collective views and practices: They tend to yield natural and spontaneous responses (Callejo 2001) and thereby allow for insights into salient social representations in communicative conversa-

tional situations (Iglesias-Álvarez and Ramallo 2003). Moreover, focus groups are particularly beneficial for explorative investigations of relatively new research topics (Hornsby, forthcoming) – such as PICC among highly-educated refugees. Some researchers suggest that only focus groups with larger numbers of participants yield data that truly reflect participants' collective views; others note that focus groups can be "small or large" (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2010: 1). Due to the different gender roles in the participants' country of origin, separate (and thus smaller, "mini") focus groups for the female and the male participants were considered more beneficial than one larger focus group including all EIs. As the results show, there were indeed some gender differences, which validates our decision.

The EIs were asked open-ended questions on topics including their perceptions of life in the Netherlands; the learning environment in the Netherlands; their professional experiences in their country of origin and the Netherlands; as well as their hopes, expectations, and goals for their professional lives.

Among the AIs, data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews. Due to the smaller number of participants in the AI group, this method was deemed more appropriate than a focus group. Interviews cannot provide insights into *collective* views and practices to the same extent as focus groups do. This is, of course, a drawback. However, like focus groups, interviews tend to bring to the fore both different viewpoints as well as commonalities and shared understandings among participants, yielding rich and in-depth data (Karatsareas, forthcoming). Moreover, like focus groups, interviews are particularly useful among minorities and disadvantaged populations because they generate a sense of empowerment among participants, allowing them to shape the research agenda and steer the conversation towards issues that they deem worthwhile (Edley and Litosseliti 2010; see also Karatsareas, forthcoming).

The AIs were asked open-ended questions on topics including their professional experiences in their country of origin and the Netherlands; their experiences of language learning/linguistic adjustment in the Netherlands; their experiences of education and training in their country of origin and the Netherlands; the factors that helped them rebuild their careers; the factors that were a particular hindrance; and the key advice they would give to others in a similar position.

3.3 Procedure

The call for participation was distributed through colleagues, friends, teachers working with refugees, and contacts at a meet-up café for newcomers. Snowball sampling was then employed – that is, those who had already expressed an inter-

est in participating were asked to also pass on the call for participation to their own contacts.

The focus group with the male EIs was conducted in person, in English, and moderated by Author 1. The focus group with the female EIs was conducted in person, in Dutch, and also moderated by Author 1. The same pre-prepared questions were used in both focus groups, and their average length was 106 minutes. Due to geographical distance and time constraints, the interviews with the AIs were conducted via telephone: One of them was conducted in Dutch and moderated by Author 1, the other took place in English and was moderated by a research assistant. The research assistant had the same age, gender, and background as Author 1 – and again, the same pre-prepared questions were used in both interviews. Their average length was 41 minutes.

The language of the focus groups and interviews was based on the participants' choice. All data collection sessions were recorded and transcribed, and the Dutch ones were subsequently translated into English.

3.4 Data analysis

We made use of thematic analysis (e.g. Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012) for both focus group and interview data. We began with a round of deductive, theory-driven coding where we categorised the data based on Byram's five ICC factors – that is, attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Subsequently, the data were inductively analysed for recurring topics and patterns within each of these five main themes.

4 Results

4.1 Attitudes

4.1.1 Advanced integrators

The interview data show that the AIs had developed a significant amount of PICC in terms of their attitudes. The participants expressed an openness to accepting that things are done differently in different countries, and they were able to reflect on this and give relevant advice to others. Much of their advice related to the notion of embracing how things are done in the Dutch system rather than dwelling on the difficulties caused by differences. For instance, the AIs recommended that

newcomers learn the language, get work experience, and try to be aware of the (corporate) culture in the Netherlands. AI2 (male) also recommended being proactive in the search for employment: "Don't sit at home. Try to find your opportunity yourself because normally people will not come and knock on your door."

