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## **Employable identities: Social and cultural capital in the narratives of former refugees**

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Navigating the labour market in a new context can be a challenge for any migrant, and particularly so for former refugees, who are often unable to find employment appropriate for their qualification and experience levels. This study takes an Interactional Sociolinguistic approach to exploring how three former refugees navigate employability in narrative, from the social constructionist perspective of employable *identities*, emergent from and negotiated within discourse. The study focuses specifically on the participants' discursive navigation of their various (Bourdiesian) social and cultural capital and its importance to labour market performance. Evident in the data are the difficulties of translating – or having recognised – a lifetime's accumulation of capital, often rendered worthless upon migration. Such challenges impact upon forced migrants' ability to successfully enact employability, and subsequently upon their imagined (future) identities. This research highlights former refugees' complex challenges involved with successful navigation of employability in a new context.

**Keywords:** former refugees; employable identities; social capital; cultural capital; migration

## **Introduction**

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In 2015 the so-called European refugee crisis dominated media worldwide. As civil war forced millions of Syrians from their homes, and increasing numbers of people fled conflict, persecution, and poverty in Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Kosovo and other nations, more than one million people crossed into the European Union via the Mediterranean Sea and Southeast Europe (BBC News Service, 2016). While this wave of migration was framed as extraordinary, nations worldwide will feel the effects of steadily increasing numbers of displaced persons (currently over 80 million; the highest it has ever been (UNHCR, 2021)) for the foreseeable future, exacerbated by the environmental and political ramifications of climate change, and a rise in isolationist and xenophobic ideologies across the globe. Refugee-receiving nations need to adapt quickly to this changing landscape. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the location for the present study, the government recently agreed to increase New Zealand’s refugee intake quota from 1000 to 1500 places annually (Doing Our Bit, 2018). Even before this increase, New Zealand had one of the highest refugee quotas per capita in the world. However, in part due to New Zealand’s geographical isolation, numbers of asylum seekers (those who arrive at a country’s border and seek to claim asylum, rather than being resettled through UNHCR quotas) are much lower than other nations, resulting in the country’s intake lagging far behind most developed nations. Both voluntary and forced<sup>1</sup> migrants to New Zealand encounter myriad challenges during resettlement, including of course prejudice and discrimination (Butcher et al., 2006). At the extreme end of this, while New Zealanders may have considered their homeland to be somewhat immune to the violent xenophobia emerging elsewhere across the globe, the Christchurch mosque shootings of 15 March 2019, in which a white supremacist

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<sup>1</sup> Those who choose to migrate under “normal” circumstances; and those who are forced to migrate due to external, emergency circumstances, respectively. The latter is often used to refer to people internally displaced in their country of origin by natural or other disasters, but in this paper refers to resettled former refugees whose migration circumstances differ drastically from voluntary migrants.

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terrorist murdered 51 people during Friday Prayers and injured many more, made clear that it is not. Acts of terrorism are exceedingly rare in New Zealand, but less visible challenges to newcomers' full involvement in society are far more prevalent. Indeed, following the initial hurdles presented by the early, practical logistics of settlement of these new arrivals, perhaps the greatest challenges for refugees and host nations alike lie ahead.

In particular, navigating the labour market is an on-going challenge for many migrants, and particularly so for those of refugee background. Largely considered by host governments to be the most important factor for social integration (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Lamba, 2003; Statistics New Zealand, 2004), accessing and securing stable, long-term employment is of course a high priority for former refugees<sup>2</sup> themselves, who frequently report not being able to find jobs commensurate with their qualifications or experience (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Gans, 2009; Lamba, 2003).

This paper seeks to explore the labour market experiences of former refugees in New Zealand, and the challenges and opportunities they perceive therein. I present data from research interviews taken from my wider Interactional Sociolinguistic study exploring former refugees' navigation of employable identities in narrative. Here I focus upon three participants, Omar, Isaac and Kelly, and the ways in which they navigate their own "employability" in narrative discourse. Excerpts from these participants' data presented here demonstrate their belief in the importance of their social networks, their experience and knowledge, and their

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<sup>2</sup> A note on nomenclature: I use the term *former refugee* to acknowledge that these participants have been refugees in the past but are now permanent residents (or in some cases, citizens) of New Zealand. I recognise that the process of refugeehood technically ends upon arrival in the country of resettlement. Although the effects of refugeehood can linger indefinitely, the label of *refugee* no longer applies.

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qualifications – Bourdieu’s (1986) *social and cultural capital* – to their employment success. However, their dissimilar access to the “right” kinds of social capital, and their varied success in attempts to negotiate recognition of their extant cultural capital, can be seen to have ensuing ramifications for their abilities to negotiate employable identities in the local context, and to remain invested in the often-dispiriting search for acceptable employment.

### **Employable Identities**

The concept of *employability*, based on “develop[ing] the personal and professional capacity to maximise one’s employment potential” (Smith, 2010, p. 280), has often been characterised by the “skills agenda” (L. Holmes, 2001) wherein an individual’s employability rests upon the supposedly observable and demonstrable work-related skills and attributes that they are in possession of (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Bridgstock, 2009; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; L. Holmes, 2001; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Recent literature, however, has begun to question this essentialised and internalised view of employability, and to focus instead on the idea of employability as an interactionally achieved, co-constructed, and contextually-dependent *identity* (J. Holmes & Marra, 2017; L. Holmes, 2001; LaPointe, 2010; Reissner-Roubicek, 2017). In this study I approach employability from a social constructionist perspective, viewing it in terms of *employable identity* (whatever that might mean in a given context, but generally of course involving the display of such traits as competence, adaptability, professionalism), which allows viewing it as a discursive and socially situated phenomenon, which is interactionally achieved. As identity discursively emerges from social and cultural practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; LaPointe, 2010), “notions of employability, skills and competence

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*only have meaning* [emphasis added] when located within socially-constructed channels of inter-employee engagement and interaction” (Tomlinson, 2010, p. 80).

