

Essay

Vedran Omanović*, Gregg Bucken-Knapp and Andrea Spehar

A Shift in Perspective: Refugee Voices and Agency in the Labor Market Entering and Workplace Integration Process

<https://doi.org/10.1515/joso-2024-0027>

Received August 22, 2024; accepted May 8, 2025

Abstract: Labor market entering and workplace integration of marginalized migrant groups remain a pressing challenge for policymakers and one of the central topics in the research. Yet, as researchers with migrant backgrounds, we have become increasingly frustrated over dominant discourses, both in the research and in the public sphere that rarely center the voices of those who are the subjects of integration on an equal footing. In this essay, we call for a change of perspective, arguing on why refugee voices should be centered in studies of labor market entering and workplace integration in the management and organizational literature. In doing so, we highlight how their voices are prevalingly absent in this literature and how this omission prevents refugees from being understood analytically as actors with agency. We also suggest and illustrate how the use of biographical interviews and solicited diaries, while not commonly used in the organizational and management literature, have, despite some limitations, the potential for redressing this problematic shortcoming and give greater attention to the choices made by refugees, and their own voices.

Keywords: critical social theory; labour market entering and workplace integration; refugee voices and agency; biographical interviews; solicited diaries

***Corresponding author: Vedran Omanović**, School of Business, Economics and Law, Gothenburg University, Gothenburg, Sweden, E-mail: vedran.omanovic@handels.gu.se

Gregg Bucken-Knapp, School of Public Administration, Gothenburg University, Gothenburg, Sweden, E-mail: gregg.bucken-knapp@spa.gu.se

Andrea Spehar, Department of Political Science, Gothenburg University, Gothenburg, Sweden, E-mail: andrea.spehar@pol.gu.se

1 Introduction

Labor market entering and workplace integration of marginalized migrant groups remain an especially pressing challenge for policymakers and one of the central topics in the integration research literature (Ager and Strang 2008; Bevelander and Irastorza 2021). Yet, as researchers with migrant backgrounds, we have become increasingly frustrated over dominant discourses, both in the public sphere and in the research literature, that rarely center the voices of those who are the subjects of integration on an equal footing. In the more general field of sociology of organization, the perspectives of managers, policymakers and street-level bureaucrats are most often privileged when conducting research (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Cunliffe 2021), including the research focusing on the labor market entering and workplace integration of migrants (Omanović and Langley 2023). This lack of emphasis on migrant voices when exploring integration dynamics comes at a significant cost. A persistent focus on the perspectives of elite actors involved, directly or indirectly, in the labor market integration process limits our understanding of the challenges and struggles faced by some of the most vulnerable on the labor market, preventing their perspectives from taking center stage in research literature to reshape accounts of where labor market integration problems and possibilities lie, alternative perspectives on what could be done, and powerful statements as to the consequences of inaction from those who must navigate the relevant policies, programs and measures. Ignoring or suppressing marginalized migrants' voices does not only silence them and leave their experiences to be viewed and framed from the more prevalent perspective of elite stakeholders, but it also denies these people agency (Sawchuk 2005).

In this essay, we call therefor for a change of perspective, arguing and elaborating on why migrant voices should be centered in studies of labor market integration in the management and organizational literature. In calling for the inclusion of migrant voices, our specific focus is on refugees, who have historically been particularly disempowered and marginalized on the labor market and in workplaces in host societies (Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020; Lee et al. 2020; Diedrich and Omanović 2023). Doing so brings about a shift in perspective, potentially shedding better light on perceived marginalization, organizational indifference and even discrimination and racism, as well as other forms of exclusion experienced by refugees. These refugee-centered perspectives can serve an important shift in perspective, making room in the literature for perspectives that cannot be gleaned from the words of elites, and can most richly be detailed by the refugees themselves. These include, but are by no means limited to, accounts of the complexities of integration programs and how hiring practices may be navigated and partly transformed, and the lived experience of shifting levels of social and economic capital faced by refugees in their new host