The data also suggest that the AIs were able to reflect on the needs of those who had not yet made the transition back into the professional sphere. AI1 (male) stressed that it is crucial for highly-educated refugees to consider what their qualities are and what they want to achieve professionally in the host country. They should then establish whether this is in fact realistic, and seek contact with people working in the relevant field. AI1 also recommended that newly-arrived refugees take on internships in order to gain work experience while improving their language skills: "The combination will help to integrate faster, to participate in the Dutch labour market, and to get familiar with the corporate culture." Moreover, AI2 recommended speaking to Dutch people and obtaining as much knowledge as possible regarding "how things are organised and how the Dutch system works" to ensure newcomers' successful integration. As both AI participants were male, gender differences could not be established – neither for this factor nor for any of the others.

4.1.2 Early integrators

The focus group data reveal that at least some of the EIs, too, had developed a certain amount of PICC in terms of attitudes – but this was apparent to a lesser extent than amongst the AIs. At least EI1 (male) and EI5 (female) had accepted that people in the Netherlands are different from people in their home country, and that in fact, people all over the world differ from each other. This can be seen to indicate their developing ability to see the world from the perspective of an outsider who might have a different set of values and beliefs. As EI5 noted: "All over the world you find nice people but people who aren't nice as well. Honest people or dishonest, it is the same everywhere." However, there was little further evidence of the EIs having developed PICC in terms of attitudes. There appeared to be no gender differences among the EIs with regard to this factor.

4.2 Knowledge

4.2.1 Advanced integrators

The interview data suggest that the AIs had also developed knowledge of how social groups and identities function in different cultures. This is evidenced by the participants' ability to reflect on particular skills and qualifications that promote professional (as well as personal) integration in the Netherlands. While the AIs did not elaborate on this PICC factor in great detail, they were nevertheless more reflective than the EIs. Evidence of this can be found in their comments aimed at helping others in their integration process. For instance, AI1 (male) explained that in order to obtain employment in the Netherlands, it is useful to have knowledge of the Dutch labour market, to have perseverance, and to be able to think analytically. He noted that his social competencies (such as the ability to manage and his leadership skills and style) were what had helped him the most. AI2 (male) deemed his work experience, his education, and especially his Dutch degree to have been particularly helpful in his integration. He also commented on the importance of networks and language skills: "the more languages you speak, the more opportunities you have."

4.2.2 Early integrators

The EIs had also, to a certain extent, developed PICC with regard to the knowledge factor. For example, in the focus groups it became apparent that they were learning to accept that in the Netherlands, there is a focus on Dutch diplomas and qualifications – and they were coming to terms with the fact that even though they were already highly educated, they had to start all over again upon their arrival in the host country. They had to attend integration courses, and in several cases, they had to study for new degrees because the diplomas from their home countries were not recognised. As EI2 (male) said: "you have to start from the beginning. Even your experience, your education, your background… nothing. I have twelve years of experience with international companies and that means nothing here." EI3 (male) agreed: "Here in the Netherlands, it doesn't matter what you've studied, you have to start from the beginning." EI1 (male) also worried about this, but after taking up an internship, he felt much more positive about his chances in the Netherlands: "So now I am more positive in this point and I know it is not about if you are *buitenlander* [a foreigener] or *Nederlander* [a Dutch person]. It is about who you are! When you work on yourself and on your future, and wish something hardly and work for it, you gonna steal the opportunity from *Nederlan-*

ders [Dutch people]." There appeared to be no gender differences in terms of the EIs' knowledge.

4.3 Skills of interpreting and relating

4.3.1 Advanced integrators

On the whole, our data provide little evidence regarding the participants' skills of interpreting and relating. However, the fact that there is comparatively more evidence of PICC in terms of this among the AIs than among the EIs could be seen to indicate that – again – the former were further along in their development than the latter. This concerns especially their ability to interpret aspects of Dutch culture and relate them to the culture of their country of origin. For instance, in his interview, AI1 (male) reflected on the effects of cultural differences when trying to integrate in the Dutch labour market, commenting that they can be a real hindrance. He illustrated this by discussing how his modesty had given potential employers the impression that he was very reserved – while the reason behind it was, in fact, the taboo that is associated with self-praise in the culture of his country of origin. He noted that he is now aware that, in order to succeed in the Dutch labour market, self-praise is necessary both in job interviews and throughout one's further career: "Not being familiar with that, and not being raised with that, is something I have experienced as an obstacle" – but his growing awareness is evidence of his developing PICC.

