RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the agency of skilled refugees in the British labour market

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Abstract

Drawing on the analytical distinction between agency and social structure, I provide insights into four strategies used by skilled refugees to navigate labour market constraints: pre-empting, to avoid present labour market constraints; circumventing present constraints, to realise future benefits; persisting in the search for skilled jobs via mobilising longstanding patterns of thought and action; and exercising voice to drive future system improvements that benefit similar others. It is striking how these strategies harmonised self-interest and others' interests. I highlight the interplay between social structure and agency in labour market strategies to depict skilled refugees as reflexive agents of change. I highlight gender-based nuances in skilled refugees' labour market moves and conclude by outlining the implications of my findings for HRM practice.

KEYWORDS
agency, refugees, social structure, temporal orientation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Management scholarship has begun to consider how Human Resource Management (HRM) systems and practices can facilitate the employment of skilled refugees (Lee & Szkudlarek, 2021), building on studies that highlight the challenges recently arrived refugees encounter in the labour market (Ortlieb &

Knappert, 2023). Studies also describe how skilled refugees attempt to navigate (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Verwiebe et al., 2019) and/or cope with (Nardon et al., 2021) various labour market challenges. We however have little understanding of the strategies used by skilled refugees in the labour market. In particular, our appreciation of the interplay between social structure and agency in skilled refugees' labour market moves is limited. This is a significant omission, because HRM managers and practitioners need to fully understand the agency skilled refugees can exercise in the labour market in order to devise effective interventions to facilitate their employment. Indeed, the potential of individual agency to transform and/or maintain social structures tends to be underplayed in existing understandings, calling for theorisation that considers agency as an ontological project.

In this article, I combine Margaret Archer's (2007, 2010) and Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) ideas on the relationship between agency and social structure to examine how a group of skilled refugees account for navigating the British labour market. I will first review the relevant literature, and then explain my theoretical framework and research design. My findings provide insights into four strategies mobilised by skilled refugees. What I found to be striking is the distinctive temporal orientations of these strategies, and the harmonisation of self-interest and others' interests in attempting to navigate the system. I outline the theoretical and practical contributions of my work.

2 | REFUGEES IN THE LABOUR MARKET: THE STORY SO FAR

An emerging body of literature that is currently addressing the labour market barriers encountered by skilled refugees is highlighting the impact of immigration policies (Ortlieb & Knappert, 2023) and the institutionalised devaluation of past qualifications and experience (Cheng et al., 2021). Refugees with higher education qualifications from their countries of origin are seen as more disadvantaged than their less-educated counterparts due to the difficulties involved in converting foreign credentials, leading to underemployment (Bakker et al., 2016) and/or reduced earnings (Baran et al., 2018). Furthermore, regardless of skill sets, settlement agencies are seen as referring refugees to low-skilled and/or low-paid positions (Senthanar et al., 2020).

While skilled refugees encounter somewhat similar employment barriers to skilled migrants in experiencing devaluation of prior credentials and experience (see Fernando & Patriotta, 2020), refugees are additionally stigmatised in being wrongly depicted as people who scrounge social benefits and lack credibility (Wehrle et al., 2018). Furthermore, because refugees' arrival to host country contexts is often abrupt, they are seen as less prepared for employment than skilled migrants (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). While both refugees and migrants must adapt to a new culture and adjust to a new labour market, refugee status is associated with a greater degree of insecurity than migrant status because refugees cannot work upon entry to the new country until they obtain formal permission and longstanding periods of temporary status can decrease one's chances of securing professional employment (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; MacKenzie Davey & Jones, 2020). Furthermore, refugees are additionally burdened by having to manage the emotional distress that pertains from their prior experiences of loss and trauma (Willott & Stevenson, 2013).

Some studies have begun to describe the ways in which skilled refugees attempt to navigate labour market barriers. For instance, it has been reported that some refugee newcomers remove work experience in their country of origin from their CVs (Senthanar et al., 2020) and/or take up any position they are offered by settlement agencies to enter the host country labour market. In a study of Afghan and Syrian refugees in Austria, Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. (2018) used a Bourdieusian lens to show how skilled refugees undertake further advanced re-training in their field of expertise to legitimise devalued credentials from their country of origin (see also Verwiebe et al., 2019). They also show how refugees do volunteer work and/or unpaid internships to improve their language proficiency and social connections so that they can access job opportunities, shining a light on what is called 'capital conversion' and how this process is shaped by the field. In a study of Syrian refugees in Germany, Gericke et al. (2018) highlight how refugees use ethnic bonding and bridging social capital (see also Eggenhofer-Rehart

et al., 2018) to enter the labour market and suggest that the latter is more effective than the former when it comes to providing individuals with access to jobs that match their skills and aspirations (see also Hirst et al., 2021).

While skilled refugees follow skilled migrants in trying to acquire new competencies and social connections to enhance their employment prospects in host country contexts (see Fernando & Cohen, 2015), the literature suggests that they enjoy less employment mobility than their skilled migrant counterparts. For instance, in a comprehensive review of the skilled migration literature from a socialisation lens, Tharenou and Kulik (2020) argue that many skilled migrants in 'foothold jobs' are likely to move to another employer as soon as they gain host country experience. In contrast, skilled refugees' career trajectories are seen as continuing to be constrained by labour market constraints (see Szkudlarek et al., 2021), and individuals are therefore seen as protecting their sense of worth by derogating the sources of occupational threats and/or reframing their views of the host country's employment system to highlight those elements of the system that might be supportive of them (Wehrle et al., 2018). They are also seen as adjusting understandings of themselves to cope with their plight, bracketing the present as transitory and recrafting a new identity to start all over again in a new field (Nardon et al., 2021), and holding on to their original occupational identities even if it means reduced job opportunities (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). While holding on to original occupational identity is seen as constraining skilled migrants from moving forward (Zikic & Richardson, 2016), it is seen as enabling skilled refugees to maintain a sense of worth and persist amid labour market barriers (see MacKenzie Davey & Jones, 2020).

HRM scholarship is beginning to address how HR systems and practices can support the employment of skilled refugees. Hirst et al. (2021) consider how language skills, expectations about employment in the host country setting, psychological resources and ethnic social capital can shape refugees' propensity to secure a job and propose HR practices to facilitate employability. For example, coaching and life-mapping are suggested as useful interventions to encourage refugees to reconcile themselves to less ideal career outcomes and engage in career adaptation. Likewise, screening, reference checks and induction programmes are advocated as ways of facilitating swift employment. In an empirical study, Lee and Szkudlarek (2021) propose a 'co-dependent relationship' between refugee support organisations and employers to provide support for managing expectations related to employment, on-the-job skills development and the development of cultural expertise and workplace attitudes. By collaborating with support organisations to promote refugees' employment, HRM is seen as being able to contribute to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) goals. Similarly, Szkudlarek et al. (2021) propose that HR practitioners work with refugee support organisations to provide networking opportunities and training for refugee job-seekers.

In the main, although extant studies describe how refugees navigate and cope with labour market constraints and speculate on how HRM can support skilled refugees' employment, we have little conceptualised understanding of the strategies individuals use in the labour market and the implications of these strategies on them and others. While a few notable studies have begun to theorise on skilled refugees' labour market behaviour (see Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018), there tends to be an ontological conflation of structures and agents in the exclusive focus on the field, leading to a limited understanding of the potential of individual agency to contribute to structural transformation. This calls for a type of theorisation that places greater emphasis on individuals and heterogeneity to illustrate the inherent abilities of agents to contribute towards driving change in social structures. From an HRM point of view, gaining a thorough understanding of the agency skilled refugees can exercise in the labour market is essential for devising effective employment interventions.