societies. In doing so, we highlight how their voices are prevaillingly absent in the management and organizational studies (MOS) focusing on labor market entering and workplace integration, how this omission prevents refugees from being understood analytically as actors with genuine agency during the employment search and workplace integration processes. Drawing on a qualitative meta-synthesis methodology (Noblit and Hare 1988), we consider data from three qualitative studies (Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar 2020; Eidse and Turner 2014; and Linn 2021) making use of biographical interviews and solicited diaries in other refugee research-related contexts to illustrate “a line of argument” (Noblit and Hare 1988, p. 64) to redress this problematic shortcoming and to pay greater attention to the choices of refugees in their own voices. By doing this, we call attention to the substantial potential of using biographical interviews and solicited diaries, as examples of the methods for data collection that would afford refugee migrant voices a more meaningful role in research on refugee labor market entering and workplace integration. We will argue that the methodological gains do not therefor solely come from the detailed nuances that can be central to some forms of solicited diary and biographical interviews. Rather, one of the strongest arguments for their use in the MOS is how they provide researchers with first-hand accounts, recorded close critical labor market integration events, where refugees reflected on the obstacles being faced and devised shorter and long-term strategies for addressing those. At the same time, these methods complete each other since they allow for different forms of reflection and detail – once tracing an overall trajectory of experience (the biographical interviews) and once providing the opportunity for detailed reflection on more narrowly defined moments at the relative leisure of the refugee themselves (solicited diaries).

Theoretically, our argumentation is – broadly speaking – inspired by critical social theory (e.g. Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Benson 1977; Bernstein 1979; Deetz 1985 & 1992; Marcuse 1994) where three interrelated principles are of particular importance:

First, our starting point is that transformative, emancipatory changes that undermine historical and systematic disadvantage are necessary and possible. Social and organizational arrangements are socially produced and influenced by asymmetries of power and certain interests, which while having their “own necessity”, are nevertheless the results of human actions and can be changed by other possible (but suppressed) social arrangements.

Second, our argument is grounded in a broadly critical approach that questions established organizational arrangements and dominant ways of knowing. Our ambition is to initiate a further search for organizational arrangements that could have the potential to undermine historical and systematic disadvantage.

Third, and related to the above, making the voices of the marginalized groups visible and heard should not rest solely on acknowledging their vulnerable positions

in the host society and the labor market. It must also involve emphasizing their own agency, which in turn may enhance the potential to transformative changes that improve their prospects within both host societies and organizations.

These three central theoretical principles served not only as the starting points of our study, but also guided the selection of empirical studies, empirical illustrations, and our proposals for further research.

In what follows, we present a brief overview of relevant literature, emphasizing how a focus on elite perspectives limits our ability to gain important insights about the workings and effects of labor market integration measures from those who are the subject to them – the refugees themselves. After that, we elaborate on the use of biographical interviews and solicited diaries, providing illustrations to lend empirical support for the importance of centering the inclusion of refugee voices seeking meaningful employment with these specific methods.

We conclude by suggesting possible avenues for increasing critical potentiality in future research based on a combination of biographical interviews and solicited diaries by reflecting on how use of these methods in the study of labor market integration can serve as a critical window into understanding how refugees themselves view their opportunities for agency, whether they make use of opportunities, and how they reflect on outcomes.

2 The Previous MOS on Labor Market Entering and Workplace Integration, what we Miss, and what are Consequences

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in conceptualizing the labor market and workplace integration of refugees within MOS. Management and organizational researchers, for instance, advocate for increased research on the role efforts of HR-professionals (Hirst et al. 2021) in the recruitment, onboarding, and integration of refugees. In a similar vein, Szkudlarek, Nardon, and Toh (2021) suggest that HR practitioners need to be sensitive to the different lived experiences of refugees prior to and during the resettlement phases to provide the suitable solutions for their workplace integration. Also, management and organizational scholars advocated for increased research on (refugee) migrants' agency (Diedrich 2023), when it comes to practices that hindering of their own labor market entering and workplace integration (Omanović et al., 2022).

According to Johnson, political agency is “the capacity to act, to be heard; it is the ability to have an impact both upon one’s life and upon the lives of others” (2011, p.1028). Drawing on a sociological conceptualization of agency, Cunliffe and Karunanayake

argue that agency is “relational in that it occurs in the intertwined activities in which people reproduce or change accepted ways of being, relating, and living their lives” (2023, p.14). At the same time agency is not, as Diedrich (2023) states an, a priori given capacity of an individual organizational actor who acts outside power relations. As Cederberg (2014) emphasizes, agency is also not something which is given, but a possibility that emerges for actors in certain positions at certain times within certain contexts (ibid, 145). As such, given that (refugee) migrants’ actions and decisions can be conditioned by structural disadvantages and asymmetric power relationships, they will devise strategies for coping and finding ways to resist and negotiate. The agency of refugees, while taking place often within subordinate and unequal situations in the labor market and workplaces, nonetheless highlights their potential to express power over their own positions and prospects at the labor rather than being portrayed as passive.