4.3.2 Early integrators

In the focus groups with the EIs, the male participants demonstrated no evidence of skills of relating and interpreting at all. The female participants showed no evidence of this factor in terms of PICC specifically, but only in terms of ICC more generally. The most pertinent topic of discussion in this regard concerned the shaking of hands: The female EIs reflected on how shaking hands with men is seen as normal by most people in the Netherlands, but in the culture of their home country, it is uncommon due to religious reasons.[6] EI5 (female) explained that

6 The fact that this was only discussed by the female participants may be because the issue of shaking hands is much more pertinent to the female experience in the country of origin than it is to the male experience. However, further research would be necessary to verify this.

while she does shake hands with men in the Netherlands the first time she meets them, she feels uncomfortable about it – and consequently, the second time they meet, she usually tells them that she would prefer not to. Some respect that, others do not. EI5 said: "Here men can't respect it [when a woman does not want to shake hands with a man] but you do have to shake hands." EI4 (female) thinks that female newcomers need to adapt to Dutch habits: "that is Dutch culture. We come to the Netherlands, they live here for their whole life, they follow their culture. We also need to understand that a little. They cannot change their culture for one, two or six women. We can't expect them to understand everything. It is not that easy for them." EI6 (female) says that in Syria, too, some men do not respect it when women do not wish to shake hands. Yet EI5 sometimes feels like Dutch men shake her hand on purpose. She struggles with it because she is not used to it, and she would like men in the Netherlands to respected her wishes. These data indicate that while some of the EIs were at different stages of developing (P)ICC with regard to their skills of interpreting and relating, at least some newcomers felt pressure to assimilate to Dutch culture – especially the female participants. Yet, the goal is integration, not assimilation, and newcomers should not be made to feel that relinquishing their cultural integrity is the only way they can participate in the host society. These data can thus be seen to highlight a necessity for (P)ICC training not only among refugees themselves but also amongst members of the host society who interact with refugees.

4.4 Skills of discovery and interaction

4.4.1 Advanced integrators

In terms of skills of discovery and interaction, the interview data indicate that the AIs had developed a significant amount of PICC. They had not only acquired knowledge of Dutch culture but they were also able to reflect on this knowledge from their current position.

Both AIs stated that learning and knowing the language of the host country is crucial for successful integration and participation in the labour market. According to them, the language course they had taken and their use of the language in daily life had increased their Dutch proficiency. AI2 (male) commented: "At the end you need to speak the language, otherwise you, well this is the Netherlands, not England. If you speak English, so eh of course like English is widely spoken. It is highly appreciated when you speak Dutch and also at the same time you eh, it will appeal more to the host if you speak their language. Because it is not a matter of the language that you speak, it is the culture that you are aware of." He added:

"When you learn the language, you learn the culture. You learn what people like, don't like, things like that. Like cultural specific things."

Both AIs were able to reflect on what else had helped them integrate in the Netherlands. AI1 stressed that it had proved helpful to be genuinely interested in, and open towards, other people and new developments. Both also commented on the advantages of building a good network. For example, AI1 (male) noted: "My network has been most important, yes for sure. I am almost asked for certain jobs, which is very pleasant." Both AIs also saw education as a crucial aspect of integration in the Netherlands. AI2, for instance, mentioned that the job opportunities he has had in the Netherlands were partly because of his studies in Syria, but mainly due to his Dutch degree. The latter was focused on conflicts and human rights, which allowed him to seek a job in this field. His studies in the Netherlands also offered him an insight into Dutch culture: "with the study I got to gather with colleagues, it is helpful to see how Dutch people behave and also in private."

Importantly, the AIs also demonstrated their ability to reflect on the challenges they had dealt with, including the hurdles posed by bureaucracy, the lacking recognition of their qualifications, and their lack of knowledge concerning the Dutch education system. They noted that the key to succeeding in their integration in the labour market had been to view such challenges as opportunities. For example, AI2 stated explicitly that "these have all been things which have been affecting, for a certain degree, well, my progress. Yeah my life here. I look at them as challenges, not as obstacles." Concerning his decision to give up his previous, well-paid job in order to study, he said: "But like I gave it up to achieve my other goal that would open more opportunity on strategic level."