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Management scholars have drawn on the interplay between social structure and agency to understand individuals' experiences of work (see Duberley et al., 2006; Fernando & Cohen, 2011). Social structure is an abstract term that is defined in a myriad of ways by sociologists. It basically refers to the aggregated pattern of interrelated social practices in a society (Haslanger, 2015) and relations among various social positions (e.g., teacher and student)

(Porpora, 1989), that are underpinned by norms, values, rules, rights, duties (Bhaskar, 1979) and meanings (Parsons, 1951/1991) that are emergent from and shapes the activities of individuals (Archer, 2010). Scholars have suggested that the explanatory potential of social structures lie in their potential to act as constraint or enabler to individuals (Haslanger, 2016). Agency, on the other hand, refers to individuals' capacity for action that can have a social impact (Bhaskar, 1998).

While some sociologists tend to conflate social structure and agency and imply that they are inseparable (see Giddens, 1984), drawing on a realist tradition Margaret Archer sees agency and social structure as ontologically distinct and argues for 'analytic dualism'. While social structures can lead to constraints as well as enablers for incumbents (Archer, 2007) emphasises that agents are acutely aware and reflexive of the social structures they encounter. Reflexivity exercised through internal dialogs is seen as mediating the impact social structures have on agents (Archer, 2007) while also shaping individuals' responses to social situations. Archer thus emphasises heterogeneity, albeit not at the expense of social dynamics. She articulates a three-stage model that emphasises both objectivity and subjectivity. Social structures objectively impact the situations agents experience, generating constraint and enablement in relation to subjectively defined concerns. Reflexive deliberations (or internal conversations) shape the actions people consecutively undertake (Archer, 2007, 2010), contributing to either social structural reproduction or transformation. Individuals deliberate on and negotiate situations with reference to their personal concerns when navigating the social world. In underscoring agency to highlight the capabilities of agents, Archer illuminates the potential for transformation in social structures.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) propose a reconceptualization of agency as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement' (1998, p. 963) expressed through orientations towards the current, the future and the past. The past element is characterised by an 'iterative' aspect, maintaining order through 'the selective reactivation of past patterns of thought and action' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). Future-focused agency refers to goal orientation and the capacity of actors to 'imagine alternative possibilities' (ibid., p. 971). This imaginative vision of 'looking ahead' is indispensable for a person's agency: it 'represents the capacity of the individual actor to reflect and occasionally attempt to alter her position within the wider social structures' (Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015, p. 1438). The current element refers to the capacity of individuals to make practical judgements in the here and now, taking account of the emerging demands and contingencies of the moment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962). While each of the three elements can be present in any action, one may 'predominate' at any particular point.

I will now apply these theoretical ideas to examine how a group of skilled refugees account for their experiences in the British labour market, considering accounts of constraints and opportunities, strategies, the forms of agency that predominate within these strategies and the potential of strategies to contribute to social structural reproduction and/or transformation. Following the approach taken by prior scholars, I conceptualise internal conversations as a mechanism by which the individual makes sense of social structures through the experiences they report (Barratt et al., 2020). While I did not introduce internal conversations as a concept in my interview guide (see Hung & Appleton, 2016), the respondents were actively encouraged to share their sensemaking and rationalise their thoughts and actions during the interviews. From this perspective, the data collected from in-depth interviews can be conceptualised as internal conversations.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

This article is based on one-to-one in-depth qualitative interviews with 42 skilled refugees and 4 caseworkers in the UK. The aim of the study was to understand skilled refugees' experiences of work in the UK, and therefore their experiences of navigating the British labour market was a central theme. Qualitative interviews were chosen because they are useful for obtaining rich insights into people's lived experiences of employment. Furthermore, in-depth qualitative interviews facilitate the development of the trust and rapport required to enable the researcher to

gather intimate data that are revealing for both parties. All the refugee participants were educated to graduate level or beyond and were between 27 and 59 years of age. Most had several postgraduate qualifications. They hailed from an array of countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, but were predominantly from Iran, Syria, Afghanistan and Eritrea, with one from Eastern Europe. At the point of data collection, all the skilled refugees interviewed had some level of work experience on a voluntary, full-time and/or part-time basis in a variety of sectors including law, accountancy, public relations, social work, engineering and architecture. The majority of the respondents had been resident in the UK for fewer than 5 years. The four caseworkers were involved in providing employment advice, managing employment contracts, training and general management. See Table 1 for more details.

4.1 | Data collection

The sampling method can be described as a combination of purposive, convenience-based (Silverman, 2000) and snowballing. Respondents were recruited through a social enterprise that specialises in helping highly skilled refugees enter the employment market in the UK. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and would not affect the individuals in any way. Some respondents introduced other important respondents. A participant information sheet that explained the objectives of the study as well as how the data would be anonymised, stored and used for research purposes was handed out to the participants before the interview. All the participants signed a consent form, and they were aware that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. The data were collected and analysed by me. A pre-prepared topic guide shaped the interview, which addressed individuals' experiences in the labour market, their perceptions of barriers (including those related to migration status, ethnicity, religion, gender and age), opportunities, support and the strategies adopted. When individuals talked about their strategies, they were invited to reflect on their origin and purpose.

The questions were typically open-ended and were not asked in any particular order. The respondents often introduced their own topics and shared their views, but I ensured that all the topics in the interview guide were covered. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min. The skilled refugees reflected on the constraints they experienced in the labour market and explained how they made sacrifices to secure future benefits. I probed them further in order to understand how they rationalised their experiences and actions and what they aimed to achieve through their actions. The caseworkers echoed the respondents' accounts of labour market constraints. 45 interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. One interview was recorded by notes because of a technological failure.

4.2 | Data analysis

Data analysis took place throughout the research (Silverman, 2009). I used thematic analysis (King, 2004) to analyse the respondents' accounts, focusing on the content of what had been discussed rather than on how it was conveyed. The thematic analysis involves sorting data into themes. The first level of coding was descriptive. I examined the data, looking for emergent themes and key differences and similarities between them. I gave these 'codes' descriptive labels and assigned data extracts to them. As I worked through the transcripts, I reviewed these descriptors and the data within them, amending them accordingly to ensure both consistency and manageability. Once the initial codes had been constructed, sections of data were assigned to them. I adopted what is called 'progressive focusing', defining empirical codes somewhat loosely at the beginning and then more specifically as the analysis progressed (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). From the descriptive codes, I developed conceptual themes (Silverman, 2009), considering how individuals responded within the labour market and what they aimed to achieve through their responses. The conceptual codes were amalgamated to develop the final strategies: for instance, 'constructive feedback to make a difference to similarly disadvantaged others' and 'sharing personal stories to benefit similar others' were amalgamated to form 'exercising voice to drive future improvements to benefit similar others'. See Table 2.

TABLE 1 Details of participants.

