

Setback in labour market integration due to the Covid-19 crisis? An explorative insight on forced migrants' vulnerability in Germany

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ABSTRACT



In Germany as elsewhere, the Covid-19 pandemic has provoked a severe crisis for the economy, the labour market, social life and public administration. This article explores how refugees, who have accessed the labour market prior to the crisis, are affected by the current situation. Focusing on the crisis-shaken labour market as a juncture for integration processes, we were interested in whether the crisis actually increases vulnerability and leads to setbacks in integration processes. Based on qualitative interviews with refugees and employers conducted at the beginning of the crisis, the article identifies three problem areas in the field of working life (every day working life, conditions of work, prospects and the advancement of careers) in which the crisis-induced disruptions produced feelings of disorientation and made some refugees vulnerable. This went hand in hand with irritations in adaptation processes that are crucial for integration. The findings suggest that the Covid-19 crisis could, for some, turn into a 'critical event' in entire integration trajectories.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic hit countries all over the world. Germany – until now – has been quite moderately affected by the disease in terms of infection rates and deaths. Among other things, this can be attributed to a quick political reaction to the pandemic's threats and consequences. In

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mid-March 2020, protective measures were implemented to prevent an uncontrollable spread of the disease, mainly by reducing or avoiding face-to-face contacts and introducing extra hygienic precautions. These efforts to control the pandemic epidemiologically went along with severe restrictions in the economic, public and social life culminating in curfews and a far-reaching shutdown of the economy and public administration. All this was cushioned by policies of extended monetary benefits directed towards suffering industries and, as a consequence, households.

Sociological debates stress that, despite state support schemes, the current crisis is likely to exacerbate social inequalities (Wimbauer and Motakef 2020). Indeed, some groups might be more severely affected by the labour market crisis caused by the pandemic than the others – among them the unemployed, for whom it might become harder to find a job, precarious workers whose work contracts are at stake, or (single) mothers, who would find it increasingly more difficult to keep a balance between work and an extra load of care effort due to the shutdown of childcare facilities and schools.

This paper focuses on refugees as another group that might be particularly vulnerable in the current crisis not least because they are in the process of integrating into a society and a system they only recently got to know. We hypothesise that the Covid-19 crisis is a ‘crucial case’ (Eckstein 2000) in which social vulnerability is likely to emerge or magnify, and hurdles to integration are likely to appear. To see whether this coincides with lived experiences, we used qualitative data to explore how the Covid-19 crisis-affected refugees that had come to Germany five years before and had taken up employment before the crisis. Do they feel insecure or vulnerable in their working life due to the current crisis? And does this induce setbacks in their integration efforts?

Social vulnerability and labour market integration

The concept of *vulnerability*, literally denoting ‘the fact of being weak and easily hurt physically or emotionally’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionaries, vulnerability entry) gained prominence in disaster studies and psychology. Although the term has a number of different uses, sometimes without clear definition (Brown *et al.* 2017), a major line of scholarship sees *social* vulnerability as a direct implication of increasing social risks and uncertainties within a society (Beck 1992). In that context, social risks and endangerments are not only induced by natural

hazards but also by societal and political developments challenging individuals' life choices, economic wellbeing and social security (Rüb 2010). Accordingly, vulnerability is not only characterised by a resource deficit but also by the degree of 'exposure to social disorganisation' and the subsequent 'instability of the mechanisms used to obtain them [resources]' (Ranci 2010: 18). From this perspective, vulnerability is sensitive to social contexts (Mackenzie *et al.* 2013: 7): Some groups in society might find themselves in a more vulnerable position than others because they are confronted with obstacles that impede the transmission of available resources into capabilities (Sen 1985). This relational understanding, for some, led to a constructivist diversification of the concept according to which public discourse and attribution of meaning are significant factors to answer the question of *what is harmful to whom* or vice versa *who is vulnerable to what* (Christmann *et al.* 2014). To merge the different perspectives, social vulnerability can be understood as consisting of two interrelated dimensions: a subjective and a structural one (Christmann *et al.* 2014). Practically, these manifest themselves in different participative capacities of groups and individuals. Thus, inequality in terms of material equipment, power, knowledge, mastery of the rules of the respective field but also interpretive perspectives become equally important.