While refugees are not entirely absent from MOS, they are not the chief analytical focus, nor are their forms of agency or the conditions under which they are exercised rarely central in the management and organizational literature, including those focusing on labor market entering and workplace integration. For instance, in some previous empirically based MOS, where the focus is more explicitly on (refugee) migrants’ entry into labor market and workplace integration, scholars study how organizations attempt to recruit and include migrants (Ortlieb, Glauninger, and Weiss 2021), developing different business strategies impacting workplace integration of interns and employees with refugee migrant backgrounds (Bergström and Omanović 2017), developing mentoring practices for integrating refugees into host country labor markets (Månsson and Delander 2017), focusing on migrants’ (Omanović and Langley 2023) and refugees’ (Ortlieb and Ressi 2022) organizational socialization, and exploring the role of public service in organizing labor market integration support measures for refugee migrants (Bešić, Fóti, and Vasileva 2022). Moreover, external stakeholders’ agency and engagement in refugee workplace integration, as well as active collaboration with employers, has also been identified as important aspects for refugee employment and workforce integration (Diedrich and Czarniawska 2024; Lee et al. 2020; Lee and Szkudlarek 2021), along with the interplay between social structure and agency for skilled refugees (Fernando 2024).

However, missing from this stream of research is a detailed focus on the agency of refugees seeking stable and meaningful employment and career progress, one that also builds on their own voices, experiences, and struggles to overcome potential barriers. So why does this matter? While not an exhaustive list, we offer below three interconnected reasons for why the inclusion of refugee voices seeking meaningful employment is of particular importance for management and organizational research focusing on refugee labor market entering and workplace integration.

First, a focus on refugee voice and agency could better attune us to experiences of both barriers that refugees encounter, as well as perceived discrimination, racism, inequalities, and marginalization on the part of refugees during the labor market entering and workplace integration process. This perspective is, by default, a perspective absent when researchers privilege elite stakeholders in the data collection process. Partial or complete neglect of refugee voices in the MOS of labor market entering and workplace integration has consequences that only certain group's experiences, views, expressions, as well as certain kind of information become analytically visible (see Deetz 1985 & 1992). Continuing to conduct research on labor market entering and workplace integration of refugees from the perspective of elite stakeholders increases the risk that only certain type of reasoning dominates, and particular sectional interests (e.g. business; or an assimilation logic when it comes to refugee-newcomers' socialization) become, to use Deetz's (1992) terminology, universalized as the only possible and in everyone's interests. The implications of this are not only that potential tensions and contradictions, conflicts, perceived unequal, and unfair treatment and/or discrimination, as well as barriers and struggles experienced and encountered by refugees, and their own agency to overcome these are suppressed or ignored, but also opportunities and potentials for transforming changes that come from the bottom up (from less powerful and marginalized) are completely excluded.

Second, it provides first-hand accounts of potential strategies used by refugees to navigate a complex maze of programs, policies and institutional and organizational settings of labor market integration (Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar 2020). In this way, refugees are not viewed as mere passive victims of the cruelties of potential discrimination or exclusion on the labor market and workplaces, but as agents who recognize a possibility emerging at certain times and in certain contexts (Cederberg 2014) to act in more or less compliant ways.

Third, and interrelated to the above, a focus on refugee voice and agency allows us to achieve insight into how social and power relationships constrain (Cederberg 2014) their possibilities and positions on the labor market and workplaces. Also, a focus on refugee voice and agency allows to consider the implications that a potential loss/gain of social and professional capital (Wali and Renzaho 2018) that may result as refugees re-establish their lives in new settings, against the backdrop of specific integration practices, labor market and workplace dynamics and the societal framing of large-scale refugee events.

Taken jointly, the added value of a focus on refugee voice and agency would shed light – in concrete and nuanced terms – on how labor market policies and organizational practices of workplace integration have lived effects (Bacchi 2009) for individuals who often remain at the margins of much of this literature, as well as in reality. We argue, therefore, that refugees should not, by default be regarded as passive in their encounters with managers, recruiters, mentors and/or other stakeholders. Just

as managers, recruiters and mentors within organizations have some autonomy that can be utilized for certain ends, refugees too have the capacity for agency. Recognizing this agency is important as it may offer alternative perspectives that contribute to more creative and comprehensive policy developments and including practices of organizing but also more broadly, having the potential for transformative changes that undermine historical and systematic disadvantage.

