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THE ECOSYSTEM OF MANAGING REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT: COMPLEMENTARITY AND ITS MICROFOUNDATIONS

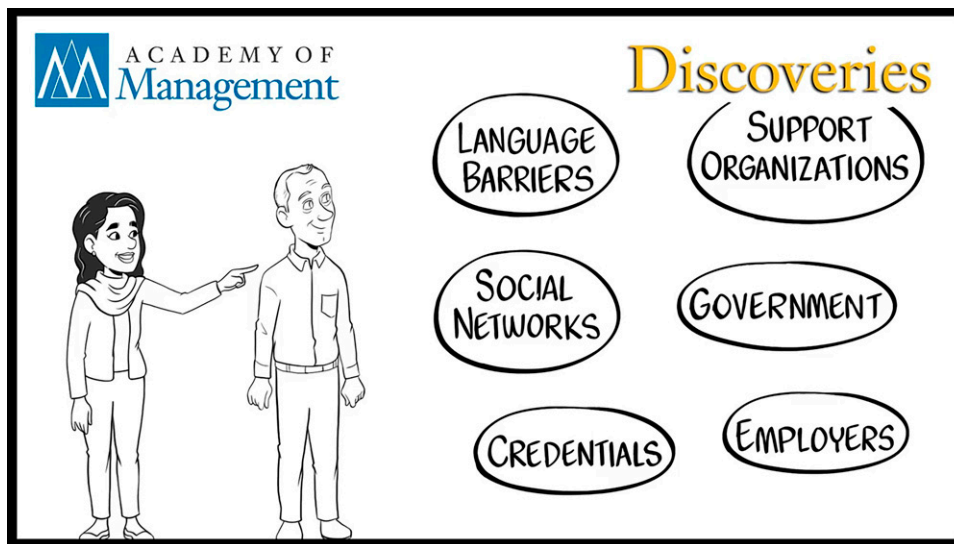
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Finding formal and stable employment in the local economy is a crucial step in the integration of refugees. In highly regulated high-income countries, multiple actors are involved in managing refugee employment and offer support to overcome its various barriers. Our research breaks new ground by focusing on the dynamics between these actors. We conducted 80 interviews with refugees, employers, governments, employer associations, refugee support organizations, and public employment services in three Western European countries. We conceive of the field as a refugee employment ecosystem in which complementarity is the key mechanism that aligns the various actors' activities to achieve the goal of refugee employment. Complementarity means that actors not only fulfill their different roles but also step in, fill gaps, and add to others' activities. Three microfoundations undergird this complementarity: individuals' motives, responsiveness, and perseverance. By showing how refugee employment ecosystems are inhabited and sustained by individuals whose activities go beyond their assigned actor roles,

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we contribute to theory development in research on refugee employment and help to humanize theorizing about ecosystems at large. We also offer practical guidance on how to increase the resilience of refugee employment ecosystems.

Steadily increasing numbers of people fleeing war, persecution, or environmental catastrophes pose a grand challenge to the global community and put a spotlight on refugee¹ integration in host societies (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016; UNHCR, 2022). Many highly regulated, high-income destination countries have an interest in facilitating refugees' labor market integration as it affords refugees the chance to interact with members of the host society and to learn the local language, fostering societal integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Further, these countries see an opportunity in refugees to fill the gaps in local labor markets and aim to relieve their public welfare systems by promoting refugees' self-sufficiency (De Lange, Oomes, Gons, & Spanikova, 2019; Hesse, Kreutzer, & Diehl, 2018). Therefore, many countries in Western Europe—the context of the present study—have implemented policies and programs to foster refugees' long-term integration into society and the labor market, especially when the number of arrivals peaked in 2015 (Martín et al., 2016).

Such policies and programs are important, as managing to find and keep a job does not lie solely in the hands of refugees themselves but often requires support by other actors. In Austria and Germany, for instance, programs targeting the vocational training of refugees require cooperation between actors such as job agencies that help refugees choose suitable training and apply for a job, educational institutions that deliver specified training content, and potential employers who look for qualified trainees and employees. Refugee employment is thus assisted by governmental agencies, employment services, private institutions, support organizations, and local communities—a complex network of multiple interdependent actors with idiosyncratic interests and responsibilities (Pries, 2019). Previous multiactor studies on refugee reception and societal integration noted power struggles, opposing logics, and contestation among actors (Hardy, 1994; Hesse et al., 2018; Lawrence & Hardy, 1999), thereby suggesting that similar problems are present when it comes to managing refugee employment. So how can the goal of refugee employment nevertheless be achieved? To improve the understanding of such accomplishment,

in this study, we ask how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed.