Code	Gender	Age	Place of birth	Qualifications	Occupation
Ahmad	Male	40	Iran	MSc	Construction manager
Bilal	Male	25	Afghanistan	Master's	Operations assistant
Murshid	Male	38	Sudan	BSc Hons	IT technician/engineer
Goush	Male	41	Syria	BSc/MSc	Civil engineer
Naushad	Male	29	Palestine	BA	Employment advisor
Mowjood	Male	49	Ethiopia	Master's	Engineer
Mohomad	Male	47	Eritrea	Master's	Accountant
Asif	Male	32	Pakistan	BSc/MSc/PhD	Software engineer/ researcher
Farah	Female	37	Saudi Arabia	BA	Education advisor
Nishad	Male	32	Syria	Bachelor/MSc	Architect
Hisham	Male	45	Iran	Bachelor	Project planner
Noor	Female	29	Ukraine	Dental qualifications	Dentist in training
Letisha	Female	54	Sudan	PG/BSc	Statistician
Kiyan	Male	23	Hong Kong	BA	Freelance consultant
Rushad	Male	42	Malaysia	College-educated	Forward planner
Jon	Male	34	Yemen	Master's	Translator
Mishal	Male	28	Syria	AAT	Roofer/student
Rukshad	Male	59	Eritrea	PhD	Researcher
Akemi	Female	38	Iran	Dental qualifications	Dental nurse
Ayesha	Female	32	Syria	MSc	Engineer
Amani	Female	30	Syria	BA/Bachelor's/Master's	Team manager
Binta	Female	40	Pakistan	LLB	Lawyer
Latasha	Female	36	Saudi Arabia	MA	Lawyer
Murad	Male	31	Eritrea	MA	Refugee caseworker
Kaul	Male	30	Syria	Civil engineering degree	Civil engineer
Shreya	Female	41	Turkey	Master's	Community worker/ filmmaker
Kareem	Male	27	Sudan	Bachelor's	Shift engineer
Rasheem	Male	27	Afghanistan	BA/Master's	Author/refugee rights campaigner
Piyush	Male	36	Yemen	Master's	Professional in the legal sector
Desh	Male	48	Afghanistan	LLM/Master's	Project manager
Nafiza	Female	36	Iran	Bachelor's/Master's	Digital marketer
Calum	Male	33	Syria	Master's/Bachelor's	Manager

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Code	Gender	Age	Place of birth	Qualifications	Occupation
Leyla	Female	25	Afghanistan	Master's/Bachelor's	Developer/entrepreneur
Kyara	Female	47	Afghanistan	BSc/MA/PG/MSc	Freelance interpreter
Lana	Female	38	Iran	MSc	Data scientist
Jaha	Female	40	Pakistan	Bachelor's/Master's	Architect/civil servant
Rushana	Female	44	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Medical doctor qualifications	Care home professional
Rishad	Male	41	Iran	Bachelor's	Accountant
Baduldeen	Male	39	Syria	Bachelor's	Engineer
Dorin	Male	44	Pakistan	LLB Hons	Insurance manager
Olum	Male	36	Ethiopia	BA/AAT	Accountant
Gavin	Male	49	Zimbabwe	Advanced diploma in security management	Health care professional in training
CW1	Male	35–45		Advisor on professional support programme	
CW2	Male	35–45		Manager of caseworkers, funding, contracts	
CW3	Female	40–50		Training and employment advisor	
CW4	Female	40–50		Senior manager with responsibilities for employability	

I suggest that the respondents' accounts should be trusted because the fieldworker was accepted as a peer, showed a genuine interest in understanding the interviewees' views and experiences and guaranteed confidentiality. I focused on the plausibility of the accounts rather than their accuracy. I did not treat them as 'true' versions of a fixed 'reality', but rather as shared constructions of the social world (Silverman, 2000). Furthermore, to ensure reliability, I discussed my interpretations with several academic colleagues who gave generously of their time, and urged them to be critical. I also always attempted to think of alternative views of the phenomena under review.

5 | FINDINGS

I will first explain the respondents' accounts of labour market constraints and opportunities in Britain and then examine four strategies mobilised to navigate the labour market.

5.1 | The requirement for UK experience

The respondents argued that credentials and experience from their countries of origin were undervalued or disregarded in Britain (see also Cheng et al., 2021) including experience from multinational company. UK credentials and experience were seen as being essential to obtain relevant skilled work, however there was very little institutionalised support for skilled refugees with the right to work to accumulate skilled work experience in the UK. The primary means of accessing work in the UK, the Jobcentre Plus, was viewed as utterly useless for signposting individuals towards relevant skilled work placements:

TABLE 2 Coding template.

First order	Second order	Aggregate themes
Devaluation of foreign credentials	Requirement for UK credentials and experience over other equivalents	**Labour market constraints and opportunities**
Devaluation of foreign experience		
Little institutionalised support for obtaining skilled job placements in the UK		
British passport required for an interview	Lack of knowledge of migrants' right to work	
Refugee status associated with no rights to work		
Refugee bias	Socio-categorical bias	
Racial bias		
Gender bias		
Age bias		
Strict laws	Attention to equality and diversity	
Freedom of speech		
Freedom to practice one's faith		
Diversity in the workforce		
Welcoming in comparison to other European countries		
Clarifying rights to work on CV	Highlighting enablers of employment	**Pre-empting**
Link to the home office on the CV		
Minimising background in talk	Playing down hinderers of employment	
Minimising background in attire		
Sharing difficulties with professional others in ethnic community	Leveraging community networks	
Building and broadening one's community networks		
Mobilising insider connections within the host country		
Juggling two jobs	Managing multiple burdens for future benefits	**Circumventing**
Juggling multiple domestic and professional burdens		
Applying for junior/low paid jobs in extant profession	Temporary downgrading	
Volunteering		
Entering blue collar work on a temporary basis		
Difficulties with entering/progressing in extant profession	Changing path	

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TABLE 2 (Continued)

First order	Second order	Aggregate themes
Decision to retrain to enter an alternative but related profession		
Decision to retrain to enter a profession with more job opportunities		
Successful family members as an inspiration to keep trying for professional jobs	Persisting by anchoring to family	**Persisting in the search for skilled jobs via mobilising longstanding patterns of thought and action**
Encouragement of family members		
Religious faith to persist	Persisting by leveraging religion	
Religious teachings to construct hope		
Accounts of disadvantage	Constructive feedback and collaborations	**Voice to drive system improvement**
Detailed explanation of holes in the system		
Suggestions for improvements		
Collaborating with relevant others to help refugees		
Authoring books	Sharing stories of lived experiences	
Participation in external studies		

> I came here with the right to work. I came here completely legally. I applied for the job, they (THE JOBCENTRE) don't give me the appropriate job, they just forward me to these low-class jobs.
>
> (Hisham)

5.2 | Lack of knowledge of rights to work

Although the respondents had the right to work in the UK, employers often wrongly assumed that they did not have working rights as refugees and declined the opportunity for an interview. Caseworker 1 explains:

> I've had a lot of candidates sharing their experience. As soon as they say, "I have refugee status," that's it really, the employer wants to end the call, and the conversation doesn't get any further than that. So I guess that's probably quite common.
>
> (CW1)

Some employers demanded a British passport to establish a candidate's right to work in the UK, and wrongly denied interviews to individuals who did not have one:

> I went for the interview and at the start of the interview the person who was taking my interview asked me, "Do you have your passport with you?" I said, "No ma'am, I don't have my passport with me." ....."Because I don't have a British passport." She said, "Oh, no, I can't take your interview then".
>
> (Asif)

These excerpts highlights that not all employers are aware of what 'right to work' in the UK means.

5.3 | Socio-categorical bias

Respondents talked about bias in the labour market associated with race, gender, age and refugee status. Gavin, a Black man who sought employment in several fields following postgraduate qualifications from the UK, explained his situation as a matter of racial bias:

> They chose to take an A-Level student who was white rather than a man with a master's degree in NAME to do the job.
>
> (Gavin)

Several female respondents talked about how women with young children are not often preferred for jobs with long hours due to stereotypical gendered perceptions attached to their domestic responsibilities:

> I applied for many jobs in sales before. Just when they hear you have children, they don't prefer you.
>
> (Farah)

Some individuals argued that employers prefer young people for jobs over older candidates:

> The employers, specifically in the private sector, I think they prefer the younger, the newly graduated people.
>
> (Letisha)

These data highlight intersectionality (Corlett & Mavin, 2014) in the employment experiences of skilled refugees, and emphasise how multiple identities such as ethnicity, gender and age interact with refugee status to shape opportunities in the labour market.