From an observer's point of view, one can assume that refugees are specifically vulnerable (even without the Covid-19 crisis) because of their particularly adverse experience of flight, cultural distance, communication problems and limited familiarity with the host country's structures. Especially for them, the Covid-19 crisis might imply a new disruptive event that magnifies their vulnerability by the economic shock, new rules in day-to-day social life and discontinued support by flanking public institutions. Based on individual perceptions, however, the picture may seem more multifaceted, and heterogeneity in awareness and concernment may crystallise.

This paper examines vulnerability in the context of refugees' integration into the German host society. It focuses on those refugees who, since their arrival in 2015/16, got a (first) foothold on the labour market by employment or apprenticeship. This choice deliberately refers to Germany's integration policy which prioritises labour market participation as a pivotal means of social and societal integration by providing language courses and educational programmes, career counselling and work permits to those who have been granted protection status (Schulz and Kolb 2018: 515).

We consider integration as a complex, relational and non-linear process that takes place on multiple levels and involves a variety of actors (migrants as well as members of the host society). Following Penninx, we understand integration as a trajectory defined by ‘the process by which immigrants become accepted into society’ (2005: 1). Acceptance is required on different levels. As proposed by Esser (2000), migrants firstly need participation in the system, i.e. in societal subsystems such as the legal, political, economic, health and educational system. They secondly need to become personally involved and take on roles in specifiable social relations.

Based on the nexus between integration and acceptance, integration is closely associated with different fields and levels of recognition (Honneth 2003). In reference to sociality and social life, recognition appears as esteem – in the sense of both self-esteem (a prerequisite for motivation) and appreciation by others. In that sense, recognition necessarily refers to prevailing normativity, and subsequently requires a certain degree of adaptation on the refugees’ side and members of the host society alike.

Accordingly, the basic heuristics which determines our understanding of integration consists of three intertwined levels of recognition as a requirement for integration. These include:

- The assignment of legal status: Formal recognition of the refugee protection right fundamental for legal access to the labour market, better social security and educational opportunities and, in the long-term, better prospects for a permanent residence permit and family reunification.
- The labour market: Crucial for opportunities of enhancement of legal status as well as social recognition, especially in the cultural context of a work society and its dominating performance principle. Recognition as a productive participant in the economy and society gained through affiliation.
- Social integration: Recognition as an (esteemed) social being through participation in networks might push forward enculturation and familiarity with the host country’s customs, and potentially influence future prospects.

Since the refugees under consideration here have all gained refugee status and work permit, labour market integration can be assumed to play a major role for successful integration processes more generally. In other words, we focus on the labour market as a venue for establishing

economic as well as social relations, and as an intermediary with regard to subsequent aspects of social and societal integration.

Looking at the labour market more closely and focusing on those refugees who already have jobs, we derive three levels of working life that are central for migrants to gain recognition and ultimately get integrated in society: (1) *Everyday working life* proves to be complex in itself as it is structured by formal and informal rules of 'doing work' which are oriented towards cooperation, results, and success. It is a field not only to prove oneself but also to 'stand the test' in the eyes of others, first of all colleagues and superiors. Therefore, working in a practical sense requires adaptability to successfully adjust to tasks, routines and not least the social environment of work to become accepted. Working life is also framed by (2) particular *conditions of work* which encompass material, but more importantly with regard to integration, contractual aspects of employer-employee relationships relevant for social positioning, e.g. peripheral workers with precarious contracts vs. core workers with permanent contracts. 'Standing the test' can turn out to be a key to job and income security and an aspiration in respect of enhancing one's legal status, too. (3) *Prospects and career advancement* thus are a third level of working life as related to integration. In the case of refugees, it is often linked to decisions of authorities which, according to legal standards, have to decide on the residential status and can flank or even foster careers by giving advice and support.