Thus, employable identities must be negotiated: for all the valuable skills, attributes, and experience job seekers may possess, these must be recognised as such by those employing (or considering employing) them. Accordingly, part of the enactment of an employable identity (which is not any one “thing”, but is the *doing* of *contextually-appropriate* identity work) involves being able to present one’s experience and skills in a way which conforms with employer expectations (Brown et al., 2016, p. 194). In order to appropriately perform this “narrative of employability” (Brown & Hesketh, 2004, p. 145) in a locally- and contextually-appropriate way, an individual must have access to the “right” kinds of cultural capital to recognise how a given practice is enacted (cf. Campbell & Roberts, 2007; Roberts, 2013; Roberts & Campbell, 2005; Roberts & Sarangi, 1995). For former refugees, such enactment is also performed in the shadow of social Discourses associated with refugeehood: in a New Zealand context, widely held (media-perpetuated) ideas that characterise former refugees as vulnerable, needy, and suffering from trauma (see Greenbank, 2014, 2020). This victim-like positioning is incongruous with widely held ideas of employability, such as competence, adaptability, or confidence – and such incongruence is important when considering the two-way, co-constructed nature of employable identities.

Most research focuses on this identity work taking place in workplaces or job interviews (e.g. J. Holmes & Marra, 2005, 2017; Kirilova, 2017; Kuśmierczyk, 2013; Reissner-Roubicek, 2017; van de Mierop & Schnurr, 2017), but employable identities are not only performed in these contexts. Indeed, they may be negotiated in any context where employability is salient to

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interlocutors. For former refugees, this salience may be heightened due to their status as newcomers and ongoing employment-related challenges. Particularly in the context of employability-focused research I argue that for the participants, their own employable identities factor into their self and other positioning in our interactions. Drawing on and indexing the various capital at their disposal is one way to navigate such identity work.

## **Capital**

Negotiating a locally-useful employable identity can be fraught with challenges in cross-cultural contexts, wherein lack of familiarity with local norms, practices, systems, and social structures can be tricky for anyone in a new sociocultural context, not least of all forced migrants (Lamba, 2003; Piller, 2016; Roberts & Sarangi, 1995). Such structural obstacles include the “translation” of a lifetime’s cultural knowledge, and the re-creation of useful social networks. These are components of Bourdieu’s (1977a, 1977b, 1986) *cultural* and *social capital*, which emerged as particularly salient in this study’s data.

Bourdieu developed these concepts as a way to explain the out-of-sight mechanisms of social order and power, and in particular the role capital plays in reproducing society and the positions of the powerful within it, often across generations (Bourdieu, 1986; Brown et al., 2016). He argued that the transmission of cultural habits and dispositions in the home is vital to scholastic success, describing this as “the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 85). An individual’s relationship to the social world is shaped by their (variously valuable) social and cultural capital, and discursively

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indexing capital can allow speakers to make various identity claims relative to that capital (though of course these claims must be accepted by interlocutors for that capital to be situationally valuable (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Seals, 2010)).

Simply speaking, *cultural* capital is (culturally-specific) valuable knowledge of and expertise in practices associated with power (Bourdieu, 1986; Meadows, 2009). It can exist in three forms. *Embodied* cultural capital is dispositions and competencies which are a part of, or inside, an individual (such as a particular accent or linguistic proficiency, skills and experience, taste, or values). *Institutional* cultural capital refers to credentials awarded to an individual by an external (institutional) body, such as academic degrees, or other qualification certificates. In theory, institutionalised cultural capital allows the establishment of “conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88), though this is changing today as increasing numbers of highly educated people decrease the market value of formerly (relatively) scarce qualifications (Brown et al., 2016). Finally, *objectified* cultural capital refers to actual goods or objects which represent or stand in for embodied capital, (such as art works, musical instruments, or books). Given that objectified cultural capital is scarcely readily employed via discourse, I do not consider it in this study. *Social* capital is the totality of the potential resources an individual can access through their group memberships, and relationships in social networks (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 88). This type of capital functions as a source of both immediate support, and of benefits via wider networks (Bourdieu, 1986).

Complicating social and cultural capital is the fact that the “rules of the game” vary and evolve across different social and physical contexts, and “the value of one’s capital also shifts

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as it travels across time and space” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 44). That is, an individual’s investment of time into any type of capital may be rendered worthless upon arrival in a new country. Former refugees, already navigating new and unfamiliar sociocultural contexts, may have to do so with little of the pre-migration planning and research that voluntary migrants are able to undertake. In their host societies, their embodied capital may lose its value, their institutional capital may be unrecognised or devalued, and their social capital may be non-existent and difficult to recreate (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Lamba, 2003; Ricento, 2015). For former refugees, the effects of such “depreciation” can be immense, both personally (in terms of their sense self-esteem and dignity) and professionally, in terms of their ability to exhibit – and have recognised – their skills and competence, as can be seen in excerpts from their narratives to follow.

## **Narrative**

Narratives are an ideal place to explore former refugees’ negotiation of employable identities, as they emerge in social interactions, and are significant sites of identity construction where we make sense of the world and reveal our perspectives and social positions (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). They are stories we tell about ourselves and others, and through which we make sense of our experiences and our place in the social world, connecting past events to our contemporary senses of self, and imagining our possible futures (Pomerantz, 2012; Schiffrin, 1996). As sites of the construction and display of self and other, narratives create a backdrop against which tellers can position themselves. The analysis of narrative discourse can be particularly useful to explore identity in studies of forced



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migrants, where narratives are sometimes “the only means we have of knowing something about life in times and places to which we have little other access” (Eastmond, 2007, p. 249). A narrative approach can reveal the complex nature of acutely challenging resettlement situations, and the specific social (and economic) implications therein.