In the following section, we elaborate on the use of biographical interviews and solicited diaries, proposing how these methods can be meaningfully applied to identify moments within the processes of labor market entry and workplace integration where agency may emerge and be exerted. We consider data from three qualitative studies (Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar 2020; Eidse and Turner 2014; and Linn 2021). These studies were selected not only for their ability to amplify the voices, experiences, and agency of marginalized groups, but also because they highlight opportunities for change that challenge historical and systemic disadvantage. Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar (2020), for example examine how refugees living in Sweden make sense of their participation in programs and initiatives intended to promote labor market integration. This study employs biographical interviews, among other methods to explore these experiences. While solicited diaries have not yet been widely used to examine refugee labor market integration specifically, they are gaining traction in migration research more broadly – a development we find both promising and relevant for our purposes. One such example is Linn (2020), who uses solicited diaries to enable Syrian refugee women in Jordan and Lebanon to document their everyday experiences, with a particular focus on space and security. This method serves to explore their perceptions of marginalization and exclusion. A second example is Eidse and Turner (2014), who employ solicited diaries with Vietnamese street vendors in Hanoi – predominantly rural to urban migrants – to investigate how this group navigates and resists legislation that restricts their ability to work. Their work illustrates how solicited diaries can afford structurally marginalized individuals the opportunity to challenge dominant frames and express agency, even when inhabiting a highly precarious socioeconomic position.

3 Alternate Methods for Studying Refugee Agency: Biographical Interviews and Solicited Diaries

As noted, studying the perceptions of job-seeking and/or interns and employees with refugee backgrounds would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the practices

of organizing for labor market entering and workplace integration and of the implications of those practices. Such a focus has clear relevance beyond refugees who are attempting to locate a meaningful employment and can also be valuable for making sense of the experiences of those who have found an internship or work and are being channeled through a process of workplace integration.

We therefore highlight the importance of documenting, interpreting, analyzing, and reflecting on refugee experiences, with a particular emphasis on relevant encounters, potential struggles, social and organizational arrangements that disadvantage some groups more than other groups, as well as learning in interactions with institutions and organizations.

To achieve this, we propose, using biographical interviews and solicited diaries – individually or jointly – in which participants are asked to document and talk about experiences, encounters, thoughts and feelings about topics and certain moments related to their processes of labor market entering and workplace integration. While these approaches have a longer history in some other research fields focusing for instance on healthcare, education, and violence (see for instance, Meth 2004; Filep et al. 2018), these two methods of data collection are largely absent from MOS focusing on refugees' entry into labor market and integration into workplaces.

3.1 Biographical Interviews

The method of biographical interviewing aims to explore the experiences of individuals in the context of life trajectories (Cederberg 2014), engaging often with marginalized peoples, while seeking to give them voice and challenge dominant relationships (Merrill and West 2011). As per refugees, Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar (2020) show that the biographical interview-approach allows us “to focus on the lived experiences of refugees with attention to “transformative narratives”, highlighting specific moments and dynamics in life trajectories of refugees, and conveying their assessment of how barriers to inclusion can be removed, and how dynamics of exclusion can be undone” (Ibid. p.59). In biographical interviews, respondents are given opportunity to reflect on “moments” of relevance from the past. This approach is of particular importance for capturing refugees' previous experiences, encounters, struggles and learning in regard to searching for meaningful jobs, and also refugee experiences of previous or current internships and employment. Thus, the approach has advantages in terms of recall of specific moments and situations from the past (or very close to occurrence of these), as well as details related to these moments and situations.

3.2 Illustrations of Using Biographical Interviews

This first empirical illustration is about a highly skilled refugee with work experience and excellent grades from his country of origine who received more than 250 rejection letters to job applications that he had sent in Sweden. Here this respondent, who, at the time of the interview, had been living in Sweden for 25 years, reflects retrospectively on his first years in Sweden and on his path to find a job that matches his education and work experience. The following empirical fragment particularly focusing on one micro-situation (his meeting with his contact person in the Public Employment Service):

... I went to him ... and I told him: "R., this way we did this, this does not work! How, (asks R.)?" Well, I told him – here, I sent (a lot of job applications but) ... no one called me (for an interview) ... And (then) I told him: "Can you help me?" (And he said): "Well, I have been helping you all this time." I said: "Well, but I have one (another) suggestion how you can help me...All these companies here (a list of the companies where he applied for a job), do you know somebody in any of these companies ... whom you could ask to meet me ... And that's (all) I am asking you to do." (Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar 2020, p. 85).

Thus, this retrospective reflection illustrates not only the respondent's struggles to find a job in his first years in Sweden, but also his own active agency, in the form of proposing alternative strategies, which were not only listened to and accepted, but also led to the removal of some of the previous barriers, and ultimately to employment.

As earlier discussed, some social and power relationships constrain refugees' possibilities and positions on the labor market leading to a loss of professional capital. More specifically, the second empirical illustration shows how refugees are often forced to completely change their professional occupation. Here we can recognize a mutuality between the refugee's specific profession from the country of origin (a journalist) and the perceptions of some Swedish organizations about the perceived usefulness of these competences and skills in a Swedish context. As a result of these social and power relationships, the space for exercising agency is significantly narrowed for some refugees but does not completely disappear. The illustration below shows how this highly skilled refugee navigated in this complex situation:

It was my wish (to work in Sweden as a journalist). But I was aware that if I want ... to be independent of social assistance ... that I have to forget ... those plans. ... (and instead) try to find a niche, in order to get easier work in the field of information and communication. (Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar 2020, p. 82).