The Covid-19 crisis hits the world of employment on all three levels in terms of (1) disruptions in work routines and customs, (2) changed entrepreneurial decisions regarding contracts and employment security, and (3) a partial shutdown of flanking institutions relevant to refugees in respect of residential status and career advancement. One can assume that refugees feel disoriented and vulnerable if the system that they only recently got to know undergoes rapid and manifold changes. This possibly impairs or even sets back their efforts to adapt and establish themselves in an accepted social position – that is, towards integration.

Data and methods

Data collection and sampling

This exploratory study was implemented as a quick reaction to the early upheavals caused by the Covid-19 crisis. It draws on 25 qualitative telephone interviews with refugees from Syria, Iraq and Eritrea conducted

between March and May 2020. Based on episodic interview techniques (Flick 2018), the interviews were focused on repercussions of the crisis for the refugees' professional and social life, providing the opportunity for interviewees to highlight their perceptions, lived experiences and opinions. Due to contact restrictions at the beginning of the crisis, (preferable) face-to-face interviewing could not take place. Hence, telephone conversations were a 'second-best' solution to discuss the relevant issues. Compared to face-to-face interviews, a phone conversation is restricted to spoken words without accompanying mimic and gestural information helpful to create proximity and trust. Yet, the previously conducted exhaustive face-to-face interviews (up to 2.5 h) with all 25 refugees had presumably made up for these obstacles. These interviews had taken place in 2018 and 2019 to shed light on refugees' transition to work and their overall integration in society and were part of a larger sample (N=65) gathered in the context of a more extensive qualitative research project.¹ Due to the telephone constellation and often spontaneous access to respondents, the coronavirus-related interviews remained short (some 25 min). The interviews were conducted either in the respondents' native language, English or German. They were all recorded and transcribed.

As measured by the criterion of maximum variation sampling (Patton 2002), the interviews generated a variety suitable for the purpose of an explorative investigation: It consists of 8 female and 17 male respondents from six typologically different regions in Germany. 16 of them were employed on different levels in the fields of healthcare, education, public administration, logistics, commerce, manufacturing and handi-crafts, four were in vocational training, and five were unemployed.

In parallel, problem-centred telephone interviews (some 35 min each) with nine employers from different sectors were conducted. All of them had hired refugees (mainly in 2016 and 2017) and were interviewed face-to-face before as well. The telephone interviews focused on the employers' situation in and responses to the crisis, especially in connection with employees with a refugee background. These interviews provided additional information on sector- and company-specific repercussions of the pandemic. By means of triangulation, they also served to validate the findings of the interviews with the refugees (Flick 2018).

¹The study '(Employment) Integration and Participation of Refugees' was designed at and funded by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB). Research has been carried out in cooperation with a research team at the Free University of Berlin.

Data analysis

The data were coded thematically, and cases were analysed in comparison. In an iterative process going back and forth between concepts and data (Eisenhardt 1989), we developed the analytical heuristics and identified the three analytical levels of working life outlined in the concept part – everyday working life, conditions of work, prospects and careers. Each of these is susceptible to disruptions and structural disarrangements caused by the Covid-19 crisis, and they all require refugees' personal adaptation as a means of integration. So, vulnerability is likely to occur at the interface or conjunction between these disarrangements and the capability to adapt.

Empirical observations

As appropriate for a short early research paper, the data are presented in a concentrated form without quotations and detailed case explanation.

