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# Linking migration aspirations to integration prospects: the experience of Syrian refugees in Sweden

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In this article, we examine the shifting role of aspirations in migration and integration processes by focusing on the experiences of a group of Syrian refugees settling in Sweden. We demonstrate that aspirations and capabilities may be used to study the lives of refugees (and immigrants) before, during, and after migration and that through a sequential study of aspirations it is possible to determine how refugees come to envision possible life trajectories in destination countries. Understanding the relevance of refugees' aspirations and the effects that other actors have on these is important to recognize refugees' active role in shaping migration and integration dynamics.

Keywords: migration, integration, agency, aspirations, capabilities

## Introduction

In this article, we examine the shifting role of aspirations in migration and integration processes by focusing on the experiences of a group of Syrian refugees settling in Sweden. By analysing their aspirations and the obstacles to their realization, we were able to capture these refugees' active role in shaping both their migratory trajectories and their integration prospects—an aspect that is often overlooked in favour of structural analyses.

Our research has been developed in light of three limitations of the current academic debate on the integration of refugees. The first limitation is that the debate focuses especially on the expected outcomes of integration policies, whereas less is known about the dynamics of integration and on how refugees influence them, which is important for the development of integration policies (Boccagni 2017; Van Heelsum 2017). The second limitation is that literature is often based on the needs and perspectives of receiving countries, but a more comprehensive

understanding of integration is required to encompass the perspectives of refugees, who have an active influence on integration processes. Recent literature on migration already demonstrated how adopting a migrant-centred perspective is important to incorporate people's agency in migration theory and to move past the determinism of earlier theories. Works on migrants' aspirations, especially research based on the aspirations and capability framework developed by [Carling \(2002\)](#) and expanded on by [De Haas \(2014\)](#), have provided valuable insights into the dynamics of migration. Van Heelsum (2017) recently suggested that the aspirations and capability framework may also be used to study refugees' lives after migration. This relates to the third limitation, namely that integration and migration are too often studied separately. Research that tried to bridge the two fields of study has often done so with a policy-oriented approach (e.g. [Entzinger et al. 2011](#)), but the effects of the migration experience on refugees' choices and their projects in destination countries remain understudied.

Drawing from Van Heelsum's work, we contend that studying refugees' aspirations, their evolution throughout migration, and their actualizability in destination countries can shift the debate about integration towards a less biased perspective and also shed light on the interrelation between migration and integration dynamics. Such focus on aspirations is not meant to downplay the role of structural constraints. Refugees navigate coercive environments that severely limit their agency. Yet, studying aspirations aids us in understanding how refugees conceive and alter their life trajectories in response to specific constraints and how, by doing so, they can influence migration and integration processes.

To enhance insights into this topic, a group of 18 Syrian refugees settling in Sweden were interviewed in early 2018. By investigating these refugees' aspirations and their experience as asylum migrants, it was possible to examine the relations between their original migration aspirations and the prospects of their integration in Sweden. Findings suggest that even in the case of involuntary mobility caused by conflict ([De Haas 2014](#)), migration aspirations function as projects for life-making ([Carling 2002](#)): they take up additional meanings that go beyond the immediate need for safety. Achieving self-realization, reuniting with spouses or relatives, and guaranteeing a better future for one's family were key aspirations that characterized the narratives of our informants. These aspirations were the drivers of informants' migration towards Europe and represent what they hoped to achieve in their destination country. They became constituting elements of informants' life projects, and whether informants developed aspirations to settle and integrate in Sweden was largely dependent on the perceived possibility to realize these key aspirations.

In the following sections, we first review relevant literature on the subjects of integration and migrants' aspirations, so as to bridge the theoretical models underpinning this study. We then retrace informants' journey since its outset in Syria. Such narrative structure serves the purpose of shifting the analysis towards informants' perspective, but it is also useful to understand how informants' aspirations concerning their future in Sweden resulted from past life experiences, and how they are linked to the motives of their migration.

### **Towards an Immigrant-Centred Analysis of Integration**

Immigrant integration has been researched through a variety of concepts and approaches. Studies that tried to describe the dynamics and the outcomes of integration differ in the object of study (newcomers versus the receiving population), in the levels of society at which they investigate integration (from the individual to the institutional) and in the markers used to measure integration. The concept of integration itself and the plurality of terms associated with it—such as adaptation, acculturation, assimilation, and incorporation—are still debated, particularly in that they continue to assume that migrants should conform to a dominant set of values and behaviours to be integrated. This assumption, which underlies policy even more than academic research, has inevitably directed the analysis of integration processes towards goals set by the receiving country. Conversely, the perspectives of immigrants on participating to and identifying with their receiving society have been overlooked relatively frequently.