Unsurprisingly, then, narrative studies have explored a wide range of contexts of migration and cross-cultural contexts. For example, De Fina (2000, 2003, 2006) explores self-representation in the narratives of undocumented Mexican immigrants to the United States. She found that these immigrants use ethnic identity as an important identification category for both themselves and others in their stories in the construction of discursive in- and out-groups (De Fina, 2000). While downplaying their own individualism within a collective group, De Fina notes that the migrants were able to keep a sense of themselves as strong and resourceful, maintaining agency through their sense of community.

Focusing on stories told by two Jewish-American women about their families, Schiffrin (1996) argues that narratives are sites of the construction and display of self. The article focuses on narratives around intra-familial difficulties, including the possibility of a daughter marrying a perceived “outsider”. The author describes how the storytellers vacillate between positions of solidarity and distance in their narrative performances of motherhood, and compares narrative to a self-portrait, or a “linguistic lens through which to discover peoples’ own (somewhat idealised) views of themselves as situated in a social structure” (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 199).

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The work of Holmes, Marra and others from the Language in the Workplace team (e.g. J. Holmes, 2018; J. Holmes & Marra, 2002) has explored narratives in cross-cultural interaction in New Zealand workplaces, including both skilled migrant (e.g. J. Holmes & Marra, 2011) and Māori-Pākehā (J. Holmes, 2005b; J. Holmes et al., 2019) contexts. These studies discuss how storytelling can be used to pragmatic ends, and in the construction of ethnic, leadership, and other identities in the workplace. They discuss how narratives can play an important role in relationship building in the workplace (J. Holmes & Marra, 2011), or in negotiating disparate aspects of workplace and social identities (J. Holmes, 2005a). Such (culturally-specific) functions are not always evident to newcomers to a workplace context.

How we position ourselves within narratives may diverge from how others position us. This can become particularly salient in exploration of refugee narratives. Leudar et al. (2008) note that, in a UK context, refugees and asylum seekers do not often get the opportunity to publicly display or affirm their identities, and that they are frequently having to do so relative to hostile media and locals. Similarly, in a narrative exploration of the self-positions of Sudanese Australian former refugees, Hatoss (2012) discovered that former refugee participants displayed strong desire to orient towards Australian identities. However, they indicated that “mainstream” Australians continued to position them as outsiders. Narratives, Hatoss (2012, p. 48; drawing on Labov, 2010) notes “are rarely just about [an] event”, but also include evaluative comments which are involved in the construction and performance of identity. Expectations around what a certain kind of person is “supposed” to be like and the impact on their perceived credibility is also particularly salient in this context. Berg and Millbank (2009) explore issues around eliciting refugee claim narratives, where the claim is rooted in sexual orientation. They note that most research on gay identity has been undertaken

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in the context of white, middle class, American men, with very little attention paid to “non-Western expressions of minority sexualities” (Berg & Millbank, 2009, p. 207). Thus, interviewers’ expectations of LGBTQ+ presentation may hinder the asylum claims of those whose narratives do not “fit the (Western) mould”, with clear “real-world” implications for such claims.

Evident in all of the above research is that “the self is social in origin and narratively structured” (Leudar et al., 2008, p. 190). These studies recognise that narratives are not “transparent renditions of reality” (Eastmond, 2007, p. 252), but rather must be considered and interpreted within their particular social, historical and contextual environments. Of particular relevance to the current study, narrative can play an important role in performances and negotiation of *employability*, which, Tomlinson (2010, p. 80) notes, “only have meaning when located within socially-constructed channels of inter-employee engagement and interaction”. I apply these understanding to the current study, examining the ways in which former refugees position themselves in relation to wider social ideologies or Discourses (Gee, 1990) as they attempt to enact employability, or employable identities.

## **Methodology**

A social constructionist approach to exploration of employable identity in narrative negotiation calls for methodological design that allows for investment of time, and requires in-depth understanding of the data collection (co-construction) context. Ethnographic research is an excellent way to address these needs, allowing researchers to “access and interpret social events

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of complex modern communities from multiple perspectives” (Marra & Lazzaro-Salazar, 2018, pp. 346-347). Recognition that the manner of data collection impacts upon the data content is fundamental to an ethnographic approach, along with awareness that the “type” or quality of data collected or created is as affected by the researcher as by the research participant themselves (Gottlieb, 2006, p. 48). Practicing such reflexivity in research aligns with post structuralist conceptualisations of meaning as situationally *co-constructed* in interaction by all participants (Ahearn, 2001; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Gumperz, 2005). Furthermore, ethnography is committed to recognising and respecting the irreducibility of human experience (O’Reilly, 2009; Rampton et al., 2014) and recognises that any account will necessarily be partial. My research aligns with an ethnographic ethos and draws on ethnographic methodology, while not comprising an ethnography per se. In particular I follow ethnography’s commitment to reflexive observation of social contexts from both emic and etic perspectives which offers depth of data and analysis over breadth.

## Interviews

The phase of study from which this paper’s excerpts are taken involved refugee-background participants, recruited through both existing university networks and refugee support agencies (for further detail, see Greenbank, 2020). This paper’s data emerged out of ethnographic-style interviews, which I approached as conversational, social encounters of meaning-making where that meaning is co-constructed by both the interviewer and the interviewee (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Mann, 2010; Talmy, 2010). In these interviews, some topics of conversation are pre-determined to a certain extent (such as past employment experiences), but as the interview becomes conversational, other topics emerge naturally and can be explored in a

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naturalistic manner. This informality allows elicitation (co-construction) of rich, complex data between interviewee and interviewer. Thus, borrowing techniques from ethnography allows me the depth and breadth of data emerging from naturalistic situations and genuine relationships. Making use of social and cultural capital emerged as salient themes in these interviews, and I present in this paper excerpts which are representative of this theme.