The niche, for this refugee meant searching for a job that is below her qualifications (a pre-school assistant), although even that process, as the illustration below shows, was not without trials and struggles, while at the same time characterized with an agency she displayed, in order to change her situation to the better:

I was invited to an interview where three teachers ... sat, and they tried in all possible ways to refuse me, to make me to refuse the job. ... Among other things, one of them, who was an “informal headmaster” at the school said: “How will we explain to our parents, that a person who does not know Swedish herself should teach our children?” Although I was not supposed to give lectures, but to watch over the kids at ... school breaks, and... to watch what they are doing. So ... I would be just an assistant staff in the classroom ... I did not say that, but I thought then: “Do the Swedes watch over and run after the children in a different way than we immigrants do...?” That triggered a protest in me, so I told them only this: “I learn quickly!” (Bucken-Knapp, Omanović, and Spehar 2020, p. 82).

3.3 Solicited Diaries

In highlighting refugee voices and agency, the solicited diaries approach has also the potential to be an especially powerful method, given their role within the “narrative movement” in social sciences, in which “self-reflexive stories and unique personal life narratives of both individuals and groups were given new credence” (Hyers 2018, p. 18). More specifically, in the solicited diaries approach of “life as it is narrated” (Kaun 2010) subjects are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and to develop a written narrative through their diary entries. This approach also allows the respondents more time to process their experiences, to contextualize some moments and ongoing situations from their job search and internship and/or employment process within a broader trajectory of one’s labor market and workplace journey, as well as to explain and reflect why some experiences, encounters, struggles, and learning become meaningful. We note again that while solicited diaries have not yet been used to explore specifically the labor market integration entering and workplace experiences of refugees, this does not preclude their applicability for making sense of these experiences and attempts at agency. Our examples below highlight this potential – one focusing on conveying the emotional landscape of the individual refugee experience, and the other focusing on how diaries can capture the agency and resistance strategies of marginalized workers.

3.4 Illustrations of Using Solicited Diaries

Our first set of empirical examples focuses on the use of solicited diaries by Syrian refugee women in Lebanon and Jordan, with a varied emphasis on writing “regularly

about both positive and negative experiences in their homes and their wider communities, reflecting on issues of space and security” (Linn 2021). In one case, a refugee woman addressed the theme of space, by detailing the loneliness of life in a “home” that is nothing more than a form of distant isolation from a life that is no more:

I live a lonely life in my house, the children go to school, I do my chores, and I sometimes visit my relatives ... [today] I sat in my room and cried, I talked to my family and my siblings on the phone, I’m constantly reminded of my isolation when I talk to them. (Linn 2021, p. 459).

In another, a refugee detailed how being in public only reinforced an impression that Syrian refugees were not welcome in Lebanese society:

I go to a public place, [locals] see us, they stay away from us, they keep their distance as if we have a danger- ous, [contagious] disease. (Linn 2021, p. 460).

While neither example addresses encounters with specific organizations in the respective host society, they do underscore the emotional and security precarity of individual refugees in these settings – where isolation and not being welcome are central components of the refugee experience. Such feelings, be they about societies as a whole, or more narrow organizational encounters, will undoubtedly vary from setting to setting. Yet, through diaries, which afford the opportunity for detailed personal reflection, they can be documented.

Our second set of empirical examples focuses not on refugees, but on Vietnamese street vendors in Hanoi, who are predominantly rural to urban migrants, women with lower levels of education, and highly marginalized within Vietnamese society (Eidse and Turner 2014). While street vending has been heavily curtailed by municipal authorities as part of a broader strategy to modernize Hanoi, over 11,000 vendors continue to operate. Eidse and Turner use solicited journaling (diaries) in order to explore a behavior that is markedly similar to what interests us in the case of refugees – how street vendors engage in “under-the-radar approaches – to either comply with the law in a manner that suits them, or work around regulations and their enforcement” (Eidse and Turner 2014, p. 2). In one case, vendors use their diaries to describe their open resistance to the regulations, emphasizing the continued determination to work and make sales regardless of policy, if only to comply with the negative effects of policy:

Today I was very sad. I walked so many streets but couldn’t sell anything. If the police ban vending, what can people from rural areas like us do? I kept walking my bike to try selling. I finally could make a sale, thank god, now I had enough money to pay a fine I had received. (Eidse and Turner 2014, p. 4).