There have been attempts to overcome the constraints of existing scholarship. [Garcés-Masareñas and Penninx \(2016: 14\)](#), for example defined integration as ‘the process of becoming an accepted part of society’. They left their definition intentionally open to emphasize the process character of integration and to avoid setting predetermined requirements to measure acceptance by the receiving society. Such definition has the merit of highlighting the necessity to involve both immigrants and natives in analysis; however, it still remains biased towards a receiving-country perspective by making acceptance a condition for integration, which implies an imbalanced power relation in which immigrants require legitimization by a majority to be considered integrated. In fact, the very idea of incorporation in a given social fabric is problematic in that it presumes an intrinsic deficiency of immigrants, who are seen as ethnic others unwilling to integrate and/or lacking the culturally specific attributes needed for their full participation in the receiving society ([Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002](#); [Anthias 2014](#)). While it is undeniable that immigrants may lack country-specific skills, e.g. language, such perspective fails to consider both immigrants’ competencies and their subjective goals.

Receiving-country biases are also largely reflected in the analytical dimensions that have been traditionally employed to study integration. Scholars propose different categorizations (e.g. [Ager and Strang 2008](#); [Crul and Schneider 2010](#)), but they essentially address the same aspects of immigrants’ lives, including social, political, and labour market participation, legal recognition, and religious assimilation. These dimensions tend to reflect receiving societies’ existing structures and focus more on the outcomes of integration and less on its dynamics, giving little attention to immigrants’ own role in carving their places in receiving societies.

In response to this trend, several scholars tried to incorporate immigrants’ agency into the analysis of integration. There is a growing corpus of literature demonstrating how exploring immigrants’ perspectives can shed light on the dynamics underlying integration and intercultural interaction (e.g. [Heger Boyle and Ali 2010](#); [Morawska 2013](#); [Vollebergh 2016](#); [Hebbani et al. 2018](#)). [Freeman \(2004\)](#)

defined integration as the product of the intersection of migrants' aspirations and strategies with the regulatory frameworks existing in the domains of the receiving society. [Spencer and Charsley \(2016\)](#) provided an innovative model to study integration, which identifies not only a comprehensive set of dimensions but also 'effectors' that impact on integration processes across those dimensions—namely, individual human capital, families and social networks, opportunity structures in society, policy interventions, and transnational effectors. Combining dimensions with effectors makes it possible to study the effects of institutional arrangements in relation to immigrants' agency and the many elements that facilitate or hinder integration at the individual level. Models like Freeman's and Spencer and Charsley's make room for a migrant-centred perspective in the analysis of integration. The inclusion in the analysis of individual characteristics and aspirations acknowledges that immigrants actively form and pursue their own life trajectories, which may or may not collide with the expectations of receiving societies but nonetheless affect their integration.

[Van Heelsum \(2016, 2017\)](#) recently rejected the use of traditional integration dimensions and resorted to the aspirations and capability framework for her research on newly resettled refugees in the Netherlands, suggesting that it can be a useful tool for studying life after migration. Migration scholarship has used aspirations and capabilities to explore the outset of migration as well as immobility dynamics. [Carling \(2002, 2014\)](#) first introduced his aspiration and ability model to analyse the effects of restrictive immigration policies, arguing for the necessity to study the aspiration and the ability to migrate separately. [De Haas \(2011, 2014\)](#) later combined Carling's model with [Sen's \(1999\)](#) theory of human development into an 'expanded' aspirations and capabilities framework, which makes it possible to explore how migrants, as individuals and as groups, exert agency within broader constraint and opportunities structures ([Carling and Schewel 2018](#)). Following up on Van Heelsum's research, we also contend that the aspirations and capability framework can be used to study immigrants' agency in receiving societies.

[Carling \(2002\)](#) elaborated on the concept of migration aspirations and their interdependence with life aspirations: migration aspirations can be conceptualized as projects for life-making that are functional to realizing broader aspirations, such as attaining a better education or income. [Carling and Collins \(2018\)](#) later suggested to go beyond the common usage of the term 'aspirations', which equates it to others like 'goals' or 'plans'. 'Aspirations' also refers to the social groundings of individual choice and comprises both the rational and emotional components of decision-making. Aspirations, in other words, are not the mere product of rational choice but also affective responses to opportunities and constraints, to social relations, and to possibilities of transforming the self. Indeed, exploring the multifaceted nature of aspirations and their embeddedness in social contexts is important if we are to understand how migrants form and pursue specific life trajectories.