To address this research question, we draw on 80 interviews conducted in three highly regulated, high-income Western European countries: Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands. As one of very few multicountry studies on refugee employment (Lee, Szkudlarek, Nguyen, & Nardon, 2020; Ortlieb & Knappert, 2023), our study focuses on commonalities between the countries in order to identify common principles for managing refugee employment. Although the existing literature (e.g., Hardy, 1994; Hesse et al., 2018; Lawrence & Hardy, 1999) did not initially lead us to expect much constructive collaboration in refugee employment, we soon noticed that the people we spoke to regularly characterized their own and other actors' activities as mutually supportive or enhancing. Actors and activities thereby constitute what we call a “refugee employment ecosystem,” referring to ecosystem theory in management studies (e.g., Adner, 2017; Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018).

This study's main contribution is that it describes the refugee employment ecosystem and explains how it works. Whereas “many studies [on refugee employment] remain atheoretical” (Lee et al., 2020: 209; also see Szkudlarek, Nardon, Osland, Adler, & Lee, 2019), our research advances theorizing on how refugee employment is managed as a collective effort. We discovered that complementarity—a unique property of ecosystems—ensures that refugee employment is attained through informal and uncoordinated, yet interdependent, activities of various actors. Although earlier research emphasized the role of “connectivity between a composite range of actors” (Richardson, Karam, & Afiouni, 2020: 2) for refugee employment, studies in this field tend to focus on individual actors in isolation (e.g., Bloch, 2008; Boese, 2015; De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010; Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller, & Pundt, 2018) and tell us little about actors' interconnectedness. We thus identify complementarity as a key mechanism underlying the managing of refugee employment as a *collective* effort.

Further, to explain how complementarity comes about, we show why and how actors engage in complementary activities. We discovered individuals' motives, responsiveness, and perseverance as important, yet so far understudied and largely unacknowledged, micro-level constituents of the ecosystem's complementarity, and, thus, the multiactor effort toward refugee employment. Building on Coleman's

¹ We use the term “refugee” as defined in Article 1 of the United Nation Refugee Convention of 1951, but in a nonlegal sense to refer to a person who has crossed an international border to flee war, persecution, environmental catastrophe, or other life-threatening circumstances.

(1986) influential bathtub model, we synthesize our findings in a microfoundational model of managing refugee employment. As we show how people follow their individual personhood and engage in activities beyond their assigned actor roles, this study also helps to humanize theorizing about ecosystems at large (Voronov & Weber, 2020) and speaks to a growing literature stream on purposeful ecosystems (Cobben, Ooms, Roijackers, & Radziwon, 2022).

To present our study of how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed, we first summarize the literature on refugee employment, focusing especially on multiactor collaboration. We then introduce ecosystem theory. Although it did not emerge as a suitable explanatory framework until we began analyzing our data, we position this theory up front, as in classical academic practice, to ensure that the study is clear and comprehensible. A description of the research context and methods then follows. In the section on findings, we elaborate on the components of refugee employment ecosystems, which we combine into an explanatory microfoundational model in the beginning of the discussion section. After discussing the contributions and limitations of our findings, we conclude with an invitation for scholarship on grand societal challenges to shift attention from conflict to collaborative efforts that seem essential for tackling these challenges of the present.

REFUGEE EMPLOYMENT AS A MULTIACTOR EFFORT

Researchers agree that refugees looking for a job in their destination countries encounter major hurdles, mainly including language barriers, unfamiliarity with local job-application customs, nonrecognition of qualifications, and discrimination (e.g., Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Eggenhofer-Rehart, Latzke, Pernkopf, Zellhofer, Mayrhofer, & Steyrer, 2018; Lundborg & Skedinger, 2016). Although these hindrances beset most migrants, the situation for refugees is particularly problematic, for many have left home hastily, have no certificates, and have chosen their new place of residence less purposefully than other migrants (Szkudlarek et al., 2019). Such difficulties are also why traditional job-search and job-choice models (e.g., Stigler, 1962; Wanous, Keon, & Latack, 1983) fall short of explaining how refugees find suitable employment.