Everyday working life

Our interviews with employers show that those who could keep their businesses running put a lot of effort into making their workplaces safe from coronavirus. The reported measures encompass the use of protective plexiglass shields to prevent direct contact between staff members and customers, the implementation of new models of shift work to reduce the frequency and amount of contacts between colleagues, or even working from home wherever possible. But the precautionary measures were not always that far-reaching, and many of the interviewed refugees, who very well understood the threat of coronavirus, were scared of their own health risks. This was, for example, expressed by a trainee in a hospital who was placed in a Covid-19 ward, as well as by some refugees employed as warehouse workers by a temporary employment agency and hence exposed to frequently changing workplaces. While the former continued working despite his worries, the latter reported they quit their jobs because they felt too insecure and not sufficiently protected. Lacking recognition – in contrast to medical professionals whose role proved crucial in the crisis – presumably was another factor influencing their decision to resign.

In other cases, working conditions were safe, like when working from home, but work routines were disrupted in other respects. As many others in the crisis, some of the refugees with children were under strain due to a situation in which they had to reconcile childcare and

work. Those working from home recurrently lamented insufficient living space as a specific challenge. But working from home also dramatically changed the modus operandi of doing work. The educational system, for instance, was hit by the crisis completely unprepared. Being based on in-person instruction, a lot of schools are not equipped with adequate digital facilities. Nevertheless, they tried to keep contact with the students online, yet forcing teachers to improvise.

This situation goes along with a change in communicative patterns, such as growing importance of digital communication via e-mail. These and other changes in the conditions of teaching and learning proved unsettling for the interviewed students and teachers alike. Some trainees interviewed were anxious about the approaching exam situations without preparatory on-site instruction, and thus concerned about the possible impact on their future, e.g. intended employment. Among our respondents, the increased need to communicate in written form also revealed latent worries about one's reputation as being a competent professional contributor, and the fear to be disrespected. Most clearly, this was reported by a teacher of Syrian origin who felt insecure about how to address his students and their parents correctly via e-mail. He was afraid that his authority as a person holding an exemplary function could be diminished and that previous efforts and achievements could thereby be questioned. This case represents an irritation in the adaptation process that uncovers concerns about a possible setback in recognition and self-esteem.

Such subjective apprehensions do not seem to be far-fetched, though they carry different weight in differing working contexts. For instance, an employer in the finance business who sent most of the staff, including eight in-house-trained clerks with a refugee background, to work from home, was mildly deriding e-mail communication with 'her refugees' although she did not consider this to be a substantial problem. Even after years, she still perceived the refugees' e-mails as peculiar in terms of language and the application of common communicative conventions. This certainly becomes more apparent in situations, such as the present crisis, in which written communication is a requested asset that can hardly be compensated by competencies in oral communication and face-to-face contexts.

Conditions of work

As suggested, the Covid-19 crisis does not only affect day-to-day working life but also impacts businesses in many different ways. As a consequence,

the possibility to keep staff or appoint new personnel is possibly at stake in some cases. We also gained insight into the sectors in which businesses were not or only marginally affected by the crisis in terms of a slowdown. For example, the finance company mentioned above reported that the respective clerks with a refugee background had turned into *established* employees and would, despite the crisis, soon be offered permanent work contracts. A very similar assessment was made by a service provider offering home care for the elderly. These insights from employers validate the subjective assessment of some of the refugees who did not raise any major work-related challenge due to the Covid-19 crisis.

If job losses could be observed, this happened in volatile businesses and small enterprises. One example is a carpenter business that heavily suffered from a drop-off in orders and downsized in order to avoid bankruptcy. Similarly, an event organiser reported on a complete standstill of his business. As common in this industry, the normal mode of operation was based on lots of minor employment contracts also held by refugees, who were forced to resign due to the crisis. Not surprisingly, deeper concerns about job losses were expressed by refugees who are unskilled and often work in helper jobs. These worries mirror actual developments according to which a low level of skills and language competency makes refugees more likely to lose their job in the crisis (Deutsche Presseagentur 2020). Even the reception of short-time work allowance can turn into a poverty trap if wages are low. This is why one interviewee searched for a side job to substitute the wage loss – a proactive response to the repercussions of the crisis considered as threatening.