[Boccagni \(2017\)](#) tried to capture both the subjective and relational aspects of migrants' aspirations by dissecting them into three constitutive dimensions:

*content* (aspiring what?), *relational reference* (to the benefit of whom?), and *time-space horizon* (when, and where?). Boccagni compared the life stories of 200 immigrant workers in Italy to trace changes in their aspirational trajectories and found that aspirations could be displaced, deferred, intergenerationally invested, or curtailed over time. Analysing aspirations along the three constitutive dimensions was effective to understand if, when, and why different aspects of aspirations were susceptible to change, and how they influenced one another. Most importantly, Boccagni framed aspirations as a way of cultivating open representations of the future and factored time into their analysis, which enabled him to study their evolution.

Approaching aspirations as representations of the future that need to be realized brings to the fore the link between aspirations and agency. First, aspirations themselves may be considered a form of agency, since they imply the intention to act to achieve specific goals (Ortner 2006: 134–153; Ghorashi *et al.* 2018). Second, the strategies chosen to fulfil aspirations always result in distinctive social practices (Pratsinakis 2005; van Meeteren 2014). Thus, exploring how immigrants' aspirations shift and evolve over time can shed light on how they exert agency in migration and integration processes.

In this article, we use Boccagni's model to execute a sequential study of our informants' aspirations. We examine how these evolved during migration and in their destination country in light of subjective priorities and of diverse constraints and opportunities (what Spencer and Charsley call 'effectors'). We thus illustrate how informants came to envision possible life trajectories, and how they pursued or discarded them depending on their capabilities. Such insights helped us establish a link between migration aspirations and integration prospects and also understand how refugees navigated and influenced structures of integration after migrating.

## Methodology

In this study, we are particularly concerned with the project-like function and the cognitive dimensions of aspirations, so as to assess how these impact on refugees' choices. Therefore, migration aspirations are here addressed in relation to the broader goals that refugees intended to realize by migrating. Terms like 'dreams, hopes, goals, plans' were used in interviews to investigate how participants consciously established possible life trajectories. This linguistic variation made it possible to explore a wide spectrum that ranged from more abstract aspirations (e.g. giving one's children a future) to more practical ones (e.g. what job one wants in the immediate future). This is not to say, however, that the emotional and social groundings of aspirations were ignored. An analysis along the three dimensions identified by Boccagni made it possible to capture how participants' aspirations formed and changed not only because of rational decision-making but also in response to social relations and subjective perspectives.

Research took place in early 2018 and involved a group of 18 Syrian refugees who had been settling in Sweden for about 6 months. All of them had reached

Europe at the beginning of 2016 and stayed one and a half year in Greece, where they spent 9 months in the same refugee camp before they were moved to multiple sites and eventually relocated to Sweden.

The group was varied in terms of age, familial status, level of education, and employment (it comprised people in their 20s, 30s and early 40s; singles, parents, and spouses without children; and, to provide a few examples, a firefighter, a truck driver, and several university students). Five elements, however, made the group coherent and suitable for research. The first is informants' country of origin. Syria links them all to a specific socio-political context—the Syrian conflict—that is the root cause of their migration and the determinant of their legal status(es) in Europe. The second element is the similarity of their migration trajectory and the shared experience of specific locations along this trajectory. The third one is the bureaucratic procedures they all underwent to obtain asylum in Sweden: as Syrian residents who arrived in Greece before 20 March 2016, informants were included in the 2015–2017 EU emergency relocation mechanism and could apply for asylum in a second European country. Their destination country, with its national asylum and integration framework, constitutes the fourth element of commonality. The fifth is that all participants were transferred to Sweden approximately at the same time and were at a similar stage of the settlement process.