4.4.2 Early integrators

The focus group data from the EIs reveal that they, too, had gained a certain amount of knowledge about the Dutch culture – and that they, too, were able to reflect on that. This is illustrated by their awareness that they would have to overcome obstacles to get to where they wanted to be. For example, EI1 (male) realised that he would have to undertake further studies, and he commented on this by saying: "Life moves and I have to move with it." EI4 (female) noted that the Dutch education system is harder than she had imagined, and that there are many procedures to follow – but she recognised the inevitability of following these procedures to achieve her employment goals.

The EIs were also aware of the importance of having knowledge of the host country's language. EI5 (female) and EI6 (female) agree that sufficient language skills would make it easier to enlarge their networks – which, eventually, would

help them find employment. They all agreed that a good network is crucial for refugees' integration in the Netherlands. As EI5 said: "The bigger your network is, the bigger the chance to find a job."

The EIs also demonstrated their PICC with regard to skills of discovery and interaction by recognising the kind of support they would need to accomplish their professional goals. For instance, all EIs agreed that they would need to do internships in order to get job-specific language training. There appeared to be no gender differences in terms of the EIs' skills of discovery and interaction.

4.5 Critical cultural awareness

4.5.1 Advanced integrators

Surprisingly, the interview data from the AIs provide little evidence of their critical cultural awareness. The only relevant issue they discussed concerned differences between the working culture in their country of origin and the Netherlands. Since AI2 (male) worked in an international environment, this was less of an issue for him. AI1 (male), however, said he had to get used to "the Dutch working culture and then especially the culture of the government and semi-government." He found this much more formal than the working culture in his home country.

4.5.2 Early integrators

The EIs, by contrast, demonstrated more evidence of critical cultural awareness. For example, in the focus groups, they all commented on characteristics of Dutch people, describing them as distant, individualistic, or not easy to get close to and therefore difficult to become friends with. EI3 (male) explained: "Everyone has to focus on their own destiny, this is how they grow up. This is why they don't want to go into someone else's life. They don't want to share much, they don't want to communicate much, because they want to focus on their own destiny. But for us, I will care about my brother, before I care about myself."

The EIs were also able to critically reflect on certain customs in their host country and compare them to those in their country of origin. For instance, EI2 (male) mentioned that he regarded it as positive that men and women are treated as equals in the Netherlands, and acknowledged that is often different in his country of origin.

We did not ask the participants explicitly what kind of integration courses they were attending, if any. However, they volunteered information regarding the insuf-

ficiency of such courses, noting that not only further Dutch language training is required (especially for work-relevant terminology) but also stating that they would find the promotion of relevant internships beneficial. This is exemplified by EI3 (male) saying that: "An internship helps me to develop very fast, eh not very fast, but in a good way, to understand what my future is going to be, what I am supposed to do". In a similar vein, EI5 (female) noted: "It would be good to focus on the language in the first year and start with a study after that and really learn the language of my profession. My vocabulary will increase a lot". There appeared to be no gender differences in terms of the EIs' critical cultural awareness.

5 Discussion

There are certainly limitations to the work presented here. For instance, the refugees' reflections may well have been be affected by their situation at the time of data collection: Arguably, it is easier to consider the importance of (P)ICC in forging one's integration into the labour market when one is narrating one's experiences and development from a position of success. Moreover, there are problems inherent in the study of (P)ICC because it is not possible to investigate the pertinent factors on scales ranging from 'not at all developed' to 'fully developed' – instead, all we could do was undertake an exploratory comparison of the EIs and the AIs, thereby establishing differences. The non-representative nature of the participant sample as a result of the sampling method, the small sample size, and the gender imbalance among the AI participants constitute further notable drawbacks. Moreover, evidently it would have been ideal to have a participant sample comprising (at least approximately equal) numbers of EIs and AIs. As it is, the former group is much larger than the latter, which poses problems for the comparison. Consequently, we cannot make any claims regarding the generalisation of this study's findings to all highly-educated refugees in the Netherlands, and we fully acknowledge that any conclusions we can draw are merely tentative. Further research with greater, random, and gender-balanced samples is necessary to confirm our findings. Nevertheless, this first exploratory, comparative study of EIs and AIs in the Netherlands provides meaningful insights.