But even a higher level of skills does not unconditionally prove as a safeguard against job losses and unsettled material security. For example, one of our interviewees who worked as an art teacher in a secondary school reported that, due to an imponderability raised by the pandemic, her contract would not be extended. Also for a high-skilled Syrian couple holding temporary contracts as ‘welcome teachers’, the contractual situation generated latent feelings of dependency and personal insecurity regarding their future. Interestingly, this was a manifest effect of the Covid-19 crisis. In the preceding interviews, the temporary working contracts were not raised as problematic (by the wife) or presented as an accepted concession to reach the ambition of becoming a teacher with tenure (by the husband). In the current crisis then, the couple realised the precarity of their positions because of a multiple unpredictability related to if and when classes could be reopened, how hard budgetary restrictions would hit the educational sector, as well as

because of a tendency to flexibilise labour – by the use of short-term contracting prevailing in many sectors.

We also observe that potentially threatening conditions of work were handled differently by our respondents. While some appeared to be drifting in view of professional perspectives that the crisis had turned insecure, others seized the chance in the turmoil. For example, the art teacher whose temporary contract would not be prolonged due to the crisis (see above) was actively using her time spared by working from home to attend online courses in order to further increase her employability and professional prospects. Another respondent quit his poorly paid and inconvenient job at a temporary employment agency and decided to live on welfare benefits in order to look for a job with better prospects.

Careers and prospects

For refugees, changed prospects to participate in the labour market may have outreaching consequences if their aspirations are directed towards permanent residence. In this regard, their future prospects depend more or less directly on the public administration that was, however, itself hit by the crisis. To reduce the risk of infection, most administrative bodies prevented face-to-face exchange with clients by resorting to phone and e-mail. Moreover, due to health regulations, a large number of administrative staff had to work from home without being properly prepared and technically equipped for that kind of work practice. A staff member of a municipality sent to work from home described that she had to come to the office to get the files needed and bring them to her home to work with them because the records were not digitised. While the situation was less constrained in other cases, this example indicates that new work routines had to be developed initially, something that, as a consequence, retarded case management.

In the employment administration, many services were delivered by telephone hotlines substituting steady contact persons. Regarding the processing of applications for welfare benefits by the competent Jobcenters – relevant to cases in which refugees had to quit their jobs – no major problems were reported. Presumably, this is due to the lowered criteria and eligibility testing implemented in view of an expected increase in applications. This observation suggests that for the interviewed refugees the concern of material shortages was moderated by the opportunity to substitute wages by welfare benefits, if required. However, other services

provided by Jobcenters, such as career counselling and the approval of measures for employability improvement (e.g. financial support of a driving licence, a language course or further training), were deferred during the crisis. The shutdown of training programmes generated insecurity especially among those refugees who, at the time of the interview, were unemployed or in a phase of professional reorientation. Respondents in relatively stable employment expectedly did not report any contact with the Jobcenters – an indicator of positive adaption and integration processes. They were hence not concerned by the changed modus operandi in the labour administration. For others, the feeling to be put on hold emerged not only due to the impeded contact with the Jobcenters: In one case, career prospects were overshadowed by the Covid-19 crisis because of the perceived lack of information on study programmes at universities of applied sciences. In another case, a respondent reported that his job interview scheduled during the shutdown had to be postponed because of his problems with digital communication. Both cases not only indicate the relevance of advice and support in the area of professional development but also the importance of the ways of their delivery. We generally gained the impression that many interviewed refugees still strongly depend on face-to-face contact to make themselves understood. This, as it turns out in the crisis situation, is not easily substitutable by written or digital communication. These examples show the crucial importance of language acquisition for integration trajectories. At the same time, the crisis-induced disruptions reveal insufficient communicative proficiencies that in turn, increase vulnerability in the form of disorientation.