Part of the literature tends to downplay the role of immigrants' background, approaching them as interchangeable research subjects whose national, cultural, and socio-economic characteristics have limited relevance. Indeed, research on migration and integration does not necessarily have to employ ethnic and national categories, but the approach above does not consider that migrants' background is a key component in shaping their aspirations and experience of receiving countries (Portes *et al.* 1978). For this study, we deemed that researching a cohort with common migration history and socio-political background was important to understand the resulting constraint and opportunity structures, and the influence of all these factors on informants' aspirations.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary research method and were complemented by observation and conversations whenever possible. Interviews were conducted in English, a language that most research participants had learned in Greece and could speak to a conversational level (translators were used with those who did not speak English well enough). Participants were asked to describe their journey to Sweden chronologically so that they could reconstruct events more clearly and open questions were used to investigate their hopes, dreams, and goals at different stages of migration. Interviews were analysed through coding categories derived from theories on aspirations, migration, and integration; categories were later expanded into sub-codes derived inductively from the data set. Additional codes and categories were also derived inductively. The qualitative information gained by looking at patterns provided valuable insights into how participants formed and pursued aspirations given the constraint and opportunity structures they encountered.

Fifteen case studies were eventually collected, some of which included family members who were interviewed together. The final case-study set presents two



main limitations. The first relates to the geographical limits of the research: with few exceptions, participants lived in three major Swedish cities—Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö—or in their proximities. The second limitation is that women are underrepresented in the case-study set: out of 18 participants, only two were females. This was due partly to the composition of the research population, which featured more males, and partly to the gender of the field researcher. Despite these limitations, the data collected provided significant insights into the relationship between Syrian refugees' aspirations, the dynamics of their migration, and their integration prospects.

### Syrian Refugees on Their Way to Europe

To study migration aspirations in the case of conflict-driven involuntary mobility, it is first necessary to acknowledge that this type of mobility happens when one's life and safety at home are under severe threat. In this case, migration aspirations are not a positive response to opportunities elsewhere but develop when aspirations to stay cannot be fulfilled (De Haas 2014). In the context of a war, the aspiration to stay is replaced by the aspiration to move elsewhere.

Research participants described at length the threats to personal safety and the infringements of fundamental freedoms that led them to leave Syria. After the first protests against Assad's government in March 2011, fights between government forces and the rebel-led Free Syrian Army rapidly extended across the country. In 2014, Islamic State entered the conflict and conquered several areas, until Syria became a patchwork of territories controlled by rivalling factions. Proximity to war zones was inherently dangerous, but informants consistently mentioned the risk of being imprisoned, tortured, and arbitrarily executed by government agents or by religious extremists. One informant reported that under Islamic State he was forced to stop studying law (which was deemed incompatible with Islamic *sharia*) and forbidden to smoke, shave, wear jeans, listen to certain types of music, and work during the obligatory daily prayers.

Syrians could essentially resort to three possible strategies to find safety: to stay in their current locations as long as these remained safe, to move to safer areas within Syria, or to seek sanctuary abroad. Informants implemented all of these strategies at different times, but by the beginning of 2016 they had all left the country. The majority took the decision to migrate when their personal safety or that of close relatives came under imminent threat. Some left to flee bombings or to escape Islamic State. In eight cases, male respondents said that they decided to migrate to avoid serving in the army; five left Syria after receiving the government's official call to arms. As more than one respondent put it, fighting in the war meant that 'you either kill or get killed'.

These threats clarify why staying was not a reasonable option for informants. The Syrian conflict was the backdrop against which their aspirations to stay were abandoned and the aspiration to migrate emerged, but the conflict also contributed to giving shape and direction to the aspiration to migrate. It must be considered that informants had to cope with other effects of war besides the threats to

safety and personal liberties. Many were planning to enhance their economic position, to further their education, or to undertake a certain career. The conflict thwarted these aspirations, causing a major disruption in the life trajectories informants envisaged for themselves and their families. Possibilities of employment became scarce, students were forced to drop out of universities, and parents could not safeguard children's needs and education. Migrating thus acquired additional instrumental values that went beyond the need to find safety, because it also implied rethinking those life trajectories interrupted by the war.

For young men like Saad, for example, migrating opened up possibilities for self-realization. A history student in Damascus, Saad, dreamt of becoming an academic. During the first years of conflict, he postponed his graduation as long as possible to avoid fighting (students were exempted from serving in the army). When he eventually graduated, Saad sought refuge in his city, which was out of Assad's control, and tried working as a teacher. However, finding a job was difficult and, after much thought, Saad decided to leave for Europe. As he said himself, leaving was a means not only to escape war but also to seek opportunities that a war-torn country could not offer: 'I decided to migrate from Syria because everything was killed. I couldn't live as a [human being]'.