## Participants

This paper explores the narratives of three former refugee participant whose data formed the phase of study this paper draws upon: Kelly, Isaac, and Omar (these are pseudonyms). I will here briefly introduce each of them to provide some context to the reader for the explorations of their narratives which are to follow. Kelly, in her mid-30s, was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents and came to New Zealand as a child with her family, as refugees. She spent a number of years completing high school and marrying in Palestine before returning once again to New Zealand. She has a Bachelor of Business Studies, and at the time of data collection, had been unsuccessfully looking for suitable employment for around a year. Isaac, also in his mid-30s, grew up in Eritrea. As a young man he fled his homeland and eventually was resettled in New Zealand. He was studying International Relations at the time of data collection, and working part time for the university's union. Omar, in his 40s, grew up in Syria. Before migration he was a chief engineer on cargo ships. Once his family had resettled in New Zealand, Omar was able to find engineering work with the help of a recruitment agency. However, this work was well below his qualification and experience level. In the data to follow, these three can be seen to variously celebrate and lament their social and cultural capital as they navigate New Zealand's labour market.

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## **Analysis**

To analyse this data, I draw on both Bamberg's (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2009) approach to analysing narrative, and the micro-level focus of Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982, 2005; J. Holmes, Joe, et al., 2011). Bamberg's approach is grounded in social constructionism and draws on both ethnography and discourse analysis. It is an approach which does not dismiss "inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguities" (Bamberg, 2004b, p. 222) in narrative, but rather explores them to examine how narrators manage their social identities in interaction. This approach considers three levels of positioning within narrative: how individuals in the storyworld are positioned in relation to each other and in space and time, the ways that the narrator positions themselves and is positioned within the interactive situation, and reflection on how the participants construct each other and themselves in terms of teller roles and in doing so establish a sense of self/identity (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 84). This approach to narrative analysis allows examination of individuals' self (as both *narrator*, and as *protagonist* within the storyworld) and other positioning, the interactive nature of the data, and their relationship to an emergent identity, being explored for the first time, renegotiated in new settings, and recounted through narrative.

From a sociolinguistic perspective Bamberg's narrative analysis, focused on identification of rhetorical and argumentative organisation (2004b, p. 221), can be complemented by the close examination of micro level discourse features, which is offered by Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS). IS is a methodological and theoretical approach to exploring

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how meaning is created in everyday, face-to-face communication. It is a theory which puts language at the heart of social and cultural processes, and as a method of qualitative analysis, “account[s] for our ability to interpret what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice” (Gumperz, 2005, p. 309). IS seeks to locate discourse in its wider sociocultural context (J. Holmes, Marra, et al., 2011). It involves fine-grained analysis which concentrates on features such as contextualisation cues and conversational inference (Gumperz, 1982, 2005); and micro level discourse features and pragmatic markers (Schiffrin, 1987, 2001), in combination with the analyst’s contextual knowledge allows deep insight into the ways that meaning and identity are negotiated moment to moment by narrators, both as narrators and as protagonists within their storyworlds (for further detail, see Greenbank, 2020).

The combination of these two complementary approaches provides me with valuable tools to explore the co-construction of identity as emergent within narrative. Simultaneously, this approach illuminates the relationships between identity and the ideologically-shaped contexts in which it emerges. The importance of both cultural and social capital in successfully negotiating locally-useful employable identities emerged in conversation with Kelly, Omar, and Isaac. Below I explore the ways in which these former refugee participants positioned themselves relative to the capital they were able, or unable, to access, and the effects that this access had on their ability to discursively navigate their current and future employable identities (Norton, 2001).

I present here relatively short excerpts (which in some cases make up a small part of a larger narrative) taken from long interviews. I am not presenting here a Labovian analysis in which all components of a narrative must be accounted for. Rather, as an Interactional

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Sociolinguist, I am interested in – and focused upon – the ephemeral moments of identity work scattered throughout an interaction. I present the excerpts as examples of the kinds of repeated – and variable – identity work that the participants engaged in over the research interviews. These excerpts, in which I first discuss cultural capital and subsequently social capital, allow glimpses of narrators’ navigation of various versions of self in a given context, and the “fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world [which might otherwise] easily be missed out on” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 5) in a focus on the wider story.

## **Data**

The capital one has impacts upon identity negotiation: understanding of one’s relationship to the world is shaped by one’s social and cultural capital, which of course is variably valuable across time and space. Earning institutional cultural capital has traditionally been considered to be the best route to access desired occupations or careers (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Therefore it is not surprising that this study’s participants place a lot of value upon their institutional capital (alongside their embodied capital of skills and experience). As will be illustrated, when their attempts to have their capital recognised are not successful, they face challenges to their employable identities and thus to their ability to access appropriate employment. Recognising furthermore that social capital is an essential element of labour market success, in the data to follow participants can be seen to variously celebrate their own social networks and extol their worth to others, or lament their inability to make and maintain connections that are locally useful. Access to and recognition of capital allows the imagining of brighter futures, and these imagined identities (Norton, 2000) have consequences for labour



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market resilience, confidence, and morale, as well as the navigation of locally-appropriate employable identities (Lamba & Krahn, 2003; Ricento, 2015).

### Cultural capital

In the excerpt to follow, Omar’s sense of self as employable seems to be closely tied to his embodied cultural capital – his extensive experience as an engineer. He both indexes this embodied capital in interaction with me in the excerpt below. He and I had been discussing how he came to secure his first job in New Zealand.

(1) Excerpt 1; 4 June 2016, 24.54-52.23

1. Emily: did you have many um interviews along the way or
2. Omar: you see it's not + kind of interview because you see
3. if you are a skilled high skilled person (1)
4. who will make you an interview what they will ask you
5. Emily: mm ok yeah [*laughs*]
6. Omar: I’m telling I told you that I work +
7. as a chief engineer for more than eight years
8. Emily: mm
9. Omar: and who will interview me what will he ask me +
10. and who would interview me

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Omar opens his response to me with *you see*, which speakers often use to signal topics or explanations about which they assume their listener is unfamiliar (Carter & McCarthy, 1997), as he explains that a job interview would be inappropriate due to the specialised nature of his embodied capital.<sup>3</sup> In doing so he claims the position of the more knowledgeable party in our interaction.