Numerous studies show that refugees' success at finding and keeping a job depends on the circumstances created by national governments (e.g., Bloch, 2008; Mulvey, 2015) and on the needs and goodwill of employers (e.g., Boese, 2015; Ortlieb, Glauninger, & Weiss, 2021). Whereas some refugees may find work through local acquaintances and coethnic social networks (e.g., De Vroome & Van Tubergen,

2010; Gericke et al., 2018)—and others may not find work at all—for many refugees, assistance from other people, such as specialists in public employment services or refugee support organizations, is crucial for finding employment (e.g., Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002). Studies in this literature strand focus on individual refugees and their dyadic relationships with the respective actors, often drawing on Granovetter's (1973) notion of the importance of weak ties. However, although that research also indicates that multiple actors are simultaneously involved in refugee employment, it tells little about their interconnectedness.

Evidence that many actors are involved in refugee employment at multiple levels also surfaces in the inventories of policies and programs in European countries (e.g., Hooper, Desiderio, & Salant, 2017; Martín et al., 2016). These players include national governments, regional and municipal politicians and authorities, employment services, civil society organizations, and employer associations. Some of these studies have suggested that this variety of actors is problematic because “there are too many actors taking initiatives and intervening at a local, regional and national level without any kind of coherent strategy or actual exchange of information” (Martín et al., 2016: 9). Unfortunately, these studies do not propose how collaboration across actors and levels can be organized effectively.

To our knowledge, the only authors who have suggested a theoretical approach to address refugee employment from a multiactor perspective are Richardson et al. (2020). In their introduction to a themed journal issue, they mentioned the notion of career ecosystems (Baruch, 2015) as a useful multiactor framework for studying the labor market experiences of refugees—without, however, further theorizing on this. We adopt this idea and develop it further by describing the design principles and explaining the functioning of ecosystems that aim at regular, stable, and adequately paid employment of refugees.

Whereas refugee employment as a multiactor effort thus still awaits theorizing, researchers studying the related field of “refugee reception” (how communities provide newly arrived asylum seekers with accommodation, food, basic language and cultural training, and health services) do theorize about the collaboration of multiple actors. Danis and Nazli (2019) proposed the notion of a faithful alliance to understand how the Turkish government delegates responsibilities and functions to progovernmental civil society organizations. Hesse et al. (2018) adopted a perspective of institutional logics to inquire into the collaboration between a district administration, volunteers, representatives of humanitarian organizations, language-

school owners, and other local experts in Germany. The authors highlighted the challenges posed by differing institutional logics, the importance of which changed over time. For instance, a shared community logic helped reconcile the diverging interests of the actors at the outset of collaboration but interfered with market and bureaucratic institutional logics after several months, complicating collaboration. Similarly, Hardy (1994) as well as Lawrence and Hardy (1999) identified challenges associated with collaboration among governments, nongovernmental organizations, and refugee organizations. Comparing refugee systems of Canada, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, the authors showed that an overarching goal of refugee protection is best achieved in a relatively unorganized system that entails many actors with multifarious values. Despite the high potential for conflicts emerging in such decentralized and heterogeneous actor constellations, their diversity actually enables them to function effectively. However, the authors focus less on the question of *how* this collaboration works.

Initial explanations of how actors in relatively unorganized systems collaborate comes from Kornberger, Leixnering, Meyer, and Höllerer's (2018) case study of the nongovernmental organization Train of Hope, which was involved in handling the 2015 refugee crisis in Vienna, Austria. The authors discovered that the collaboration of several thousand volunteers and other actors such as the Vienna city administration and the Red Cross was made possible through an ad hoc governance structure that rested on the volunteers' willingness to share economic resources and on their concern, responsibility, and hope. As with the community logic that Hesse et al. (2018) noted, moral aspects played a role in the successful collaboration among Train of Hope's members.

In summary, multiactor considerations in refugee research primarily revealed the challenges and conflicts among actors but imparted little knowledge about the way(s) in which successful collaboration functions in this context. Collaboration among multiple actors is better understood in the setting of refugee reception, but also this research does not fill the empirical and theoretical gaps concerning multiactor efforts in the field of refugee employment. To address this lacuna and prepare our exploration of how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed, we now explain ecosystem theory, which offers an action-centered perspective on a set of actors and their interdependent activities (Adner, 2017).

ECOSYSTEM THEORY

The term "ecosystem" comes from biology, where it denotes a community of organic and inorganic

elements whose interaction and mutual adjustment create an equilibrium, which the ecosystem needs to survive (Tansley, 1935). Moore (1993) introduced the ecosystem metaphor into management scholarship to draw attention to interdependencies between organizations. This spurred research in the direction of value creation and multiactor structures yielding economic benefit, culminating into the current conceptualization of a "business ecosystem" as "the alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialize" (Adner, 2017: 42). More recently, purposeful value creation of ecosystems gained scholarly attention. Whereas earlier studies predominantly focused on value creation that benefits the actors of the ecosystem, a growing stream within the entrepreneurial ecosystem literature has shifted that focus toward socioeconomic goals (e.g., sustainability) on the level of regions or countries (Cobben et al., 2022).