Of the 15 cases here examined, eight left Syria between 2011 and 2015 whereas the remaining seven left at the beginning of 2016. Those who left Syria in 2016, like Saad, directly moved towards Europe. Conversely, informants who emigrated earlier initially tried to settle in Lebanon and Turkey, following the pattern of many Syrians who found hospitality and employment through their connections in neighbouring countries (Chatty 2017a: 219–246). In 2016, however, both groups crossed the Aegean Sea to reach Europe.

Salah was among the first to leave Syria. When the conflict started in 2011, he moved to Lebanon and found a job at a state-owned company. In 2012, he became engaged with Fatimah, a relative living in Syria. Salah strived to achieve the economic well-being that would allow Fatimah and him to get married and live together in Lebanon, but when the Lebanese government passed a law that forbade Syrians from working in public companies he lost both his job and his house. He then planned to continue working in Lebanon and to return to Syria when the conflict would end. Yet, the conflict only worsened and the Lebanese government progressively restricted the liberties of Syrians refugees (cf. Chatty 2017a: 235). Seeing no future in Syria and Lebanon, Salah tried to find work in Qatar and in Dubai and eventually moved to Turkey in 2014, where he managed to set up a successful business as a builder with a close friend. In June 2014, Fatimah and Salah celebrated their marriage in Turkey and at the beginning of 2016 she became pregnant. The pregnancy brought about new preoccupations. Fatimah was scared of the poor assistance Syrian women received in hospitals, whereas Salah was concerned about obtaining citizenship for the coming baby. 'You work for now, nothing for the future', he said, highlighting how the family's future would be precarious without some form of permanent residency. Meanwhile, migration towards Europe increased. Salah said that workers in his company would only stay long enough to save money for a smuggler. He also said that the media



portrayed a promising image of Europe, showing non-governmental organizations and volunteers who worked to support asylum seekers landing on Greek shores. In March 2016, despite their relative economic security, the couple crossed the Aegean Sea on a smuggler's boat.

Fatimah and Salah's story demonstrates how migratory trajectories are not always the result of predetermined plans but can be processes in the making that entail some degree of unpredictability. Within these processes, life aspirations work as a compass with no fixed North: they evolve *en route*, adjusting to new needs and contexts, and they can lead migrants to reconsider their destination and even the motives of their migration (cf. Schapendonk 2011, 2012). For Fatimah and Salah, the relational dimension of aspirations played a key role in decision-making: achieving family well-being was the top priority. The aspiration to start a family led Salah across four countries until the conditions to realize it were met; then, when Fatimah became pregnant, the couple formed new aspirations concerning the future of their child and expanded their horizon towards Europe, where better life conditions seemed possible.

The challenges to building a bright future for oneself and for one's family is a theme that came up in the interviews with all respondents who tried to settle in Syria's neighbouring countries. Many lamented extremely poor working and living conditions and the impossibility for children and youngsters to access formal education. As these informants realized that their aspirations could not be fulfilled in their first country of arrival, new destinations entered their geographical horizon. Time also affected their aspirations and led them to reconsider their projects. Some had hoped to live in a neighbouring country only until a safe return to Syria became possible, but the conflict's unpredicted duration and the unlikelihood of living a 'good life' in Turkey or Lebanon pushed them to move onwards (cf. Chatty 2017b).

Conversely, the group of informants that left Syria in 2016 moved directly towards Europe. As they witnessed the progressive collapse of socio-economic infrastructures and their chances of making a promising future in Syria died down, these informants thought of migrating as a long-term project rather than a temporary solution and opted not for the closest safe place but for a destination where building a brighter future seemed possible. The geographical horizon of their aspirations was also influenced by the accounts of friends, relatives, and other refugees who had already sought refuge in Europe, who depicted it as a more promising destination.

Regardless of whether migrating was a temporary or a long-term project, however, the examples provided show that informants' migration aspirations were embedded in broader life aspirations. Even when mobility was involuntary, as in the flight out of Syria, migration aspirations served multiple purposes and called into question informants' projects for the future. Reaching Europe was then a voluntary rather than involuntary type of mobility but was still propelled by the prospect of fulfilling one's projects.

### Stranded in Greece

After reaching the Greek islands, informants were taken to a newly built refugee camp in Katsikas, a village in the mainland. Like those who had crossed the Balkans before them, informants were planning to transit quickly through Greece and move on towards Northern Europe, but the unexpected closure of Macedonia's border left them stranded and exposed to the camp's terrible living conditions. From their initial condition of involuntary mobility, informants shifted into one of involuntary immobility with virtually no chances to continue the journey and no certainty about their future.