He begins to indirectly index his embodied cultural capital, using conditional/hypothetical phrasing when he sets the scene: *if you are a highly skilled person* (line 3). However, he soon moves to definitively name and own the capital (*I'm telling you that I work + as a chief engineer for more than eight years*, lines 6-7), drawing on his cultural capital to take up an experienced and knowledgeable interactive position.

The value that Omar places upon his embodied cultural capital can be seen through his use of rhetorical questions. As an indirect speech act, rhetorical questions can strengthen the force or credibility of a point by encouraging the listener to follow the speaker's train of thought (Frank, 1990, p. 726). Omar asks me rhetorically three times *who*, given his capital, would be equipped to interview him (lines 4, 9 and 10)? And given the nature of his capital, what kind of questions could an interviewer possibly ask him (lines 4 and 9)<sup>4</sup>? Omar seems to indicate that the kind of person who would usually conduct job interviews would not be qualified to do so in his case (on account of the quality of his cultural capital). Furthermore, because of the

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<sup>3</sup> I believe that Omar was rejecting the idea of a traditional job interview performed by someone who is not necessarily an expert in the field themselves, rather than the idea of a pre-job-offer discussion generally.

<sup>4</sup> When Omar began this questioning I was initially unsure if a response was expected – were the question *not* rhetorical, I would have understood it as a demand to recognise Omar's highly-skilled status (my laughter on line 5 was an attempt to mitigate this possibility). As the questions continued, I reevaluated the questions as an interactional strategy.

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*embodied* nature of his capital, he stresses through a repeated rhetorical question that interview questions are pointless, and seemingly implying that his capital should speak for itself.

Enactment of an employable identity depends upon, in this case, embodied cultural capital being recognised as such. Seen in this excerpt, for Omar, negotiating with a less (industry) experienced interviewer would present a challenge to this. By employing rhetorical questions in interaction with me to make this point, he guides my understanding of the situation such that we co-construct (aided by my accommodating feedback) his competent and qualified employable identity in the here-and-now of the research interview.

Similarly, Kelly’s sense of herself as competent and employable seems to be strongly connected to her institutional cultural capital. Below we can see how her perception of her own institutional capital, and thus her employable identity, is threatened by what Brown et al. (2016) call “credential inflation”, wherein a qualification’s perceived value drops due to its ubiquity on the labour market. Kelly had told me that when she was studying, stories of job shortages were making the news:

(2) Excerpt 2; 8 April 2016, 1.05.15-1.05.39

1. Kelly: I was like (1) [*high tone*] why am I doing this there is no jobs
2. and people are going back to study um (1) master’s and ah (1) um P H-
3. (1) and (1) [*laughing tone*] so why am I bothered so that was like +

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4.                   never + look too much up otherwise your neck will hurt you
5.     Emily: [*small laugh*]
6.     Kelly: so just look at the steps in front of you

Kelly begins to report her reaction to reported job shortages by questioning the rationale of her decision to study, but using a high, laughter-like tone to do so mitigates the potentially face-threatening situation of having heavily invested in a low-value qualification (Warner-Garcia, 2014). As protagonist she takes up a low agency position (in the sense of restricted ability to act upon the world) on line 2, depicting her attempts to gain institutional capital as a futile endeavour through an implicit comparison of her undergraduate degree to others' postgraduate qualifications. She then moves to a higher agency position by describing how she managed this dispiriting situation, beginning on line 3 when begins to describe her coping strategy. She provides advice in the form of a metaphor to herself in an assertive tone: *never + look too much up otherwise your neck will hurt you* (line 4). Through orienting to resilience, Kelly-as-protagonist can be seen here to maintain her investment in her institutional cultural capital, and not comprise her student – and future employable – identity.

Norton's (2000, 2013) concept of *investment* (originally developed for a second-language classroom context) can be applied here. Kelly invested (intellectually and financially) in her university courses with the understanding that she would gain “symbolic and material resources...[and] increase the value of [her] cultural capital” (Norton, 2013, p. 45). Despite her high *motivation* to succeed, Kelly's *investment* in her education could have been threatened by her perceptions of the job market and the higher qualifications of others. However, we see here

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that she was able to maintain her investment by concentrating on what she could control in the moment, and not fixating on possible future problems she was not in a position to address.

Despite the high emphasis placed upon it by educators and job-seekers alike, in many Western labour markets including New Zealand, institutional capital is rarely sufficient alone to secure desired employment (Brown et al., 2016; Cain & Spoonley, 2013; Dupuis et al., 2005; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011). Embodied cultural capital beyond qualifications and work experience – including, crucially knowledge of and ability to enact local interactional and behavioural norms – becomes necessary to successfully navigate interviews and the workplace (Brown et al., 2016). However, the combination of both institutional (qualifications) and embodied (many years’ experience) capital is not necessarily enough to secure an interview (in which one could attempt to perform an employable identity), as Omar came to realise. In the excerpt below, he describes requesting and receiving feedback after being rejected (without an interview) for a job that he applied for online. The advertised job matched his experience and competencies well, and his resulting frustration at his powerlessness to display his employable identity can be seen here:

(3) Excerpt 3; 22 March 2017, 29.22-30.13

1. Omar: I (1) just ask them (1) ah:: + can I know the reasons + why
2. I’m not matching because I have the all + what you need
3. Emily: yep
4. Omar: experience certificate degrees anything you want (1)
5. and (1) give me a chance + make me interview or

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6.                   make me a meeting or anything after that you can
7.   Emily: yeah
8.   Omar: say sorry or you can check me (1) he say no +
9.                   it's not because of + your ah:: certificates or experience
10.                  or whatever + but because my client he wanted (1) ah::
11.                  a New Zealand + American + Australian + Canadian (1)
12.                  it's ah:: or England (1) citiz- ah: yeah + citizen
13.                  for that ah: + for that position

Omar positions himself as wholly qualified for this job on line 2 when he recounts his conversation with the recruiter, saying that he has *the all + what you need*. He underscores this on line 4 when he lists his embodied and institutional capital, stressing that this is *anything [an employer would] want*. Omar recognises here that his employability is contingent upon others' *recognition* of his considerable capital. This can be seen on lines 5-6 in the way that, as protagonist, he implores the recruiter (acting as Kerekes' (2007) gatekeeper) to allow him the opportunity to prove himself in an interview (interestingly contrasting with the earlier excerpt wherein he dismissed the idea of a job interview, taken from a research interview in the previous year). He indicates that he would be happy to accept rejection *after* an interview if only his capital would be recognised for its worth (lines 6 and 8). Lack of access to the appropriate context (a job interview) in which to attempt to do so is precluding his ability to interactively negotiate an employable identity.