Three elements characterize an ecosystem (Adner, 2017; Kapoor, 2018): (1) activities for realizing the ecosystem's value creation, (2) actors who perform the activities according to their roles and responsibilities, and (3) an alignment of the actors' interdependent activities. Whereas other multiactor concepts in the field of refugee integration (e.g., Danis & Nazli, 2019; Hesse et al., 2018; Lawrence & Hardy, 1999) are limited to those actors that are connected to one another through explicit arrangements, the notion of ecosystems encompasses all actors whose activities contribute to the system's value proposition (Adner, 2017; Shipilov & Gawer, 2020). Their governance can rest on formal contracts, informal agreements, or a combination thereof (Kapoor, 2018).

Compared to other collaborative concepts, a unique property of ecosystems is "complementarity," defined as an interdependency of activities in which one activity helps to create or improve another (Cobben et al., 2022; Jacobides et al., 2018; Shipilov & Gawer, 2020). Parallel to ecological ecosystems (Petchey, 2003), complementarity can only emerge in ecosystems that possess diversity among their actors in terms of resources and capabilities. Example activities by which actors enact this complementarity include taking on responsibilities, filling potential gaps, and increasing the value of others' activities by supporting them. Ecosystem theory suggests that complementarity is central to how ecosystems find alignment and eventually create value without full reliance on hierarchical governance structures or market mechanisms (Jacobides et al., 2018). However, little is known about why and how actors engage in complementary activities, so explanations focusing on the micro level are needed for this key property of successful ecosystem functioning (Cobben et al., 2022).

Hence, as part of our discovery process, we adopted a microfoundations approach that considers individual-level factors to explain higher-level phenomena (e.g., Barney & Felin, 2013; Felin, Foss, & Ployhart, 2015; Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Teece, 2007). As Coleman (1986) suggested in his bathtub model, microfoundational explanations consist of the following three steps: they start at the macro level, then “move down to the level of individual actions and back up again” (Coleman, 1986: 1322). A few researchers have investigated the microfoundations of ecosystems, for example to advance understanding of entrepreneurial dynamic capabilities (Roundy & Fayard, 2019) or engagement by human and machine actors in service ecosystems (Storbacka, Brodie, Böhmman, Maglio, & Nenonen, 2016). However, insights into the microfoundations of complementarity within ecosystems remain very limited. Because the microfoundations approach emphasizes individual actions, which are triggered by macro-contextual factors and bring about the macro phenomenon under study (in our case, refugee employment), it is especially well suited to helping us understand how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed.

METHODS

In this multicountry study, we adopted a qualitative research design, which is particularly appropriate to uncovering novel phenomena and exploring them in depth (Ariño, LeBaron, & Milliken, 2016). Given the dearth of theory to explain refugee employment as a multiactor effort, we opted for an abductive approach, which can be described as a “process by which a researcher moves between induction and deduction while practicing the constant comparative method” (Suddaby, 2006: 639). Specifically, and in contrast to the hypothetico-deductive approach, our research was grounded in empirical observations that were constantly being compared with prior research and relevant theoretical concepts. This process enabled us to make sense of our data and discover what is new and interesting. In the following, we will first introduce the policy and societal contexts in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, and then describe how we collected and analyzed our data.

Policy and Societal Contexts in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands

To understand the refugee employment ecosystems in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, it is helpful to take a brief look back in time. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, migration policies in most parts of Europe became more regulated systems. The intention was to enable the nation states to

differentiate between their citizens and foreigners, especially in order to prevent foreign workers from benefitting from emerging national welfare. By contrast, World War II and the following years brought about a more humanitarian approach to immigration and care for displaced persons, eventually resulting in the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 (Lucassen, 2019). As signatories of the Convention, Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands are responsible for providing basic accommodation, health care, food, and legal assistance to newly arrived refugees. In recent years, all three countries also actively prevent refugees from coming to their countries, for instance by supporting policies to strengthen the borders of the European Union (EU), committing themselves to agreements with countries outside the EU to host refugees there (e.g., the EU–Turkey Statement of 2016), and funding the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Although most refugees find shelter in countries outside the EU (UNHCR, 2022), Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands are popular destinations for refugees in Europe. The pre-Brexit EU received 3.9 million asylum applications in the period from 2015 to 2018, out of which 1.9 million were addressed to Austria, Germany, or the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2021). The high interest by refugees in these countries, along with the comprehensive refugee integration programs and labor market characteristics of these three EU member states, make it particularly fruitful to study how refugee employment is managed there. Table 1 presents key figures and policy characteristics of those countries, along with EU averages.