A few respondents suggested that refugees are associated with a lack of credibility and trust (see also Wehrle et al., 2018), posing an obstacle to employment. Noor, explained how she experienced bias in an official authority entrusted to support refugees:

> I went to the NAME in my area….I heard this gentleman that served me…I heard their conversation, how his supervisor had told him, "Remember, you cannot trust these people." And after that, I just left, because they look at you like you are trying to lie… They don't see them like normal people; they are always thinking that you are trying to lie, to mislead them.
>
> (Noor)

5.3.1 | Attention to equality and diversity

The respondents also expressed their profound admiration for the strict laws and regulations governing differential treatment in the UK. This was seen as providing some form of buffer from prevailing challenges, even though it did not eradicate them completely:

> The laws are strict in this country; therefore they (RACIST INDIVIDUALS) may not say anything directly, but they think it.
>
> (Amani)

Many individuals felt that they had more rights in the UK compared with their countries of origin, including to challenge injustice and practice their religion, which they found deeply reassuring:

> You feel some right about the human here.
>
> (Nafiza)

Some respondents highlighted the sociocultural diversity of the British workforce, suggesting that the UK is a better country for ethnic minority immigrants than its European counterparts:

> On the train you stand with people from England and the office, they're hiring people from Syria, from England, from Europe. I think it's a good place here for Islamic people.
>
> (Calum)

5.4 | Strategy: Pre-empting to avoid present labour market constraints

Pre-empting involved making practical proactive moves to evade present constraints in the labour market. The respondents did this by employing three key moves.

5.4.1 | Highlighting enablers of employment to gatekeepers

Highlighting enablers of employment involved emphasising the right to work in CVs to avoid being rejected by uninformed HR personnel. Caseworker CW1 explains the approach of numerous service users:

> I've come across CVs where they've put, you know, a Home Office link of their right to work where the employer goes and checks.
>
> (CW1)

This excerpt demonstrates how skilled refugees acknowledged HR personnel's lack of awareness of working rights in the UK and responded to the situation in a practical way by inserting a link to the Home Office in their CVs in an attempt to avoid the disadvantageous effects of labour market constraints.

Engineer Goush talked about how he highlights his right to work on his CV to avoid labour market barriers:

> I make it very clear, by the way, in the heading of my CV, under my name, I added one line saying I'm a refugee in the UK, I'm eligible to work, there's no work limitations, and I'm a holder of a full UK driver's licence as well. I have never done that before and I don't think that's professional, but someone told me, just write it there, that's going to pick their eyes and maybe they… they may consider your CV.
>
> (Goush)

Goush acknowledged that his approach may not be entirely professional, but he did not want to risk being wrongly rejected for a job interview. Under the circumstances, he chose to compromise his professional image and

clarify his right to work. It should be noted that it was mainly male respondents who referred to highlighting enablers of employment to gatekeepers.

5.4.2 | Playing down potential hindrances to employment

Playing down potential hindrances to employment involved minimising social identity indicators to avoid bias in the labour market (see also Senthanar et al., 2020). This move was mainly pursued by female respondents, who attempted to play down their refugee and/or ethnic background at employment interviews. Noor, a Ukrainian-born dentist, talked about how she minimises her refugee background:

> How I came here, and all of these things, and I'm not going to tell this to anyone, to be honest. …Well, I just want to be… I just want to feel like a normal person. I don't want anybody to feel sorry for me, or to talk about me.
>
> (Noor)

By minimising her refugee background Noor can arguably avoid being excluded due to bias.

Farah, a Muslim woman, explained how she chose to minimise her ethnic and religious background by not wearing a headscarf:

> There was racism, there was… you know what I mean? So, this is one of the reasons. But wearing it (THE HEADSCARF), it's an option; it's an option, so it was my decision. But I saw the difference, you know what I mean?
>
> (Farah)

Farah explicitly alludes to racism and highlights her practical efforts to avoid drawing attention to her background. While women like her may be able to evade the effects of bias in the labour market through their approach, they do nothing to contest the social structures that disadvantage them.

5.4.3 | Leveraging community networks to secure skilled jobs in host country settings

This move involved mobilising connections to established professionals through diaspora communities to avoid present labour market constraints such as the requirement for UK credentials and experience. Shreya, who works in film and media, explained:

> Usually they're not employing, like the skills—they're not aware of how people are educated in their home country. …..I just shared with one friend that this is my last money and I'm actually, I'm very depressed and I don't know what to do … he was more settled in this country, he's been here for 20 years. Then he made some phone calls. And then he found that this company, a NAME company but doing, like the TV channel for a European channel and they were looking for an editor…the following day I went there, they tested my skills and they were super pleased because I was a good editor, And then they just hired me and this was my turning point… ….After I started with this organisation, I helped some other friends to get into a job. It was like a circle, it works…
>
> (Shreya)

Shreya reflects on the barriers in the labour market that constrained her chances—specifically the lack of recognition accorded to foreign experience. She thus explained how she appealed to an established professional from her ethnic community to avoid this barrier and obtain a job for her in her field of work. In highlighting how she leveraged her post-organisational connections to help others like herself to secure jobs, Shreya's excerpt illustrates how reciprocity in informal networks can be leveraged to buffer skilled refugees from the constraining effects of the system.

Jon, a former company director who now works as a translator, also talked about how he leveraged a connection to his diaspora community to secure a job in a relevant company:

> Then one of my friends gave me a recommendation about this job opportunity and it helped me a lot to get the offer easily. At least to send in my CV and to get the interview and finally to get the offer. From my home country—he (HIS FRIEND) has been here, he has been working here for seven or eight months as a solicitor....
>
> (Jon)

Through his friend's professional recommendation, Jon was able to avoid the requirement for UK experience and secure a skilled job in a reputed company. While the extant literature depicts ethnic bonding social capital as having little effectiveness when it comes to facilitating refugees' entry into skilled jobs that match their aspirations (Gericke et al., 2018; Hirst et al., 2021), respondents like Jon and Shreya were successful in securing entry to skilled work through their diaspora networks. This may be due to the fact that they were highly skilled and thus had contacts with individuals with similar skill sets in their diaspora communities.

5.5 | Strategy: Circumventing present constraints to realise future benefits for self

Circumventing involved mindfully working around labour market constraints to realise future benefits. The respondents circumvented through *three* key moves.

5.5.1 | Managing multiple burdens to remain in skilled employment

Managing multiple burdens to remain in employment involved making sacrifices in the present by pursuing 'personally inconvenient but relevant' employment opportunities to realise future benefits. This move was mainly pursued by female respondents. In the words of Jaha:

> I used to start my journey at 5:00 in the morning. When I reached there it's usually, it was seven something, 7:00. So I did that for four weeks. Because I was travelling that long in the train, it was £80 a day I was spending on the travelling... But at least it was a respectable job and they were not asking me for any prior experience. And they were providing all the training and development I required.......I had three kids at that time, very young. Two of them were in school and one used to be in nursery, she was just two at that time.
>
> (Jaha)

Jaha applied for relevant skilled jobs around the area where she lived, but she was unsuccessful because employers asked for UK experience. In response, she decided to take up the only opportunity that came her way, compromising on pay as well as personal time so that she could obtain the training she required. Jaha's excerpt displays future-focused agency and goal orientation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), refuting stereotypical perceptions

of refugee women lacking ambition (Tomlinson, 2010) and showing instead how they bravely manage multiple burdens to achieve their career goals.