In another, a vendor reflected on the diary-keeping process itself, and how it represented a form an opportunity for agency – the chance to inform others as to the conditions and difficulties that were experienced:

And here I am, writing with my sincere feelings so people who don't vend, and those from other countries can understand about people like myself. (Eidse and Turner 2014, p. 4).

Thus, solicited diaries and bibliographic interviews have a potentiality to contribute to progressive social research by providing an opportunity for those who are often marginalized in research to have their say (Meth 2004). These methods have relevance and potentiality not only for making refugee voices and experiences more directly visible, but also for unveiling and producing refugees' agency, that in turn could eventually have a transformative character in reconstructing social/organizational arrangements. In short, viewing refugees as agents, these methods have potential for better understanding of how agency may be exercised by refugees as part of labor market and workplace integration processes.

However, like all other methods, biographical interviews and solicited diaries face certain challenges – such as reliance on retrospective reflections on past events, as well as issues related to participant recruitment and retention.

In biographical interviews (and in biographically oriented research more generally), there is always a time lapse between the events that occurred and the participants reflections on those events retrospectively. Refugees' reflections on past events may therefore be influenced not only by their memories but also by their previous and current encounters, struggles and learning. This can result in the same events may be interpreted in slightly different ways at various points in their lives. Nevertheless, both retrospective nature of these reflections and the potentially of evolving interpretations can enrich our understanding – not only of the events themselves and how agency was exercised, but also of refugees' current positions and prospects regarding labor market entry and workplace integration.

While solicited diaries offer participants critically important time for reflection, they also present certain challenges, including a potentially higher drop-out rate associated with the expectation to produce regular text, the emotional weight that may accompany reflecting about difficult personal experiences, and differences in how participants may choose to engage with the format and guidelines (Filep et al. 2018; Linn 2021). These risks can be partially addressed through regular check-ins, clear information about the diary's purpose and expectations, and opportunities for participants to revisit the process in supportive group or individual settings. Some participants may produce detailed written entries matching the guidelines, while others may opt for alternative modes of expression – such as sketches, photographs, or poetry – adapting guidelines in ways that better reflect their own circumstances.

Although such variation can complicate analysis, it may also provide valuable insight into participants' sense-making processes. Rather than treating these as limitations, we see them as variations appropriate to a method that invites participants to engage in ways that ask them to reflect deeply and personally.

Finally, below we propose possible avenues for enhancing the critical potential of future research – avenues that may help to uncover social and organizational arrangements contributing to historical and systematic disadvantage. At the same time, these approaches aim to amplify the voices and agency of marginalized groups, thereby increasing the potential for transformative changes.

4 Possible Avenues for Increasing Critical Potentiality in Future Research Based on a Combination of Solicited Diaries and Biographical Interviews

As with all research, the fundamental choices that we make in terms of design and method can have a genuine impact on the critical potential of the analysis. Some choices will lead to greater opportunities for identifying and understanding potential barriers, discrimination and possible exclusion experienced by refugees. From our perspective, at least three interconnected aspects for increasing critical potential are crucial for research on labor market entering and workplace integration based on biographical interviews and solicited diaries which aim to make the voices of refugees heard and document their agency.

The first is related to a selection and recruitment of respondents. As noted earlier, while most refugees face serious challenges when it comes to quicker labor market entering and workplace integration, they do not necessarily constitute completely homogeneous groups. It is important that the focus group reflects differences in terms of ethnicity/nationality, gender, educational background, socio-economic status, and religion, to create preconditions for different voices to be heard, and also to highlight potentially different practices of agency. Second, and interconnected to the above, “diversity” among respondents plays key roles in how researchers address a topic, in that “diverse” refugee voices and agency provides different experiences of injustice, discrimination, marginalization, as well as different paths and strategies to overcome them. This can jointly increase the critical potential of our research and create an important platform for identifying ways for more nuanced and (potentially) alternative opportunities for interpreting, and analyzing an empirical material, and socially producing a text. For