The UNHCR officially notified informants about the possibility to enrol for the EU relocation programme only 3 months after their arrival in Katsikas. The programme offered a legal pathway to exit Greece and rekindled informants' prospects of reaching their chosen destinations but, in fact, it deprived them of the capability to determine both the direction and the timing of their movements. The programme entailed several interviews to assess individuals' right to asylum, after which destination countries were to be established and transportation arranged in coordination with EU Member States. This process forced informants into a long period of transition.

Exploring the continuities and discontinuities of informants' aspirations during this transitional period is important to understand how they reworked their trajectories in light of the structural constraints posed by the European asylum system. Discerning between the various dimensions of aspirations is here useful to grasp what elements of informants' aspirations were susceptible to change and which ones remained constant. The analysis also enables us to better understand the role that aspirations played in a situation of stagnation where informants could exert very limited agency over their lives.

Within the framework of the relocation programme, asylum seekers could express preferences about their destination by picking from a list of participating countries. By mapping informants' preferences, it is possible to see that they oriented themselves upon a common geographical horizon. A clear division between 'good' and 'bad' countries emerged from interviews: North-Western countries with better economies and welfare provisions were good countries, and South-Eastern countries were bad ones. This common perception was mostly the product of information collected and shared within refugee communities, both online and offline (other studies on how asylum seekers define migratory trajectories highlighted similar dynamics; see [Koser and Pinkerton 2002](#): 26–29). As informants built up their knowledge of European countries, they revised their aspirations' geographical horizon, sometimes opting for new destinations that better suited their objectives.

Self-realization was often the primary driver for single young men. Saad, the history graduate mentioned above, was initially heading to Germany but later he picked Ireland as his first option for relocation. Information about Ireland's first-rate universities and the fact that he had already learnt some English led him to choose a country where continuing to study seemed easier. Families prioritized

children's well-being. Qasim, a father of six, clearly enumerated his criteria for assessing possible relocation countries: employment opportunities to support his family, the possibility for his children to receive an education and better provisions for refugees. In both cases, the geographical horizon of informants' aspirations worked in combination with their subjective priorities when they chose their options for relocation. Saad's choice depended upon the content of his aspirations (undertaking a certain career), whereas Qasim's pivoted on the relational dimension.

Relational reference was also the most compelling element in the aspirations of those hoping to reunite with family. Hamza, who wanted to secure legal entry for his wife, opted for the Netherlands, where reunification laws were more favourable; for him, location and employment opportunities were instrumental to fulfilling the conditions to apply for family reunification. Conversely, informants who left Syria to join family members already in Europe chose their relatives' country of residence as a destination.

Eventually, informants' standstill in Greece lasted about a year and a half. Europe's immigration interface, their depleted economic resources, and individual restraints hampered their capability to migrate illegally and waiting became inevitable. It must be noticed, however, that the standstill did give some informants the opportunity to mobilize their social capital and gather enough money to pay a smuggler. Still, these informants decided to wait. Waiting represented a sensible investment if the potential outcome was to be granted legal entry in a Northern country, as opposed to running the risks of being smuggled or asking for asylum in Greece and accepting a less promising future (negative assessments of the costs and benefits of migrating can indeed lead asylum migrants to favour immobility, regardless of individual capabilities; cf. [Valenta et al. 2015](#): 109). Some informants also considered migrating illegally again after relocation should they be assigned an undesirable destination.

This capability to envision possible life trajectories and devise plans to realize them despite the constrictive asylum framework can be considered a 'delayed' type of agency, a form of resistance to structural constraints ([Ghorashi et al. 2018](#)) that pivots on the temporal dimension of aspirations. Because of their potential nature, aspirations do not require an immediate realization and may be deferred. During the standstill, informants postponed the realization of their aspirations; this gave them an opportunity to reformulate and sharpen their trajectories, but it also helped them sustain psychologically a long period in which the ability to exert agency was brought to a minimum.

This last remark is crucial to understand informants' experience in Greece. Our focus on decision-making should not create illusions about informants' actual agency within the asylum system. Despite the possibility to express preferences, relocation very much depended on place availability in each country and many Katsikas camp residents had their expectations disattended. Sweden was not even available for relocation at the time of informants' applications. It was the European asylum system that allocated them to Sweden after the Swedish government agreed to participate in the programme.