Latasha, a single female lawyer, talked in similar terms about how she compromised on pay and personal time to obtain the experience she required to practice as a solicitor in the future. She took up the only paralegal job that came her way even though she felt it was poorly paid, and worked another blue-collar job part-time to make ends meet:

> I have currently two jobs, one is NAME paralegal and the second one is online assistant in my local supermarket... I have to keep a job which is not even related and it's physically tiring, to be able to pay my living. ...I know it's good when you read, you work as a NAME paralegal, it's an amazing job, it's something more related to the law until I finish my qualification and registration in the solicitor authorised... For me, even like the pay in the company, is not equal to the other people, British or ones with more related... I usually try to remind myself that hopefully this is for a short time, it's not long-term.
>
> (Latasha)

Latasha's excerpt highlights her vision for the future, which is to register as a solicitor in the UK, and how she juggles two jobs in the present, working 7 days a week to make the vision a reality. Individuals like Jaha and Latasha demonstrate their drive and ambition to others, contributing to transforming negative perceptions associated with refugee women.

5.5.2 | Temporary downgrading

Temporary downgrading involved demoting oneself in the short run to do unpaid or extremely low-paid white-collar work in the field of expertise or paid blue-collar work. By doing this, individuals not only responded to the demands of the here and now, but also attempted to derive future benefits by making sacrifices in the present. Postgraduate qualified translator Jon explained his response to the labour market constraint that required UK-specific experience to secure skilled work:

> I think volunteering here, before joining the market, is very helpful in terms of getting work. I guess when you apply with some kind of experience or work experience here in the UK, it helps you a lot.
>
> (Jon)

Jon's excerpt highlights future-oriented thinking (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). He used volunteer experience to obtain relevant skilled work in the future.

Similarly, accountant Mohomad explained:

> I was an accountant in my home country, I didn't want to continue in a warehouse. I joined the warehouse just to support my family and get work experience, but my long-term objective was not to work in the warehouse. I believed that I have the skills and knowledge and my education to get a better job...
>
> (Mohomad)

Given that UK-specific experience is required to enter the labour market, Mohomad worked in a warehouse to meet the demands of the here and now, providing for his family while also gaining some form of UK experience to add to his CV so he would be able to secure an appropriate white-collar job in the future.

Notably, the caseworkers suggested that male refugees with families are less likely to pursue unpaid or low-paid white-collar work because they cannot afford to due to their responsibilities as breadwinners. In their view, male refugees with families were compelled to prioritize financial imperatives and were thus more likely to downgrade by doing blue-collar work. Murad, who used to work as a refugee caseworker, explained:

> They say okay, I feel a bit older now. So, if I do this, it might take me time, so let me do some other jobs so that I can pay their bills and pay their taxes and all that.
>
> (Murad)

5.5.3 | Changing occupational path

Changing an occupational path involved making a conscious decision to switch to another professional field after carefully assessing the constraints and/or risks involved in re-entering the current profession in the host country context. Gavin, who encountered what he understood as racial discrimination in the UK job market (despite having UK postgraduate credentials), reflected on his decision to change occupations to enter the healthcare sector, which he understood to be culturally diverse and thus better for him in the long-term:

> Every day, I will put applications and applications and sometimes you don't get acknowledgement. So you end up getting frustrated. You end up, like right now I was on Jobseekers Allowance. The people there, they want you to look for a job. You tell them, I've applied for this, I've done this, I've done that, no response, nothing at all. So it's a stressful situation that you will be living under.......What I'm doing now is looking where prospects of getting a job, like in health. They are employing even nurses outside the country, whilst I'm a potential nurse in this country. So if I apply, if I do a nursing degree, which I'm doing, I hope I will be accepted into nursing because they're accepting people from Africa and so forth.
>
> (Gavin)

The healthcare sector has a shortage of nursing staff and an abundance of paid training posts. From this perspective, it is a practical choice for Gavin (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Although Gavin's decision to change sectors allows existing structures of disadvantage to remain intact, he himself can address his long-term personal interests through his strategy of pursuing white-collar work in an occupational sector that is friendly to people from other countries.

Jaha, who had a background in architecture, reflected in similar terms on her decision to switch to urban design because reaccreditation to practice as an architect in the UK is time-consuming and costly and there are more jobs in urban design:

> I decided why not choose a related field to architecture, which was urban design and planning. And do a master's, which was a one-year course. And then because I would be a fresh graduate maybe after that (laughs), so I can start my career in a related field. And I knew that there are more jobs in planning rather than architecture. So I kind of went that route. I did my degree, another master's degree in urban design and planning from the NAME of UK University. Yeah, I used to travel there on a daily basis when I needed, from Stoke-on-Trent to Manchester.
>
> (Jaha)

Jaha worked around the accreditation barriers in architecture by switching to a less competitive field with more jobs, thus increasing her chances of securing a white-collar job in the future.

5.6 | Strategy: Persisting in the search for skilled jobs through mobilising longstanding patterns of thought and action

This strategy involved persist in navigating present labour market challenges by leveraging 'past' patterns of thought and action linked to family and/or religion. While this move is oriented towards the present, it also demonstrates an iterative element due to respondents mobilising past patterns (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) linked to their early socialisation. This strategy was enacted through two moves.

5.6.1 | Persisting via anchoring to the strength of family

Persisting via anchoring to the strength of family involved deriving motivation from parental upbringing to persist in applying for skilled jobs despite repeated rejections. Engineer Goush explains:

> I'm a man of determination, I never give up, this is my nature. I just don't give up. I keep trying and trying. So, I get up in the morning, like 7:00, from 7:00 up to 10: 00 or 11:00 I keep sitting in front of my laptop, the only thing I do apart from writing personal statement, amending my CV, writing letters, is to go to my kitchen to cook something, to have my food and come back again. I come from a middle-class family in Syria. My dad is an engineer, my mum is a medical technician. When we were kids, their focus was on motivating us to succeed in the academy. For us, that was the only way for living …You have to have determination to succeed in your school, in university, to score high grades and to get a job and to work hard to survive.
>
> (Goush)

Goush highlights how he activates past patterns of family-driven perseverance to keep applying for skilled jobs in the British labour market, without giving up.

Mohomad similarly explained how he anchored to his family's longstanding encouragement to persist in getting a better job in line with his skill sets:

> I believed that I have the skills and knowledge and my education to get a better job My father was a driver, and my mother was a housewife—they didn't have an educational background. But they always encouraged us to get an education and NOT become like them. They encouraged us to get a qualification and become better.
>
> (Mohomad)

5.6.2 | Persisting via leveraging religion

Persisting via leveraging religion involved mobilising religious faith and/or specific religious teachings to carry on in applying for jobs despite repeated rejections. In the words of Hisham:

> I believe in God, whenever I was working during this past three years, I told you it's a really bad situation. I knew that one day it's going to be finished, because I know when you do good things, good things back to you. So this is the only things keeps me you know, it doesn't me dissatisfy because every single, I apply for the job, I get the reject. But I will carry on, carry on, carry on, because I believe on something. It's not going to be like this. Yeah. Otherwise, I would (laughs) quit applying.
>
> (Hisham)

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Hisham suggests that he derived a sense of comfort and hope from the religiously influenced idea that good things will ultimately happen to him in line with his good conduct.