example, Amott and Matthaei's (1997) research on gender, ethnicity and class -necessitates taking in account historical time and place (and not separately one from another) as well as power and economic exploration. Therefore, as we earlier suggested, utilizing biographical interviews with solicited diaries, (as well as other potentially other complementary methods including ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, critical participatory action research and visual methods) would not only increase critical understanding of historical time and space and/or forms of inequalities and injustice, but also greater validity (Meth 2004) of research results. Third, and interconnected to the above, the task of researchers in studies that focus on labor market entering and workplace integration should not only be to produce a text (based on biographical interviews and solicited diaries) describing the social/organizational arrangements as they are. Rather, as Thomas (1993) suggests, the aim of interpretations and analyses should be to call attention to "whether these social and organizational arrangements create asymmetrical power relations and norms that keep some people disadvantaged to the advantage of others and block fuller participation in or understanding of our social environments" (ibid. 43). As de los de los Reyes and Wingborg (2002) show, discrimination (on the labor market and workplaces) may also be understood and studied in light of prevailing ideologies that ranks human beings on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, or cultural origins, placing individuals in (unequal) positions in societal (and organizational) hierarchies. As such, there is reason to expect that the empirical material from future research may suggest that such an ordering of individuals has been implicitly taking place but is explicitly lived by participants. Given this, we see a key contribution of our work as centering the voices of the marginalized in order to cast greater light on how exclusion and discrimination that is systematically unspoken has a profound impact on organizing the labor market and workplace integration of refugees.

5 Concluding Thoughts

As scholars of sociology of organizations and public administration in both private and public sectors, we have become adept at seeking out organizational perspectives when trying to make sense of refugees' entry into labor market and integration into workplaces. We talk to employers, we talk to managers, we talk to case officers. The data gleaned from those conversations is important and sheds meaningful light on how most powerful actors within organizations think and act when encountering refugees. Sometimes they act according to the rule book, sometimes they exercise discretion within the established guidelines, and sometimes they throw the rule book out entirely. Yet, we know far less about how agency is developed and expressed on

the other side of the table – by less powerful actors, refugees who “encounter” practices of organizing labor entering and workplace integration in their search for or having employment. Perhaps reflecting official perspectives that refugees exist as “objects” to be channeled through the labor entering and workplace integration process, scholars have to view and study them as subjects, downplaying the degree to which refugees have their own specific experiences and interests (as any other actors), strategies, perceptions, and normative baggage as they navigate and struggle for the labor market entering and workplace integration. Yet, agency is there, nonetheless. By asking refugees to talk and write about their lives – what they experience when looking for employment and subsequently becoming integrated into workplaces, the frustrations and rewarding experiences that they encounter along the way and the strategies that they develop to navigate this overall process – biographical interviews and solicited diaries can provide us with a much-needed empirical and analytical boost in understanding the working and consequences of these processes.