The overall trend revealed by the findings is that the AIs' PICC was comparatively more advanced than that of the EIs. The findings thus provide a tentative answer to our research question by suggesting that PICC might have played an important role in the AIs' process of tackling the numerous challenges and barriers to their integration in the host society's labour market. Evidently, correlation does not necessarily entail causation – but this interpretation of our findings is supported by the fact that previous research (see above) has revealed the impor-

tant role of ICC in various other types of intercultural contexts. Further factors – such as the fact that the AIs had developed more advanced language skills, obtained Dutch degrees, and established networks in the Netherlands – will likely also have played a role. However, indirectly, all these factors would also have contributed to the participants' PICC. Overall, the findings of our study thus indicate that developing higher PICC may be beneficial for highly-educated refugees' integration in the host society's labour market.

A closer look at the data reveals that there is one factor that constitutes an exception to the overall trend: The AIs were more advanced than the EIs in terms of attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction – however, the data from the EIs include more evidence of critical cultural awareness than the data from the AIs. A possible reason for this exception is that, because the EIs were still relatively new to the Netherlands, they still struggled more with Dutch bureaucracy and (working) culture, while the AIs had simply had more time and opportunity to get used to it and were therefore possibly less critical towards their home and host country. However, further research would be necessary to verify this.

Notably, the data suggest that the EIs' development of PICC was not at the same stage for all factors, and that there were differences between the participants within the factors as well. This is illustrated, for example, by the EIs' skills of interpreting and relating: The male EIs showed no evidence of this (yet); while the female EIs demonstrated evidence of their development of ICC in general, rather than PICC in particular. Moreover, the female EIs' discussion of shaking hands with men demonstrates that they had divergent perspectives on this, with some presenting themselves at different stages of developing ICC with regard to their skills of interpreting and relating – but with others feeling pressure to assimilate by relinquishing their cultural integrity in order to fully participate in the host society. The data can thus be seen to highlight a necessity for (P)ICC training not only amongst refugees themselves but also amongst members of the host society who interact with refugees (for more detail, see below). Moreover, this aspect of our findings indicates the necessity for further research especially with regard to different gender groups among refugees. There are gender differences in the labour market both in Syria and in the Netherlands (Wold Economic Forum 2021), which is exemplified for instance by less full-time work and less economic participation among women (Rijksoverheid n.d.–c). It is thus unsurprising that women experience the integration into the host society's labour market differently. More research is needed to establish whether this pattern is systematic – and whether it also applies to AIs.

Many of the challenges and barriers to finding employment that both EIs and AIs in our study discussed overlap with those described by the UK-based partici-

pants of Ganassin and Young (2020; as noted above, their publication focuses solely on AIs). Struggles with bureaucracy, insufficient language skills, and lacking networks were among the topics discussed by participants in both studies. Moreover, our findings support those of Ganassin and Young in another way: They indicate the necessity to further develop the (P)ICC model to fully accommodate the intercultural encounters of refugees – because, as elaborated in the introduction, their circumstances and experiences are rather different from those of other migrants and individuals simply sojourning abroad. The traditional ICC model does not take account of this, but Byram (2009) himself acknowledges that the list of factors included in his model is not exhaustive. Ganassin and Young (2020) thus propose a further factor to be considered when examining (P)ICC among refugees, namely *resilience* – that is, "the capacity of individuals to cope successfully with significant change, adversity or risk" (Lee and Cranford 2008: 213). As Luthar (2006: 741) notes, resilience is not a permanent trait but a developmental process in which "new strengths and vulnerabilities emerge with changing life circumstances." The findings of our study indicate that expanding the (P)ICC model by including resilience in addition to the other five factors would indeed be beneficial. In our research, as indicated in part by the results presented above, the AIs showed similar signs of resilience as those in Ganassin and Young's (2020) study: They maintained a positive outlook even in the face of difficulties, and they seemed determined to view obstacles as challenges to be tackled. Arguably, refugees by and large are resilient, as evinced by the journeys they have undertaken. Yet, our research suggests that the AIs' resilience was far advanced, while the EIs were still in the process of developing even more resilience. (This cannot be compared to Ganassin and Young's work since they focused solely on AIs.) The parallelism of this pattern to the EIs and AIs overall development of (P)ICC, as discovered in our study, lends support to the notion that the incorporation of resilience into the overall model would be appropriate.