In the three studied countries, registered asylum seekers are entitled to basic social services (e.g., medical care, accommodation, and food). Depending on individual decisions by government agencies and local availabilities, some may attend publicly funded language or integration courses. Registered asylum seekers are allowed to work after a few months but only under certain conditions with regards to working hours (e.g., a few hours per week), workplace (e.g., in their accommodation), and income (which is mostly adjusted based on the social services they receive). Once refugees have a positive legal status (asylum, subsidiary protection, or humanitarian grounds), participation in publicly funded integration courses is mandatory. Recognized refugees are entitled to social welfare just as local citizens are, have free access to the labor market, and are supported in their job search by local job agencies. The latter assess the applicants’ skills and training needs, assign language courses (provided by public and private institutions), and contact employers.

Unemployment rates were at relatively low levels (4% to 6%) in the three countries during the period

TABLE 1
Demographic, Economic, and Administrative Data on the Countries in the Sample (2015–2018)

Characteristic	Austria	Germany	The Netherlands	EU (28 countries)
Population	8,720,132	82,171,806	17,035,609	510,613,163
Unemployment rate	5.5	4.0	5.4	8.1
No. of asylum applications per 1,000 inhabitants	168,840	1,628,405	108,150	3,943,155
• share of applicants aged 18–64	• 4.9	• 5.0	• 1.6	• 1.9
• share of applicants aged 18–64	• 58.8%	• 62.7%	• 74.6%	• 69.3%
No. of decisions on applications	149,985	2,105,790	77,245	3,482,070
• share of positive decisions	• 60.1%	• 45.7%	• 64.4%	• 49.2%
Average duration of asylum procedure until first decision	16 months (2017)	11 months (2017)	10 months (2018)	No data available
Main citizenship of asylum seekers	Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq	Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq	Syria, Eritrea, Iraq	Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq
Labor market access	For refugee-status holders, full access. For asylum applicants, as of 3 months after the start of the asylum procedure: limited time (e.g., in their accommodations, municipalities, and harvesting); apprenticeships and self-employment in some fields under certain conditions; approval by public employment authority based on labor market shortages	For refugee-status holders, full access. For asylum applicants, as of 3 months after the start of the asylum procedure and approval by public employment service (exceptions: highly skilled applicants, those with an internship, and those who have lived at least 4 years in the country); more restrictions for applicants from secure countries of origin or those living in refugee accommodation	For refugee-status holders, full access. For asylum applicants, restricted access from 6 months after the start of the asylum procedure: up to 24 weeks per year as an employee, or 14 weeks as an artist after approval by municipality; only 25% of the salary may be kept, up to €185 per month	Aim: full access no later than 9 months after asylum application; member states may apply their own rules and conditions
Other labor market specifics	High importance of formal qualifications and certificates, foreign qualifications rarely recognized; high prevalence of 2- to 4-year-long apprenticeships combining vocational school with on-the-job training	High importance of formal qualifications and certificates, foreign qualifications rarely recognized; high prevalence of 2- to 3.5-year-long apprenticeships combining vocational school with on-the-job training	High importance of formal qualifications and certificates, foreign qualifications rarely recognized; a growing number of refugees are in education, mostly secondary vocational education	Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region: measures adopted by countries to assess and document the qualifications of foreigners
Main state programs and initiatives	Integration course (8 hours on values and living in Austria); language training at entrance level; subsidies for advanced language training; skills assessments; counseling; vocational training; wage subsidies; mentoring	Integration program comprising 600 hours of language training and 100 hours on life in Germany; service points; skills assessments; job counseling; internships; vocational training	Integration courses (300 hours of language training and living in the Netherlands), refugees are required to follow courses and prepare for exam, fee if exam is not passed within 3 years	