References

- Ager, A., and A. Strang. 2008. “Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21 (1): 166–91.
- Alvesson, M., and S. Deetz. 2000. *Doing Critical Management Research*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Amott, T. L., and J. A. Matthaei. 1997. “Race, Class, Gender, and Women’s Works: A Conceptual Framework.” In *Workplace/Women’s Place*, edited by D. Dunn. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Co.
- Bacchi, C. 2009. *Analysing Policy: What’s the Problem Represented to Be?* Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Education.
- Benson, J. K. 1977. “Organizations: A Dialectical View.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 22 (1): 1–21.
- Bergström, O., and V. Omanović. 2017. “Integrationsstrategier För Utlandsfödda I Detaljhandeln.” In *Forskningsrapport 2017*, 9. Handelsrådet.
- Bernstein, J. R. 1979. *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bešić, A., K. Fóti, and V. Vasileva. 2022. “The Role and Challenges of Public Service Organisations in the Labour Market Integration of Refugees: A Relational Perspective Analysing Integration Measures in Austria, Finland, Germany and Sweden.” *European Management Review* 19 (2): 207–21.
- Bevelander, P., and N. Irastorza. 2021. “The Labour Market Integration of Humanitarian Migrants in OECD Countries: An Overview.” In *The Economic Geography of Cross-Border Migration. Footprints of Regional Science()*, edited by K. Kourtit, B. Newbold, P. Nijkamp, and M. Partridge. Cham: Springer.
- Brell, C., C. Dustmann, and I. Preston. 2020. “The Labor Market Integration of Refugee Migrants in High-Income Countries.” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34 (1): 94–121.
- Bucken-Knapp, G., V. Omanović, and A. Spehar. 2020. *Institutions and Organizations of Refugee Integration: Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Syrian Refugees in Sweden*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Cederberg, M. 2014. "Public Discourses and Migrant Stories of Integration and Inequality: Language and Power in Biographical Narratives." *Sociology* 48 (1): 133–49.
- Cunliffe, A. L. 2021. *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Management*. London: SAGE.
- Cunliffe, A. L., and G. Karunanayake. 2023. "Relational Agency as a Dialectic of Belonging and Not Belonging with the Social Ecology of Plantation Life in Sri Lanka." *Journal of Organizational Sociology* 1 (1): 13–45.
- Deetz, A. S. 1985. "Critical-Cultural Research: New Sensibilities and Old Realities." *Journal of Management* 11 (2): 121–36.
- Deetz, A. S. 1992. "Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization." In *Developments in Communication and the Politics of Everyday Life*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- de los Reyes, P., and M. Wingborg. 2002. "Vardagsdiskriminering Och Rasism I Sverige." In *En Kunskapsöversikt. Integrationsverkets Rapportserie 2002*, 13. Norrköping, Sweden: Berlings Skogs Trelleborg.
- Diedrich, A. 2023. "Organising Integration: Some Conclusions and Directions for the Future." In *Organising Immigrants' Integration*, edited by A. Diedrich, and B. Czarniawska. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Diedrich, A., and B. Czarniawska. 2024. "Organizing Integration of Refugees: Translation and Hybridization." *Journal of Organizational Sociology* 2: 1–23.
- Diedrich, A., and V. Omanović. 2023. "Lost in Transitional Space? Organising Labour Market Integration for Highly Skilled Refugees in the Welfare State." *European Management Review* 20: 530–42.
- Eidse, N., and S. Turner. 2014. "Doing Resistance their Own Way: Counter-narratives of Street Vending in Hanoi, Vietnam through Solicited Journaling." *AREA* 46 (3): 242–8.
- Fernando, D. 2024. "Exploring the Agency of Skilled Refugees in the British Labour Market." *Human Resource Management Journal* 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12565>.
- Filep, C. V., S. Turner, N. Eidsen, M. Thompson-Fawcett, and S. Fitzsimons. 2018. "Advancing Rigour in Solicited Diary Research." *Qualitative Research* 18 (4): 415–70.
- Hirst, G., S. Curtis, I. Nielsen, R. Smyth, A. Newman, and N. Xiao. 2021. "Refugee Recruitment and Workplace Integration: An Opportunity for Human Resource Management Scholarship and Impact." *Human Resource Management Journal* 33: 1–23.
- Hyers, L. L. 2018. *Diary Methods: Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, H. L. 2011. "Click to Donate: Visual Images, Constructing Victims and Imagining the Female Refugee." *Third World Quarterly* 32 (6): 1015–37.
- Kaun, A. 2010. "Open-ended Online Diaries: Capturing Life as it Is Narrated. International." *Journal of Qualitative Methods* 9 (2): 133–48.
- Lee, E. S., and B. Szkudlarek. 2021. "Refugee Employment Support: The HRM–CSR Nexus and Stakeholder Co-dependency." *Human Resource Management Journal* 31 (4): 936–55.
- Lee, E. S., B. Szkudlarek, D. C. Nguyen, and L. Nardon. 2020. "Unveiling the Canvas Ceiling: A Multidisciplinary Literature Review of Refugee Employment and Workforce Integration." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 22 (2): 193–216.
- Linn, S. 2021. "Solicited Diary Methods with Urban Refugee Women: Ethical and Practical Considerations." *Area* 53 (3): 454–63.
- Månsson, J., and L. Delander. 2017. "Mentoring as a Way of Integrating Refugees into the Labour Market—Evidence from a Swedish Pilot Scheme." *Economic Analysis and Policy* 56: 51–9.
- Marcuse, H. 1994. *One-Dimensional Man*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Merrill, B., and L. West. 2011. *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Meth, P. 2004. "Using Diaries to Understand Women's Responses to Crime and Violence." *Environment and Urbanization* 16 (2): 153–64.

- Noblit, G. W., and R. D. Hare. 1988. *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies*, Vol. 11. Sage Publications.
- Omanović, V., and A. Langley. 2023. "Assimilation, Integration or Inclusion? A Dialectical Perspective on the Organizational Socialization of Migrants." *Journal of Management Inquiry* 32 (1): 76–97.
- Ortlieb, R., E. Glauning, and S. Weiss. 2021. "Organizational Inclusion and Identity Regulation: How Inclusive Organizations Form "Good", "Glorious" and "Grateful" Refugees." *Organization* 28 (2): 266–88.
- Ortlieb, R., and E. Ressi. 2022. "From Refugee to Manager? Organisational Socialisation Practices, Refugees' Experiences and Polyhythmic Socialization." *European Management Review* 19 (2): 185–206.
- Sawchuk, D. 2005. "Horkeheimer and Adorno on Social Change: Problems and Potential in Light of "History from below"." *Critical Sociology* 31 (4): 537–57.
- Szkudlarek, B., L. Nardon, and S. M. Toh. 2021. "A Temporal Perspective on Refugee Employment – Advancing HRM Theory and Practice." *Human Resource Management Journal* 34: 1–17.
- Thomas, J. 1993. *Doing Critical Ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Wali, N., and A. M. N. Renzaho. 2018. "Our Riches Are Our Family, the Changing Family Dynamics and Social Capital for New Migrant Families in Australia." *PLoS One* 13 (12): 1–14.