### Settling in Sweden

After their arrival in the summer of 2017, informants were taken to reception facilities across the country and spent months in camps often isolated from urban areas. The Swedish Migration Agency assessed their cases and provided temporary accommodations until longer-term housing became available. Informants were then enrolled in national integration programmes at local municipalities.

Swedish integration programmes are widely considered as very liberal for their rights-based approach, which aims at facilitating refugees' social inclusion through language, housing, and employment assistance (Valenta and Bunar 2010). Swedish citizenship policies are also framed as an instrument to facilitate integration, requiring only 5 years of residence to apply with no other preconditions. In recent years, however, Sweden has progressively retreated from its multiculturalist orientation (Schierup and Ålund 2011; Bech *et al.* 2017) and the government adopted several restrictions to asylum rights, most notably the decision to issue only time-limited residence permits—3 years for political asylum and one for subsidiary protection. Legal statuses and integration programmes impacted on informants' aspirational trajectories, working in combination with individual factors such as housing, family networks, and social interactions. Legal statuses directly related to informants' need for stability and the prospects of reuniting with family and thus affected aspirations to settle and integrate on a broader scale. Integration programmes primarily affected informants' perceived possibility to pursue specific life trajectories in terms of education and career, therefore impacting on the content of aspirations.

The large majority of informants said they hoped to settle permanently in Sweden. They excluded returning to Syria, emphasizing the prospect of political persecution and the impossibility to make a life in a country ravaged by years of war. Yet, the temporary nature of their protection statuses impinged on their aspirations to stability and long-lasting safety, resulting in a prolongation of that state of suspension that characterized their time in Greece.

The liberality of citizenship policies left more room to aspire for stability. Informants generally looked at citizenship as an instrument to secure full rights in Sweden, but this utilitarian perspective was not the only one to emerge. Some attached to citizenship other meanings related to needs of belonging and social inclusion. Interestingly, informants who said they would be content with any form of permanent residence did not necessarily show a lower aspiration to social inclusion, suggesting that integration itself had an intrinsic value for them. For example, integration into Swedish society was a clear goal for Noor. 'I want to be a Swedish man. With citizenship and a good job', he said. Yet, Noor did not associate his desire to stay with citizenship: 'They give us a good future. I think we should do something for the country. I will not stay here just for the passport. If I don't get it, no problem'.

Many informants framed the aspiration to integrate in terms of becoming 'embedded with the people', paying attention to their relationship with the Swedes rather than with the Swedish State, but they encountered diverse setbacks

to socialization. Daily routine seemed to be crucial in determining interactions with the Swedish population, more than language skills. When housing arrangements and integration programmes did not offer chances for spontaneous encounters with Swedes, informants felt that they could not fulfil the aspiration to integrate. This was the case of single men hosted in refugee reception facilities in Stockholm, whose social circles inevitably featured almost only foreigners. Conversely, positive engagement with Swedish neighbours helped other informants to create social leverage and it accelerated their acculturation, and in one case it even provided a job opportunity.

The new transnational dimension of informants' family networks inevitably affected the relational aspect of their aspirations, casting diverse effects on settlement prospects and on their efforts towards embedding themselves in their new society. As informants left Syria to seek safety in Europe, the geography of their family networks was reshaped to encompass multiple countries. Three factors specifically affected integration prospects: the presence of family members in Syria; the presence of close family members in other European countries; and (the lack of) opportunities for family reunification. Knowing that close family members were still subject to the risks of war in Syria was a great source of distress and hampered informants' ability to focus on language and skill acquisition, but it did not affect their aspiration to settle. Conversely, the presence of close family members in other European countries could affect settlement aspirations. Omar, whose entire family moved to Germany, considered the possibility of joining them in the future, but first he wanted to continue his education and find a job in Sweden. Opportunities for family reunification proved to have a crucial impact on the development of settlement aspirations. When Hamza discovered that his subsidiary protection status prevented him from applying for reunification in the next years, he developed no aspirations to settle and thought of migrating again somewhere he could reunite with his wife sooner.

Integration programmes were more directly linked with aspects of self-making. These programmes comprise language and skill courses as well as internships. Refugees are assigned a case worker to develop customized plans that formally enable them to formulate their own career goals, but the programmes also cater to the state's need of ensuring refugees' self-sufficiency by the end of a two-year period (cf. [Fernandes 2015](#)).