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Characteristic	Austria	Germany	The Netherlands	EU (28 countries)
Major topics in recent immigration history	Refugees from Hungary (1956) and former Yugoslavia (1990s); migrant workers from Eastern Europe	“Guest workers” from Turkey and Mediterranean countries (late 1950s to 1970s); continuously increasing trend	Colonial legacy; “guest workers” from Mediterranean countries (early 1960s to early 1970s); migrant workers from Eastern Europe	“Refugee crisis” (2015–2018) after a steep increase in refugee arrivals
Policy approach and societal climate	Chancellors Faymann, Kern, and Kurz seek to reduce refugee arrivals; xenophobic trends but also strong support of refugees from civil society; increasing votes for the right-wing anti-immigrant political party, the FPÖ; score on MIPEX: ^a 59	Chancellor Merkel and large segment of society welcome refugees in 2015; increasing votes for the right-wing anti-immigrant political party, the AfD; several hate crimes against refugees; score on MIPEX: ^a : 81	Increased opposition to refugees with the rise of populism in the early 2000s; restrictions of refugees’ access to and position in the Netherlands under various coalitions led by Prime Minister Rutte; score on MIPEX: ^a : 57	

Sources: Eurostat (2021); Martín et al. (2016).

^aMIPEX = the Migrant Integration Policy Index of labor market mobility, which covers indicators of labor market access, support, and workers’ rights; maximum score is 100 (MIPEX, 2021).

under study, which means that the labor market offered good chances of finding a job. However, an impediment for many refugees is that their qualifications are not, or are only partly, recognized in the host country (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Wehrle, Klehe, Kira, & Zikic, 2018), and they are asked to do additional occupational training. Austria and Germany have a long-standing vocational education and training system with more than 300 occupations that require two to three years of on-the-job training and vocational school. In the Netherlands, the occupational training landscape is somewhat less regulated, and refugees are provided with qualification programs that differ in duration and intensity.

All three countries have introduced numerous programs to support refugees in finding stable employment. This approach requires close cooperation between job agencies, educational institutions, professional chambers, and potential employers, with charity and refugee support organizations offering coaching and mentoring. From their first day in a new country, refugees come into contact with various institutions and people, such as asylum agency officers, consultants, peers, or volunteers. Thus, even those who eventually find a job by themselves (e.g., via a job ad) or through personal networks have previously been in contact with other actors of what we call the “refugee employment ecosystem,” and they are part of it.

As these descriptions and Table 1 indicate, there are some country-specific differences in the labor market characteristics, local actors, and initiatives of these three countries. However, in this study, we focus on the various similarities between the three studied contexts, as other ecological ecosystem studies (e.g., Higgins, 2017) have shown that focusing on such parallels is useful to identify the common design principles that deliver the theoretical insights needed for simplifying models. More specifically, in line with observations from other highly regulated high-income countries, refugee employment in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands involves a set of actors who interact with one another (Correa-Velez, Barnett, & Gifford, 2015; Martín et al., 2016; Senthanaar, MacEachen, Premji, & Bigelow, 2020). Thus, these countries are a highly suitable context with which to examine how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed, and allow for the investigation of common design principles that may apply to other (highly regulated, high-income) contexts as well.

Data Collection

Working in three country teams, we collected data and later pooled them. In total, we drew on 80 semi-structured interviews with multiple actors

distributed evenly across the three countries. We began with interviewees from the organizations we knew to be important for refugee employment in the respective country (e.g., Caritas in Austria, several professional chambers in Germany, and VluchtelingenWerk in the Netherlands) and actively sought out employers and refugees. Our basic sampling criteria were that refugees had to have regular, stable, and adequately paid employment; employers had to be employing one or more refugees; and experts had to be involved with refugee employment in their work. We recruited interviewees in various ways, such as cold calls, our personal networks, social media, and snowballing. This multipronged approach ensured that we reached beyond the officially involved actors to include all the kinds of people who work in the context of refugee employment (e.g., Adner, 2017; Shipilov & Gawer, 2020). Appendixes A and B present the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics.

The semistructured interview guidelines addressed the interviewees' activities and experiences regarding refugee employment, their relationship with other actors, and the factors that they perceived as helping or hindering refugee employment. In most cases, the interview was in the local language (German or Dutch), but occasionally the interviewee felt more comfortable speaking in English. All interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by the research teams of the respective countries in the period from 2015 to 2019.

Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded in five steps. First, we engaged in open coding (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012), using the MAXQDA software and repeatedly going through all interviews to create and refine codes while adhering closely to the interviewees' personal descriptions of activities and perceptions of their relationships with other actors. This exercise resulted in 572 first-order codes.