As acknowledged above, further research is necessary to ascertain whether our findings generalise to highly-educated refugees in the Netherlands at large. Yet if this were indeed the case, our findings would have important implications for promoting the integration of these newcomers into the Dutch labour market. The findings suggest that developing higher PICC (including resilience) is beneficial for highly-educated refugees' integration in the host society's labour market since it helps them tackle the numerous challenges and barriers they encounter in this process. Should this hold true, it would imply the possibility of ameliorating highly-educated refugees' employment trajectories and facilitating their labour market participation by actively promoting their development of PICC. It would therefore make sense to integrate PICC training into the curricula of the integration courses and the language schools in which refugees receive their Dutch

classes. Moreover, it would consequently be useful to provide PICC awareness training to agency professionals and employment consultants whose work entails helping refugees find their way back into the working world. Both, the explicit teaching of PICC to highly-educated refugees themselves and the increased awareness of the importance of PICC among professionals who are supposed to help them, could ease and expedite the refugees' process of forging new careers in the host society. To this end, as part of the CSLW project, a PICC training toolkit was developed to support educators and other professionals who work with highly-educated refugees. This toolkit was co-constructed by refugees themselves and is therefore firmly grounded in their needs – and it is freely available online (CSLW 2019).

We acknowledge that the teaching of (P)ICC to refugees is not an uncontroversial endeavour. Del Percio, for instance, warns that:

> "intercultural communication also acts as a powerful resource that is mobilized to express control over or discipline not only the workers [i.e. social workers, those at employment agencies, etc.], who are the executors of this infrastructure of migration, and the migrants, whose trajectories and life projects are determined by the receiving institutions, but also the general population, which is asked to accept or tolerate the forms of precarity that are frequently associated with these migrants" (2016: 98).

It is certainly crucial not to promote this kind of "docilizing governmentality" (Del Percio 2016: 89). Yet, upon reading Del Percio's work, the question arises whether it really is an issue of *whether* (P)ICC is taught, or whether it may be a matter of *how* and *to what end* it is taught.[7]

We agree with Lønsmann (2020) that it is key not to perpetuate a situation of "responsibilisation" in which employability and integration in the labour market are deemed the individual responsibility of each refugee, while structural factors are downplayed. A wide range of additional measures is required to ensure that refugees do eventually start off from the same level playing field as the rest of the population – ranging from the removal of unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles to the combating of systemic racism and discrimination in the host society (as discussed in the introduction). Moreover, if PICC training is provided to refugees themselves and to professional who help them, then it should really also be provided to refugees' co-workers. Arguably, it would also be beneficial if members of the host society in general acquired at least a certain amount of ICC to facilitate the integration of newcomers – because, as noted above, at least some refugees

7 Regrettably, despite his criticisms and warnings, Del Percio (2016) does not provide any suggestions for alternative strategies of supporting refugees.

are made to feel as though integration is not sufficient, and they are put under pressure to assimilate. ICC training among members of the host society could constitute a beneficial measure to start tackling this.

While much more remains to be done, we thus argue that both the explicit teaching of PICC to refugees themselves, and the increased awareness of the importance of PICC among professionals who are supposed to help them, can potentially constitute sensible first steps towards assisting and promoting refugees' labour market integration. Evidently, this can only work if the teaching and awareness-raising of PICC skills is implemented in the right manner, with the aim of genuinely helping refugees, and with the prospect of strategies to eventually bring about larger structural changes.

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