Naushad similarly appealed to specific religious teachings to persist in the *formal* labour market despite the challenges he faced:

> I'm Muslim, so everything I'm doing is Islam's principles, for me, it's the principles I'm following in doing anything here in the UK. An example, some people here in the UK, they work in a black market and working in a black market so you can get money in cash. It means that you are not going to pay tax, for example. In my opinion, and from my religious background, I feel like any income you have, and you don't pay tax on it, it's not legal and it's not your right.
>
> (Naushad)

Naushad suggests that Islamic teachings of ethical work motivated him to refrain from seeking unreported work in the informal labour market and persist in his job search in the formal labour market.

5.7 | Strategy: Voice to drive future system improvements to benefit similar others

This strategy involved making carefully considered micro moves in the present to raise awareness of injustices in the labour market and/or the challenges experienced by refugees. This transformation-oriented strategy was underpinned by the respondents' acute awareness of equality and diversity in Britain and was intended to drive change for the benefit of similarly disadvantaged others. This strategy was applied in two ways.

5.7.1 | Constructive feedback and collaboration to make a difference to similarly disadvantaged others

Constructive feedback and collaboration involved providing detailed accounts of injustices, errors and/or bad practice to employers and working with the relevant entities to help other refugees. It is notable that this move was not as prevalent as other moves in the data collected. In reflecting on his previous experiences in the labour market, Murad talked about how he provided constructive feedback about inclusivity in the interview process to an employer:

> I can tell my opinion, what I felt. Maybe it could help you next time.....I did all the interviews and then with the head of HR. So every time I got some hope that I will get the job. I'm not feeling down that I didn't get the job, no. I felt from your questions, that when you asked me, you were not that aware of refugee or migrant or other backgrounds. I felt something missing there, because next time I'm pretty sure other candidates will come. So I don't want them to face the same thing. If you work a little bit on that one, it will help other colleagues, or it would help other people from my background. So, I sent it to them, and they were happy to receive it. When we (HIS CURRENT EMPLOYER—A REFUGEE SUPPORT ORGANISATION) started to work with them...I told them to employ an admission officer who really understands the refugee background, the 1951 Convention, what are the rules related to migration, refugees, asylum seekers. Because that helps the organisation........ After three months I got a call from there. They were sending clients, clients so that I can help them.
>
> (Murad)

Although he had no hope of gaining employment with the organisation, Murad provided detailed feedback on the gaps in the interview process and how it could be improved because he wanted to ensure that other candidates like him would have a better interview experience and outcome. By doing this, he not only constructed himself as an informed contributor of noteworthy ideas to British workplaces, but he also nudged the employer to update their knowledge of skilled refugees and migration regulations and to be cautious about raising the hopes of vulnerable candidates. Murad's excerpt highlights the transformation-oriented outcomes of the future-focused agency he exercised. The organisation not only formally acknowledged his feedback but also recognised him as an expert by starting to work with the refugee support organisation that he later begun to work for and seeking his advice and collaboration on matters related to the employment of refugees, an approach that is likely to facilitate the improvement of employment practices to enhance the experiences of other skilled refugee newcomers.

Postgraduate qualified Asif talked about how he provided a detailed explanation of his working rights to an HR officer who refused him the opportunity of an interview due to his refugee status:

> "What visa do you have because you said you can work legally?" I said, "Yes, I have refugee status." And would you believe, she said, "Oh sorry, this job is not for you then." I said, "Ma'am, you can't say this, it's illegal to say this. Because you can't just tell someone that this job is not for you just because you're a refugee (laughs), because there is nothing like this mentioned in your job description. And I'm telling you that I have a legal status and I have a legal right to work." She was not accepting, she was not able to understand this thing. And then I said, I don't care about my job, but I sent her a long email sharing all the relevant links and all the relevant documentation to educate her to the fact, first of all, that not everyone who is going to come for a job will have a British passport. She needs to learn to understand what the legal policies are.
>
> (Asif)

Asif highlights 'the other' focused intentions of his actions—he hoped to ensure that another candidate like him would not be disadvantaged in recruitment by raising the HR officer's awareness of rights to work in the UK. The agency he exercised was thus underpinned by a future-looking motive to benefit others. Asif's actions led to him being called for an interview with this organisation, although he was not offered a position. This suggests that the organisation acknowledged him as knowledgeable on employment rights and felt compelled to reverse their initial decision to not interview him. Following their encounter with Asif, we can expect this organisation to act to ensure that they do not break the law by continuing to deny the right of refugee applicants to be interviewed for jobs. In other words, they may improve their employment practices, providing training to their staff on the employment rights of refugees.

5.7.2 | Sharing personal stories to benefit similar others

Sharing personal stories to benefit similar others involved mobilising appropriate external channels to raise awareness of the challenges experienced by skilled refugees and to advocate for support and changes in practice. Rasheem talked about the book he authored on refugees:

> People are writing to me as a result of reading my book, they have gone to Greece or Calais or Bosnia or Serbia to do some volunteer work. To get involved with their local refugee charity or set up a local group. People have written to me that as a result of my book, they have fostered refugee kids. That's what motivates me to continue advocating and campaigning, because it makes a difference and it has an impact. People take action as a result of my talk or my book. They do fundraising. They befriend

> refugees. They mentor refugees, so there are so many ways that they could help and I provide them
> with these ideas of how best to help people like me.
>
> (Rasheem)

Rasheem highlights his intention to advocate for the interests of refugees by sharing his lived experiences through his book, positioning himself as a 'constructive campaigner' and contributing to shaping the meanings attached to refugees. His account further illustrates the potential for social structural change in his future-oriented agentic efforts: people wrote to him about how his book inspired them to support refugees in employment and other affairs—leading to practices such as mentoring programmes, fundraisers, etc. which can help refugees to better navigate labour market constraints.

Several respondents emphasised that they participated in this research study because they wanted to raise awareness of the challenges faced by skilled refugees and contribute to changing representations by sharing their story:

> Right now my motivation is the motivation why I'm sitting and talking to you is that I felt this thing in
> my heart strongly that there are other people who may not be able, or not be that privileged, who
> maybe have, let's say lack of communication, like they will not be able to speak English. They would
> not have that much—which I have. So I have made this thing that I will share my story and I will share
> my story not in a negative way, but to the people who can make a difference. The people who can look
> into these things, and even if I make a slight improvement somewhere in the future, for this group of
> community with whom I … it will satisfy me because I kind of, I've seen the hardship and pain and if I
> will be able to make a difference, then I would love to do that.
>
> (Asif)

Asif highlights his intention to drive constructive change through the right channels. By sharing his lived experiences in a research study that aims to instigate change in policy and practice, Asif takes incremental steps towards influencing the meanings attached to skilled refugees as well as the rules that influence their work and career experiences in the UK.

6 | DISCUSSION

My findings provided insights into four strategies used by skilled refugees to navigate the labour market. Pre-empting involves enacting proactive moves to avoid current labour market constraints. This present-oriented strategy aims to practically evade existing labour market constraints (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) by highlighting enablers of employment to gatekeepers, playing down hinderers and/or leveraging community networks to secure long term jobs. Circumventing involves mindfully working around present labour market constraints to realise future benefits. Through this future-oriented strategy, which involves managing multiple burdens, temporary downgrading (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018) and/or changing occupational path (Verwiebe et al., 2019) skilled refugees look ahead and enact appropriate present moves to change their future employment prospects (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Persisting via mobilising longstanding patterns of thought and action involves leveraging well-rehearsed moves related to the past to persevere in the search for skilled jobs in the present. In using this strategy, individuals persist in applying for jobs in the formal sector by anchoring to the strength and encouragement of family and/or leveraging religious faith and religious teachings. Finally, exercising voice involves driving future system improvements that can benefit similar others. This future-oriented strategy (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) comprises moves such as providing constructive feedback of employment processes and/or sharing

personal stories that illuminate how refugees struggle due to deficiencies in the system. Based on my findings I make three contributions.