Second, pursuing our research question of how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed, we subsumed the first-order codes into broader categories based on thematic similarity of the codes. These categories consisted of (a) activities to support refugee employment (e.g., language courses for refugees, legal assistance to employers, and round-tables or recruitment events); (b) actors' drivers and attitudes linked to engagement in refugee employment (e.g., willingness to help, desire to give back to society, a need to address skill shortages); (c) actors' interests in and expectations of other actors (e.g., refugee counselors interested in financial support by government, refugees interested in company internships, employers expecting refugees to be fluent in

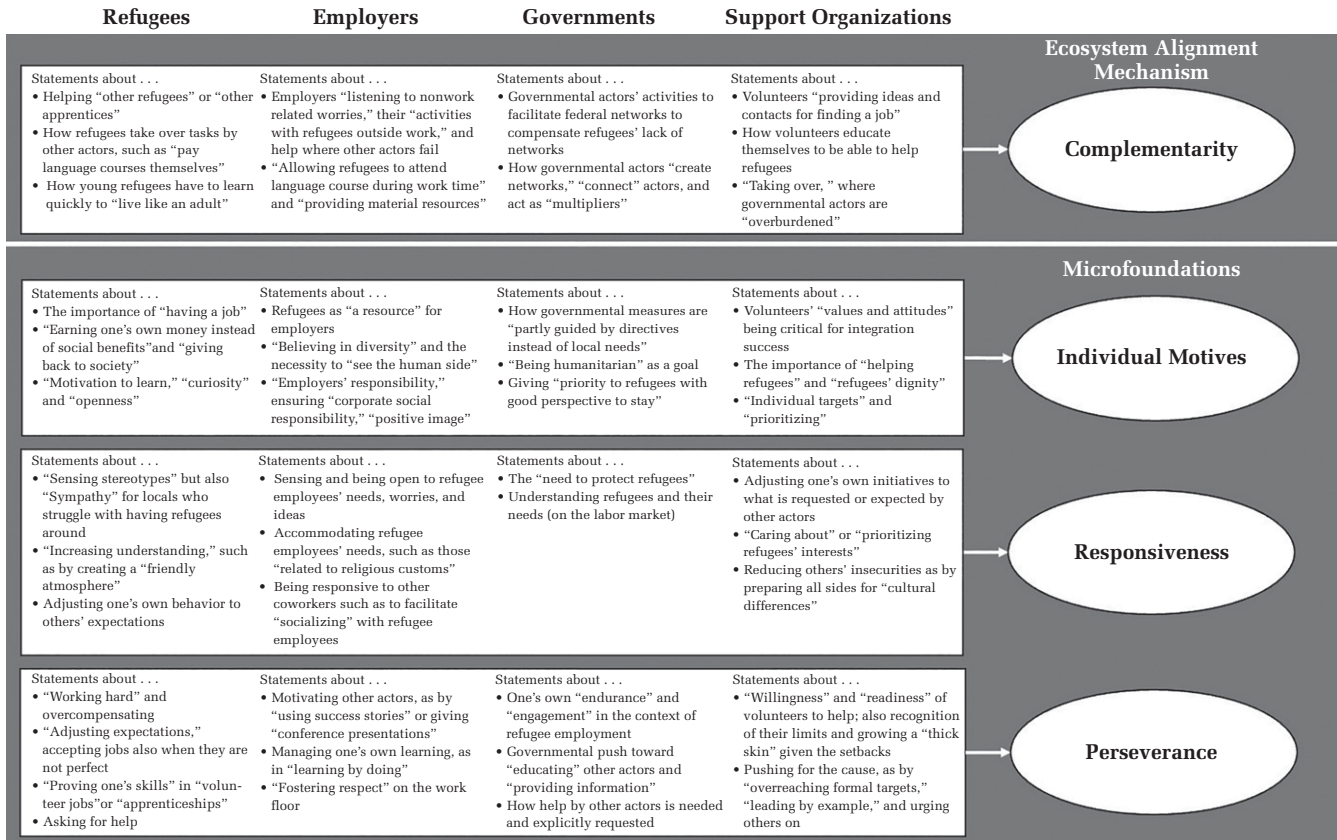
the local language); (d) challenges related to refugee employment (e.g., stigmatization, language, limited transfer of qualifications); and (e) context-specific factors (e.g., references to national law, identification of particular local volunteer initiatives). All these categories formed the basis for the subsequent iterative analysis. The third category (actors' interests and expectations) helped us map and deepen our understanding of the complex web of actors and their interdependencies. Drawing also on the rich literature on barriers in refugee employment (e.g., Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Lundborg & Skedinger, 2016), we used the fourth category (challenges) to gain additional insight into how actors manage these barriers and interact with each other to maneuver around them. The final category (context-specific factors) helped us identify differences and similarities between countries, regions, and cities. Together with the country attributes presented in Table 1 and the cross-country similarities we identified in the other four categories, these contrasts and comparisons supported our decision to focus on commonalities among the three countries.