Omar then reports the recruiter's words matter-of-factly (lines 8-13), making clear that no experience or qualifications would render him eligible for this job: the employer requests a

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citizen of a Western, English-speaking, White-majority nation, in what seems like clear (yet plausibly deniable) discrimination. Citizenship, Bauder (2008, p. 316) argues, is a form of cultural capital which can manifest itself in both institutional (legal) forms and embodied (practiced) forms, and “functions as a key mechanism of distinction that renders migrants vulnerable and exploitable”. Citizenship can be thought of as a “historically and politically constructed concept” (Bauder, 2008, p. 317) that has real world (labour market) effects. That is, while citizens usually have full access to the national labour market, this may not be the case for migrants, for both societal and legal reasons (Bauder, 2008, p. 321).

Thus, as may be the case for Omar, citizenship requirements may be exercised in the labour market as a proxy for other attributes (e.g. ethnicity, accent, and so forth) to the (racist) exclusion of recent migrants and former refugees (cf. Piller, 2016). In fact, as Omar went on to say, citizenship alone was not sufficient; a minimum of *ten years* citizenship was required to be considered for the job (*he told me my client want...to be a citizen from this + nationality at least + ten years*). We can see here the dynamic and context-specific nature of capital and the ways in which it is “subject to...the dominant ideologies of specific groups or fields” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 45). Devaluation or erasure of capital upon migration can have consequences for former refugees’ resilience and identity. For Omar, being denied the opportunity to prove his embodied capital – and the institutional capital that preceded it – has ramifications for his sense of his own employable identity in the New Zealand workforce.

Social capital

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Alongside the great importance that participants place upon their (embodied and institutional) cultural capital, they all also seem keenly aware of the importance of *social* capital to their ability to enact employable identities. That is, access to and acceptance within useful social networks, as a way to reach opportunities, and as a source of immediate support. Below, Isaac discusses the value of social capital, mentioning a friend of his who had a PhD, rarely socialised outside of his family, and was having little luck in the labour market:

(4) Excerpt 4; 30 March 2016, 55.33-55.46

1. Isaac: I I always tell him that you know if you don't have a
2. if you don't know the right people
3. this job that I do + is a good example I always use it as example
4. look at this job (1) if I came as stranger and applied for this job
5. I wouldn't get it

Isaac-as-protagonist takes up a position of authority within the storyworld here, using himself as proof of the advice he is providing. As narrator, he aligns himself with me, assuming my agreement with his advice with discourse marker *you know* on line 1 (Jucker & Smith, 1998; Stubbe & Holmes, 1995), inviting my inference and assuming my understanding of what is to follow. Isaac notes that he *always* has this type of conversation (lines 1 and 3), which highlights the importance that he places on the creation and maintenance of social capital. At the same time, it implies that he is frequently in a position of giving advice, strengthening his powerful position within the interaction. He backs this up with evidence in the form of his own labour market success (rooted in social capital) on lines 4-5: *if I came as a stranger...I wouldn't*



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*get [the job]*. Isaac alludes to the *co-construction* necessary in the enactment of employable identities. Even with the institutional capital of a PhD, his friend cannot negotiate employability alone: it requires social capital – networks of the *right people* (line 2) with whom to do the negotiating and through whom create further connections.

The networks required to access or be vouched for jobs is not the only kind of social capital it is important to have. Searching for employment can be a long and disheartening process. The importance of social support to manage and persevere in such challenging times cannot be understated (Gans, 2009; Ricento, 2015). Kelly herself says *you need someone to believe in you*. She had told me that a job search and training centre that she regularly attended had closed, and below she describes the dispiriting effects this had on her. Having applied for numerous jobs while the centre was open, she received multiple rejection letters on her own at home after the centre closed:

(5) Excerpt 5; 14 September 2016, 30.53-31.16

1. Kelly: so I don't have support and the only thing I'm hearing
2. + from + phone calls and emails +
3. [*aggressively*] you don't have experience you don't have experience
4. you don't have experience you don't have experience I had like th- (1)
5. how many + jobs at least + like (1) fifteen jobs that you know got to
6. me through that period and I thought (2) why am I applying [*laughs*]

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The vital importance to Kelly of the emotional support that her former (job centre) network provided is evident in the way that she repeats four times, in an emotionally-charged tone, the feedback from every phone call and email: *you don't have experience* (lines 3 and 4). Through this repetition Kelly portrays herself as bombarded with rejection, and emphasises the exhausting effect of being constantly reminded of her lack of embodied capital (further underscored by her estimation of fifteen rejections that she received without social support to help her emotionally process them). This led to Kelly-as-protagonist questioning her own drive to continue searching for work (line 6). Here, as she often did in our conversations, Kelly-as-narrator laughs (fairly humourlessly) in a non-humorous context, perhaps attempting to save face while recounting a demoralising storyworld situation (cf. Ladegaard, 2013; Warner-Garcia, 2014).

In fact, Kelly went on to tell me that this *was* the point at which, after a year, she decided to stop applying for jobs, and to instead direct her energies towards volunteer work. Although not being paid, she felt that here at least her skills were being put to use. Without a social network to provide the necessary emotional support to weather ongoing labour market rejection, Kelly indicates that her investment in attempting to successfully negotiate an employable identity was severely diminished. Receiving only negative feedback, she appears to have been unable to maintain belief in the value of her own capital and in her employability, impacting upon her ability to project success in the future.