The interplay between social structure and agency in the labour market strategies exercised by skilled refugees.

The literature describes how skilled refugees adjust understandings of self to cope with host country labour market constraints (see Nardon et al., 2021), and to a lesser extent navigate labour market constraints by retraining (Verwiebe et al., 2019), volunteering, mobilising social contacts (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Gericke et al., 2018) and/or playing down social identity indicators that are seen as disadvantageous to employment (Senathanar et al., 2020). I extend existing understandings of refugees' agency in the labour market by offering a typology of strategies. This typology, which considers agency as an ontologically distinct endeavour (Archer, 2007) with varying degrees of temporal orientations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) highlights the potential of skilled refugees to influence social structures. See Table 3 for the typology.

The future oriented strategy 'exercising voice' is transformation orientated because its enaction contributes to refining meanings attached to 'refugees', presenting refugee employees as contributors of constructive ideas that has potential to achieve functional change in workplace processes (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014) as opposed to powerless and uninformed victims. This strategy thus arguably contributes to alleviating the social position of refugees. Given that meanings make up and maintain social structures (Parsons, 1951/1991), individuals need to expand and modify the meanings attached to the social categories that they affiliated with to start facilitating change in social structures. Furthermore, employment practices that constrain skilled refugees' chances of skilled employment may be refined, if gatekeepers feel nudged to reconsider underpinning rules and values due to the constructive feedback provided.

Likewise, by participating in legitimate research studies on skilled refugees' experiences of work and bringing their struggles to the attention of relevant entities who are able to drive constructive changes in policy and/or practice, individuals not only contribute to shaping the meanings attached to 'refugees', but they can also contribute to exerting some form of influence on the rules that disadvantage skilled refugees. As Young (2011) has argued, social change to mitigate the effects of social structural constraints requires incumbents to take first steps towards engaging in discussions with relevant others and publicising the issues they experience to influence extant practices.

While the future oriented move circumventing can be seen as working around the 'rules of the game' as opposed to challenging them, we can also consider the potential of skilled refugees' circumventing moves to contribute towards changing representations in the long run. For instance, as women visibly 'manage multiple burdens' to progress their careers and demonstrate their high level of career ambition in the process, they contribute to refuting negative meanings attributed to female refugees (see Tomlinson, 2010) and alleviating the social position of women refugees. Indeed, these individuals can serve as behavioural role models and inspire other refugee women to follow their approach (Morgenroth et al., 2015) contributing to further strengthening understandings of refugee women as ambitious and determined careerists. Likewise temporary downgrading to secure better employment prospects in the future and/or changing path to maintain professional employment demonstrates to others that skilled refugees are capable of exercising future oriented practical evaluative agency to maintain their career trajectories (see Szkudlarek et al., 2021) as opposed to simply coping with their new circumstances (MacKenzie Davey & Jones, 2020; Nardon et al., 2021). In other words, the enaction of these moves can contribute to expanding and/or modifying the meanings attached to 'refugees'.

In enacting the present oriented move pre-empting, individuals contribute to both social structural change and maintenance. Highlighting enablers of employment may contribute to challenging wrong representations attached to skilled refugees' employment rights while minimising potential hinderers of employment and leveraging community networks to obtain professional employment does nothing to change the extant social order. Finally, the move persisting in the search for skilled jobs via mobilising longstanding patterns of thought and action, which is present oriented with an iterative element (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), arguably contributes to refuting meanings

T A B L E 3 Typology of labour market strategies.

Strategy	Dominant temporal orientation	Tactics	Implications
Pre-empting by enacting proactive moves to avoid present constraints	Present	Highlighting enablers of employment to gatekeepers	Facilitating self while contributing to changing representations
		Playing down hinderers of employment	Facilitating self
		Leveraging community networks to get skilled jobs	Facilitating self
Circumventing present constraints to realise future benefits	Future	Managing multiple burdens	Facilitating self while contributing to changing representations in the long term.
		Temporary downgrading	Facilitating self while contributing to changing representations in the long term
		Changing occupational path	Facilitating self while contributing to changing representations in the long term
Persisting in the search for skilled jobs via mobilising longstanding patterns of thought and action	Present	Persisting via anchoring to family	Facilitating self while contributing to changing representations in the long term
		Persisting via leveraging religion	Facilitating self while contributing to changing representations in the long term
Exercising voice to drive future improvements that benefit similar others	Future	Constructive feedback and collaboration to make a difference to similarly disadvantaged others	Contributing to facilitating the employment outcomes and experiences of similar others and contributing to changing representations
		Sharing personal stories to benefit similar others	Contributing to facilitating the employment outcomes and experiences of similar others and contributing to changing representations

attached to refugees as benefit scroungers who lack credibility (see Wehrle et al., 2018), and alleviating the social position of the refugee in the long-term.

The extant literature provides insights into how the agency exercised by skilled refugees is constrained by various forms of social structures (see Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). My findings develop existing understandings by depicting skilled refugees as change agents who can exercise some form of transformation-oriented agency on their new environments. In other words, through their labour market behaviour individuals can impose a new version of reality on others that has potential to challenge longstanding stigmatising connotations attached to skilled refugees. These insights are theoretically important because they illuminate refugees as authors of their realities—as opposed to mere navigators of a reality designed for them.

The analytical separation of structure and agency also allows us to gain a more holistic understanding of how refugees' labour market moves are underpinned by reflexive deliberations of external structures (Archer, 2010).

For instance, playing down social identity indicators that are seen as disadvantageous to employment (see Senathanar et al., 2020) (or pre-empting) is underpinned by the realisation that only a few employers have full knowledge of what the right to work in the UK means, and it is therefore advisable to proactively clarify right to work rather than risk being eliminated from the interview process. Likewise, retraining (or circumventing more generally) reflects individuals' realisation that there is little chance of securing relevant skilled jobs without host country experience (Lee & Szkudlarek, 2021), and that they therefore need to downgrade and/or take on the few personally inconvenient opportunities that come their way so they can accumulate this experience and achieve their career goals. Exercising voice is underpinned by individuals' acute awareness of laws and human rights in the UK. They understood that they would not be penalised for complaining and/or writing books in the UK, and they knew that their feedback would be taken seriously there. Indeed, individuals were acutely aware of the 'rules of the game' (Archer, 2007) and extremely realistic about their employment expectations and responses. By following Archer in considering structure and agency as ontologically distinct entities, the capacity of skilled refugees to systematically assess and respond to external circumstances in a feasible manner is illustrated. Indeed, my findings suggest that skilled refugees are not as unrealistic in their employment-related expectations as the literature implies (see Hirst et al., 2021; Nardon et al., 2021). Rather, they can swiftly assess their environments and exercise practical agency to meet the demands of the here and now while also doing what is best for themselves and others in the long run.

6.1 | The harmonisation of self and other orientation in skilled refugees' labour market behaviour

Extant understandings construct skilled refugees (see Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Nardon et al., 2021; Wehrle et al., 2018) and skilled migrants (Fernando & Cohen, 2015; Fernando & Patriotta, 2020; Zikic & Richardson, 2016) as predominantly self-focused agents. I develop extant understandings by also illuminating the 'other orientation' in these individuals labour market behaviour. My findings show how skilled refugees' labour market strategies reflect a dual orientation towards self and others, promoting and supporting personal interests via pre-empting, circumventing and persisting in the search for skilled jobs, while also promoting and supporting the interests of similar others (see Cialdini et al., 1987) via exercising voice' through constructive feedback and collaborations and/or sharing lived experience.