For some informants, the programmes represented an opportunity to take up again the life trajectories that the war in Syria had interrupted. Saad, who wanted to be an academic, personalized his plan in view of accessing higher education and teaching jobs. In other cases, informants changed the content of their aspirations and chose to undertake new paths in response to the experience of war, migration and the long interruption of their expected life trajectories. Twenty-four-year-old Rashid hoped to become a history teacher, but he abandoned his dream because he thought that his knowledge of Syrian history could not find an application in Europe; he therefore settled on studying mechanics. Twenty-year-old Amir wanted to study communication engineering, but he decided to become a doctor after witnessing people's suffering in Syria; he therefore tailored his plan to pursue

such career. Goals like achieving a degree, however, imply a long-term investment. A sound knowledge of Swedish is required, and informants must become financially self-sufficient. Some informants devised alternative strategies, like seeking temporary careers, to tackle these obstacles, and in so doing they applied the same ‘delayed’ agency that they had applied in Greece. Noor, a former law student, thought of training as a welder to find employment quickly and resume studying law in the future.

In practice, integration programmes address both refugees’ goals and skills and thus function as laboratories where individual aspirations and capabilities are reconfigured into life trajectories that can be more or less satisfactory. Age and parenthood are likely discriminating factors in the process of establishing these trajectories. Single youths were more inclined to pursue long-term education and career plans, whereas parents predictably prioritized their families’ economic security over personal professional aspirations.

At the individual level, aspirations are therefore susceptible to space-time conditions—the structures in which refugees are embedded, the effects of their past experiences, and the perceived opportunities to actualize aspirations in the future. This may influence the content of aspirations and/or the strategies devised to pursue them. At the same time, wider patterns emerge. When informants perceived opportunities to realize the aspirations or projects for life-making that led them to migrate—safety and stability, self-realization, securing children’s future—they developed aspirations to settle and to integrate. Conversely, when they perceived that these aspirations could not be fulfilled, as in the case of family reunification, aspirations to settle and integrate were affected negatively.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have demonstrated how, even in the case of involuntary mobility, migration aspirations correspond to specific projects for life-making, which at once encompass and go beyond the need for safety and which remain central during migration and settlement. Whether informants developed aspirations to settle and integrate in Sweden was largely dependent on whether they perceived the possibility to bring these projects for life-making to completion, regardless of the changes in content and space-time horizon that may have occurred during migration. Framing migration aspirations as projects for life-making therefore enabled us to establish a direct link between the motives of informants’ migration and how they navigated structures of integration in their destination country.

Analysing aspirations through their constitutive dimensions (Boccagni 2017) was also essential to understand in what ways projects for life-making may change. The spatial horizon of aspirations seems to be instrumental to the fulfilment of other dimensions. Informants developed their geographical trajectories to reunite with their families, ensure their families’ well-being (relational reference), or realize personal goals, for example accessing a certain type of career (content). Content can be influenced by other dimensions of an aspiration, not least its temporal horizon, and can change after an evaluation of costs and benefits.



(How long does it take to realize an aspiration? Is it worth pursuing?) Conversely, the relational reference of aspirations was hardly negotiable and acted as the prime trajectory determinant for those hoping to reunite or travelling with families—which seems to match patterns in the choice of destination countries described by other asylum migrants (cf. [Robinson and Segrott 2002](#); [Brekke and Brochmann 2015](#)).

Identifying contextual constraints to the realization of aspirations was equally relevant to see how informants' *actual* life trajectories were formed. Yet, by incorporating Boccagni's three-dimension model into the study of aspirations and capabilities we gained a more nuanced understanding of how informants strove to direct their life trajectories, not only during migration but also in destination countries. This offers an advantage in the study of aspirations and capabilities, in that it allows to better capture aspirations analytically and to assess the decision-making processes based on such aspirations.

For methodological reasons, this article focused on a homogeneous group that had only been in its destination country for a short period and, therefore, we have been concerned with integration prospects rather than outcomes. Other studies demonstrated that as aspirations change over time so do immigrants' social practices ([Pratsinakis 2005](#); [Boccagni 2017](#)) and that aspirations themselves can be used as analytical categories to examine integration trajectories ([van Meeteren 2014](#)). Using the three-dimension model to research the aspirations and capabilities of other migrants could therefore clarify how the motives of their migration impact on integration dynamics, and how the intersection of subjective priorities with contextual opportunity and constraint structures generates specific integration outcomes. This is crucial if we are to reconceptualize integration in more comprehensive terms that are not solely based on the perspectives of receiving societies.

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