Access to useful social capital can have the opposite effect on ability to project future success. We have seen that (non)recognition of cultural capital can affect former refugees' sense of self. Likewise, social capital can be important for resilience and for imagined identities

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(Norton, 2001), that is, the ways that former refugee jobseekers can envisage their futures. The impact of Isaac's broad social capital upon his imagined identity(/ies) can be seen in the excerpt below. While he was still a student, we talked about what careers he was interested in. He suggested continuing to work for the union with whom he had part-time employment at the time, before arriving at the idea of eventually entering local politics:

(6) Excerpt 6; 30 March 2016, 47.19-47.44

1. Isaac: also I don't know the local politics kind of + looks fun [*laughs*]
2. Emily: yeah
3. Isaac: ah people cause I always associated myself with the Labour Party +
4. and + I do a lot of campaigning when whenever I have the time
5. for local politicians starting from my our MP [*local MP name*] and
6. Emily: mmhm
7. Isaac: councillors like [*local councillor name*] + so I don't know in the
8. long term that could be maybe + local + yeah + council

Isaac hedges his suggestion that he would like to enter local politics in a number of ways. Beginning on line 1, his first mention of politics is preceded by *I don't know*, suggesting that the idea of Isaac entering local politics is to be taken as a casual thought, which may have just occurred to him (likely as an interactional strategy rather than a direct index of a cognitive state (Bolden, 2006, 2009)). The hedging continues as he suggests that following this path *kind of + looks fun*. Here, not only can *kind of* be used interactionally to imply a lack of real investment in the idea, but by describing this potential career as *look(ing) fun*, Isaac paints this

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possible path in a trivial and playful light. Furthermore, all of this is followed with laughter, which Isaac does not often employ in non-funny contexts (neither in the recorded data nor my unrecorded interactions with him). This laughter may be serving to mitigate the potentially face-threatening act (in a New Zealand context) of being so bold as to imagine a high-status job for oneself (Billig, 2005; Warner-Garcia, 2014). The combined effect of all this hedging and mitigation positions Isaac as cautious to reveal this imagined identity of local politician.

Thus, to ratify this imagined identity, Isaac goes on to draw upon his high-status social capital (lines 3-5 and 7) of *the Labour party* and *local politicians*, including a central government MP and a local government councillor, with both of whom he is friends. In invoking this capital, he positions himself agentively, noting that he associates with (line 3) and campaigns for (line 4) the parties and politicians, suggesting a more than casual involvement with politics. After having provided this justification for allowing himself to aim high he reiterates his imagined identity, though still carefully hedging this hope, using *I don't know* (line 7), conditional modal *could*, conditional adverb *maybe*, and several pauses (line 8). Thus, despite his apparent hesitance to project a prominent, high-status future for himself, Isaac is able to do so by indexing his social capital. This capital allows him the discursive space to “aim high” in constructing and justifying his (future) employable identity.

Imagining such future identities for oneself becomes difficult when capital is not recognised and valued. As we saw earlier, Omar expresses frustration and despair at his inability to gain access to the right context in which to even *attempt* to display his capital and have it acknowledged. Without recognition of his capital, Omar cannot regain the employment (and social) status he held pre-migration, a painful and often humiliating experience common

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to many migrants (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Gans, 2009). It is perhaps unsurprising that in some case, former refugees may focus their attention on a better future for their children, in place of the better future they are struggling to achieve for themselves. This may go some ways toward justifying the pain of loss of status, self-worth and opportunity (Norton & Toohey, 2011). I witnessed Omar orient to this position after he had expressed his despair at having been told he would have to retrain from the lowest level of engineering if he wanted to obtain qualifications in New Zealand. Contrasting sharply with widely held ideas about the better lives and brighter futures that refugees find in their countries of resettlement, lives for which they are often expected to be perpetually grateful (cf. Greenbank, 2020), Omar succinctly – bluntly – encapsulates what must be the experience of so many former refugees continually struggling to have their capital recognised, enact locally-valued employable identities, and rebuild their interrupted lives:

(7) Excerpt 7; 22 March 2017, 26.05-26.11

1. Omar: maybe this country is good for my children +
2. but for me I find myself just (1)
3. I'm dying here

## **Discussion**

The once-reliable exchange rate between institutional capital (in the form of tertiary qualifications) and a certain rate of economic capital (in the form of practically guaranteed

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employment) has begun to be challenged by changing labour market models and ever-increasing numbers of tertiary graduates. Today, in many labour markets, a tertiary qualification is frequently simply an initial requirement for applying for a job (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p. 306). In order to distinguish oneself from other, equally-qualified applicants, candidates must be able to display their “experiences, character, and accomplishments in ways that conform to the competence profiles scrutinised by employers” (Brown et al., 2016, p. 194). Employability involves narratively packaging the self in ways that make it difficult to conceal one’s embodied capital “behind the veil of technical expertise” (Brown et al., 2016, p. 194; following Rose, 1999; and Skeggs, 2004). Thus, institutional cultural capital must be accompanied by locally-valued embodied cultural capital, in order to enact a locally-appropriate employable identity. The narratives of Isaac, Omar, and Kelly explored in this article have shown the complexity in negotiating appropriate and useful capital in the labour market.

Omar can be seen to place high value on both his institutional capital, and his embodied cultural capital of eight years’ engineering working experience. He discursively claims a highly employable identity for himself by indexing this capital, implying that he is so highly employable as to be essentially un-interviewable (excerpt 1). Kelly, describing a challenge to the value of her institutional capital (from credential inflation), maintains her investment in her capital by focusing on what she can control: the next step in front of her (excerpt 2). As discussed above, institutional and embodied cultural capital become complicated in a refugee context, as that capital can be erased or diminished in value by the crossing of international borders. While Isaac and Kelly gained their (tertiary) institutional capital in New Zealand,

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Omar gained his in Syria. His narratives indicate that the act of migration has indeed tempered his ability to capitalise upon his capital.