While exhibiting 'other orientation' via constructive feedback and collaborations is arguably constrained to some extent due to skilled refugees not having the luxury to focus on driving change in the system, individuals' keenness to share their lived experiences of work and career in this research study highlights their strong desire to help others like them. Indeed, in contrast to skilled migrants (see MacKenzie Davey & Jones, 2020) we might expect skilled refugees' distinctive experiences of loss and trauma (Willott & Stevenson, 2013) to influence their motivation to facilitate similar others in host country work settings. In other words, grief pertaining from loss may influence these individuals to develop compassionate sensitivity to the suffering of similar others and a commitment to try to alleviate this suffering in some way (see Gilbert, 2009, 2014).

Individuals' keen desire to help others like them through exercising voice, alongside getting their own lives and careers back of track through pre-empting, circumventing, and persisting, reflects the harmonisation of self-interest and others' interest in refugees' labour market behaviour. The harmonisation of self and others' interests is significant because it depicts skilled refugees as socially responsible individuals who grapple with the double burden of facilitating victims of structural injustices in direct and/or indirect ways, while also assuming individual responsibility for furthering their own careers.

6.2 | Variations in the labour market strategies exercised by skilled refugees

In the extant literature on how refugees navigate (Wehrle et al., 2018) and cope with (Nardon et al., 2021) labour market barriers, refugees tend to be portrayed as a homogenous group with few insights into socio-categorical variations in their labour market moves. I extend existing understandings by providing insights into gender-based variations.

My findings show how refugee women tend to pre-empt disadvantage in the labour market by minimising background indicators, while refugee men tend to pre-empt by highlighting their credentials. Given that refugee women are additionally burdened by having to overcome gender bias to gain access to employment (Koyama, 2014; Tomlinson, 2010), we might expect them to feel a greater need than refugee men to minimise other potentially disadvantageous background indicators in order to increase their chances. It is also notable that it is mainly refugee women who tend to circumvent labour market barriers by managing multiple burdens. Once again, this can be understood as a gendered move that reflects women's disadvantaged domestic status: women have no option but to take on multiple burdens if they wish to move forward in the employment sphere. What is striking in these data is the fact that refugee women took individual responsibility for driving their careers forward. They fully understood the resources they had and those they lacked, and the stereotypes attached to them. Rather than complaining about the situation, they took matters into their own hands and attempted to overcome labour market barriers in the UK. The extant literature victimises refugee women when it highlights the fact that they are paid less than men, find it harder to find decent jobs and face forms of exploitation in the labour market (see Senthanar et al., 2020). Furthermore, unlike male refugees, they are seen as having only a limited opportunity to escape difficult situations, which leads to perceptions of exclusion, frustration and/or a reluctant acceptance of subordination (Knappert et al., 2018). I problematise extant understandings by showing how skilled refugee women manage multiple burdens to navigate labour market barriers or skilfully avoid these barriers by minimising background indicators, representing female refugees as agents as opposed to perpetually injured subjects (see Tomlinson, 2010).

My findings show how men with families, are less likely to engage in temporary downgrading when there are only a few financial imperatives involved. In other words, because men are more likely to assume the breadwinner's role, men with families are seen as more likely to downgrade to do paid blue-collar work than unpaid professional internships. Existing studies highlight downgrading as a move pursued by skilled refugees (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Based on my findings I emphasise the importance of distinguishing between different forms of downgrading (for example, downgrading to unpaid or low-paid white-collar internships and downgrading to blue-collar jobs) and depict downgrading as a move that is mediated by the intersection between gender and family circumstances. By highlighting fine-grained nuances in the labour market strategies of skilled refugees, my findings contribute to diversifying existing understandings of skilled refugees' labour market experiences.

6.3 | Practical implications for HRM

HRM scholarship has started to consider how refugees can be supported in the labour market (Hirst et al., 2021; Szkudlarek et al., 2021). My findings indicate that skilled refugees are extremely reflexive and persistent individuals who can exercise practical evaluative and future-focused agency to advance their interests. From this perspective, HRM efforts can go beyond facilitating career adaptation for refugees (Hirst et al., 2021), to provide opportunities such as work placements to swiftly integrate them into relevant skilled work. In offering work placements, it is important to ensure that individuals are sufficiently remunerated because older refugees with families may not be able to undertake low-paid or unpaid work placements due to their responsibilities as breadwinners, and therefore organisations might risk missing out on this important pool of talent. HR units can help ambitious skilled refugee women do work placements by offering support for childcare and/or travel.

Second, HRM units can take steps to ensure that recruitment and selection practices are more inclusive for refugees. HR personnel can be trained and up-to-date on refugees' employment rights so as to make sure that deserving candidates are not wrongly denied the chance to be interviewed. Furthermore, HR personnel and line managers can be trained on skilled refugees, their backgrounds and the cultures they come from to ensure that the interview questions candidates are asked reflect their diverse experiences. In fact, HRM units can seek the advice of refugee support organisations to ensure that their selection processes do not disadvantage refugees. Adopting a skills-based approach to recruitment that prioritises hiring based on demonstrated skills and competencies (Fuller et al., 2022) can open opportunities for a large population of refugee candidates who are currently excluded from consideration due to their foreign credentials. The findings of this study indicate that refugees are extremely persistent and resilient individuals, and that they have access to unique cultural resources (for example, religious faith and family) to facilitate this persistence. Such diverse competencies and resources can be recognised and prioritised in organisational selection processes if there is a fit with the job and/or organization. Finally, HR units can take measures to identify and eradicate all forms of bias from their selection processes. The findings of this study highlight that skilled refugees can be impacted by racial and gender-based biases as well as by stereotypes attached to refugee status, and therefore efforts must be made to tackle prejudice and discrimination.

Third, HR personnel can leverage the employment support they provide to refugees to facilitate positive change in societal attitudes, thereby contributing to broader CSR goals. This can be achieved through campaigns that highlight work placements offered to skilled employees from refugee backgrounds, thereby contributing towards challenging negative stereotypes that wrongly construct refugees as social benefits scroungers with little skills (Beaman, 2011). Fourth, HRM personnel can work with policymakers to ensure that all employers are proficient in rights to work in the UK. The Home Office can be urged to consider whether rights to work might be published in a clearer and more accessible form in order to ensure that the most vulnerable candidates are not negatively impacted by employers' lack of awareness and negligence. Moreover, authorities can be encouraged to impose large fines on employers who fail to carry out right-to-work checks and to establish channels for candidates to complain about employers who fail to comply with requirements. Finally, HR personnel can work with policymakers and refugee support organisations to ensure that there are adequate systems in place to support skilled refugees to enter professional work. The standard of support provided by Jobcentre Plus is inadequate for the purpose of helping skilled refugees make this step. It is a significant waste of resources for individuals with valuable Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and other skills to be employed in blue-collar jobs. By collaborating with policymakers, social enterprises and the relevant government authorities in supporting employment for skilled refugees, HR units can become more sustainable.

I recognise that my study is based on a small sample of highly skilled refugees, and that there are limits to how far the findings can be contextualised or generalised. Having said this, however, my intention has not been to yield generalisable understandings, but rather to provide conceptual insights into the agency individuals exercise in the labour market. In terms of a direction for future research, studies should consider how intersectional identities play out in the strategies that individuals use to navigate the labour market, while also comparing the labour market experiences of refugees in different countries. Finally, my study is based on predominantly ethnically minoritised refugees. It is important for cross-cultural comparative studies to consider if the experiences and responses of white refugees from European countries are similar to those of refugees from the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

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