For some refugees who had issues concerning their residence status, poor accessibility of public institutions created additional problems and insecurities. The shutdown also affected foreigners' administration offices and courts, putting stress on those whose cases had to be postponed. One of our interviewees expressed extreme psychological pressure due to insecure prospects whether entitlement to political asylum and, as a consequence, residence permit in Germany would be acknowledged during court proceedings. This person was worried about the complete uncertainty regarding his personal future. The limited success in acquiring recognition (in terms of status and socially) generated feelings of desperation and alienation that, despite all adversities, made the person consider the option of giving up and returning to his home country Iraq.

Another respondent had put a lot of effort into establishing gainful employment in order to fulfil the prerequisites for becoming entitled to

a permanent residence permit. This interviewee explained that she avoided contacting the foreigners' registration office doubting whether her application would be decided in conformity with the law in times of the present crisis. She was concerned that the fundamental *rules of the game* valid for refugees could have been temporarily suspended. Although this might be an overly grim judgement, an employer reported that, at the beginning of the crisis, some foreigners' registration offices handled applications very restrictively. Extensions of residence titles were limited to 30 days only, while several months or years are the common standard. These observations highlight the precarious situation of some of the interviewed refugees who were stuck between volatile labour market prospects and status-related insecurities that intensified in the crisis. The cases not only indicate the increased vulnerability but also evident repercussions for recognition and hence integration processes.

Conclusion

This exploratory article has examined how the Covid-19 crisis-affected forced migrants in Germany who had taken up employment before the crisis. Looking at the pandemic-shaken labour market as a junction of decisive importance for integration processes, we asked whether the crisis actually increases vulnerability and leads to setbacks in integration processes. Based on the analysis, we have first of all identified different problem areas in the field of working life – ranging from daily routines to career advancement – in which refugees' vulnerability is likely to increase. Vulnerability as a lived experience in most cases arose from (subjective) perceptions of uncertainty and instability of social functioning which the refugees only recently got acquainted with. This was particularly obvious in the management of everyday working life and advice-seeking in the context of future plans. In some cases, vulnerability emerged from (structural) endangerments of labour market positions or legal status. These findings substantiate a two-dimensional perspective on social vulnerability (Christmann et al. 2014). They further highlight that the two dimensions (subjective and structural) are mediated by different participative capacities. Accordingly, vulnerability is likely to go hand in hand with irritations in the adaptation processes that are crucial for integration. In that sense, joint attention to vulnerability and integration processes also helps to understand to what extent our findings are specific for refugees: On the one hand, some of the reported problems (e.g.

temporary contracts) seem to be very similar to risks that other people, depending on their social and economic situation, are confronted with (not only) due to the pandemic. On the other hand, however, we argue that the crisis-induced disruptions led to uncertainties that produced peculiar effects for refugees – specifically because they are *refugees* on their way to become accepted as persons, to become valued in their social roles, to establish themselves as autonomous participants on the labour market, and finally to become recognised as citizens with a secure and permanent residential status. The latter, in turn, has the potential to overshadow entire life and work situations because it provides security to shape one's future. On a case level, we see that social and system integration (Esser 2000) are interrelated in diverse and intricate ways.

While our explorative, qualitative data reveal some important aspects of social vulnerability and irritations in adaptation processes, these now need to be assessed with statistically representative data-oriented towards long-term effects.

Finally, the analysis has revealed that not all of the interviewed refugees were equally affected by the crisis. While some expressed insecurity and disorientation, others reacted to the pandemic-induced disruptions with confidence and self-determination. These findings suggest further exploration of the underlying dynamics, especially a systematic analysis of different forms of agency and resilience (Ramp et al. 2019) and the study of integration processes by considering various aspects of intersectionality (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018). Future research will show whether and for whom the Covid-19 crisis will turn into a 'critical event' leading to setbacks in entire integration trajectories.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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