Embodied cultural capital plays a larger role in employment success than perhaps in the past, in modern labour markets where focus has shifted from institutional capital to often imprecisely-defined employability. In fact, Omar does not even have the opportunity to attempt to discursively “package” his embodied capital face-to-face, as he lacks the required cultural capital of citizenship (of certain White-majority anglophone countries) that might afford him an interview (excerpt 3). A requirement of ten years’ citizenship may be acting as a proxy for less admissible employment requirements. That is, constraints on employability, for former refugees, may be rooted in discrimination or racism: requiring longstanding citizenship may in fact be an instance of “new racism” (a subtle, “value”-based racism which avoids mention of race, but instead focuses on cultural difference, sometimes framed as deficiency or pathology (Augoustinos et al., 2005; Barker, 1981; van Dijk, 2000)). After escaping dangerous conditions, highly-educated refugees like Omar can find that there is a “hidden price to be paid for living in a secure environment...[where their] non-transferable professional credentials severely curtail their ability to enjoy the ‘full blessings of liberty’” (Ricento, 2015, p. 142), with ramifications for their opportunities to demonstrate their employability.

Often, and particularly with regards to negotiating employability, the “economic and social yield” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 48) of cultural capital is closely related to access to useful social capital. Isaac displays recognition of this in excerpt 4 when he remarks that, irrespective of the quality of your institutional capital, knowing the right people is essential to get a job. However, as with cultural capital, migration (and particularly forced migration) can complicate

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the creation and maintenance of useful social capital. Forced displacement and subsequent resettlement (perhaps on the other side of the world) can “abruptly disrupt, if not sever, [former refugees’] social, economic and cultural networks” (Koyama, 2013, p. 948). For former refugees who rarely have the opportunity to prepare for migration in the same way that voluntary migrants can, this of course may be exacerbated by arriving in a new country with limited local language proficiency or cultural capital, as is often the case.

Alongside its value in allowing access to potential employment, social capital is also important for navigating the potentially ego-bruising and exhausting process of rejection and setbacks that often accompany the search for work (Gans, 2009; Hunt, 2008). This can be seen to be the case for Kelly in excerpt 5. She describes the disappearance of her support network, and then enduring 15 job rejection letters alone, with no one to emotionally support her, or help her to maintain belief in her own employability in the face of consistent rejection. Kelly makes a link between this and her disengagement from the labour market. The impact of lack of social capital on employment and employability is clear.

However, when capital is recognised or valued, it can open up space for imagined identities and imagined communities. For Isaac (in excerpt 6), his social capital seems to allow him to envisage the realisation of his aspirations. He cautiously suggests that he might enter local politics in the future. He is able to support this imagined identity by discursively indexing his social capital (and imagined community) of politicians with whom he has personal relationships. On the other hand, in Omar’s case, we see that when capital is not recognised or valued, future, imagined identities are more difficult to envision (excerpt 7). Omar frames his situation as hopeless as he struggles to have his extensive institutional and cultural capital



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valued, all the while expressing hope that life in New Zealand will allow his children to achieve their dreams, even as he does not see a future for his own. Although he has secured permanent employment, the effects of non-recognition of his competence on his identity are remarkable.

It is worth noting the value of qualitative, in-depth interviews for exploring these kinds of topics and issues; interviews that can follow participants' lead in terms of lines of discussion, and which allow space for emergent narratives to unfold. The kind of narrative data which this approach to data collection allows gives insight into participants' understanding of employability in their own terms, and can be particularly useful for teasing out the particular and sometimes out-of-sight challenges that former refugees encounter in the labour market – or in their attempts to enter it. Furthermore, it allows room to tease out the multifaceted process of negotiating employability and gives evidence for the fact that it is not a solo endeavour.

This study has demonstrated specifically how attention to social and cultural capital can be important to explorations of identity in storytelling. Access to – and perceptions of – capital can enable or hinder speakers' ability to take up certain identity positions or to make claims about their present or imagined future identities. This is of course particularly salient in migration contexts where having crossed a border can erase a lifetime's capital, but is also relevant to smaller-scale “cross-cultural” contexts where capital may not translate or be recognised – across social classes, for example, or between industries or sectors.

The way that the value or utility of different types of capital is intertwined – and to a certain extent self-perpetuating – means that their effective use in discourse, and negotiating their uptake, is complex, challenging, and ongoing. This is true for anyone navigating the

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labour market, but particularly so for refugee-background job-seekers: the negotiation and co-construction of an employable identity appropriate for the local context can be a long and bumpy road for those whose lifetimes' accumulations of capital has been diminished or erased through forced migration.

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## **Appendix: Transcription conventions**

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+	short pause up to one second e.g. so I told her + don't put it there
(1)	pause one second or longer, where number of seconds e.g. but she wasn't (2) she wasn't even listening
wha-	hyphen indicates cut off word, both self-interruption and other speaker interruption e.g. I didn't know wha- + I couldn't tell what was going on
// [x]\ /[x] \\ 	indicates overlapping speech e.g. A: and if you want to come //you\ B: /yep\ 
<sup>1</sup> // [x]\ <sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> / [x]\ <sup>1</sup>	indicates multiple overlaps in one section e.g. A: then after I came back <sup>1</sup> //I saw\ <sup>1</sup> that the other one <sup>2</sup> //was\ <sup>2</sup> gone B: <sup>1</sup> /yeah\ <sup>1</sup> + <sup>2</sup> /mm\ <sup>2</sup>
[laughs]	square brackets with text in italics indicate paralinguistic and relevant non-verbal features e.g. A: yeah [laughs] but it wasn't until later that [clears throat] I realised
so::	colons following letter and words indicate that sound has been drawn out e.g. he was there for a re::ally long time
?	High rising terminal, i.e. a word or phrase that ends with a rising pitch intonation (may or may not be a question) e.g. then he picked it up? and saw it was broken?
CAPITALS	Words spoken with emphasis; louder than surrounding speech e.g. but I had said the FIRST one

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