In a third analytical step, we narrowed down the complex web of actors into four actor groups according to similarities and patterns of their activities: (1) refugees; (2) employers and employer associations; (3) governments, which encompassed public employment agencies, federal institutions, and municipalities; and (4) support organizations, consisting of humanitarian organizations and local volunteer initiatives.

In the fourth step of data analysis, we started looking at our data and theory in tandem. Against the background of prior multiactor conceptualizations in refugee studies and related literature, we engaged in extensive discussions within the research team, scrutinizing our own beliefs and expectations. Given our knowledge of previous refugee research, we had embarked on this research project with the "educated expectation" (Ariño et al., 2016: 110) that we would uncover power struggles and conflicts between actors. However, it surprised us to see that actors' activities facilitated circumvention of existing barriers, complemented each other, and aligned with other actors' activities that supported refugee employment. Our realization caused us to focus our research on constructive collaborative activities of managing refugee employment and prompted us to seek alternative theoretical explanations. We found that ecosystem theory appropriately made sense of our empirical findings, particularly because it drew our attention to complementarity, which we identified as an important feature of successful multiactor collaboration.

In the fifth analytical step, with ecosystem theory and the microfoundations literature in mind, we

FIGURE 1
Data Structure



took another close look at the thematic categories identified in the second analytical step—especially individuals’ activities and attitudes—in order to explore in depth how complementarity comes about. We identified three micro-level factors that bring about complementarity: (a) individual motives of people to engage in actions promoting refugee employment; (b) the responsiveness of people who perceive and act upon other actors’ strengths, weaknesses, and needs; and (c) the perseverance of people who show immense effort and resilience to achieve the goal of refugee employment. Figure 1 presents the resulting data structure in a four-by-four scheme that connects the four actor groups with the four content themes (i.e., complementarity and individuals’ motives, responsiveness, and perseverance). These categories express the common principles that emerged across Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands for managing refugee employment.

FINDINGS

So what did we discover about how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed? A first finding

is that, despite some differences between the three countries in our study, there are essential parallel patterns in the roles and responsibilities of actors that shape how refugee employment is managed. Second, whereas previous literature considers multiactor efforts toward refugee employment as loosely coupled efforts or even conflict ridden, we discovered that they operate in a more collaborative way that is best described as “complementarity,” which is a key alignment mechanism that is unique to ecosystems. Lastly, to unpack how complementarity comes about, we disentangled how it is driven by actors’ individual motives, responsiveness, and perseverance (i.e., the micro-foundations of complementarity). In the following, we elaborate on each of these three main findings.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Ecosystem Actors

In all three countries, actors of the refugee employment ecosystem take on certain roles and responsibilities to work toward the overarching goal of refugee employment. More specifically, they largely agree on certain qualities of this shared goal, such that

refugees should work in regular, stable, and adequately paid workplaces where they can use and develop professional skills and where they meet local people. They should work neither in the informal economy nor in jobs where they are exploited. The following quote by the owner of a small technical-services firm who employed a refugee illustrates how employers feel responsible not only to offer refugees any job, but also to assign them meaningful work tasks:

If you decide to hire a refugee ... it is a high degree of responsibility that each of us has to bear in the company anyway, because you cannot say, "Now I have one, hooray," and he sweeps floors all day—like one used to do with apprentices. (Employer 4)

Taking a broader societal perspective on this, an expert from an employer association explained to us:

From a sociopolitical perspective, we are of the opinion that people who are here should be integrated in the labor market rather quickly. Not only because our firms need them, but [also] because I think it makes sense that people have meaningful work. (Expert 6)

These qualities of refugee employment describe the desired outcomes of actors' efforts (i.e., the value creation of the ecosystem).

In supporting (and sometimes restricting) the overarching goal of refugee employment, state policies and programs trigger actors who share this goal to take action and interact. Rather than functioning like an orchestrator, the policies and programs provide a basic stimulus for actors to take on certain roles and fulfill certain responsibilities. One example is the Qualification Initiative in Germany. This state program not only connects actors, including job agencies, institutions for the recognition of formal qualifications, and professional associations, but also provides guidelines that define certain activities, such as sensitizing companies for refugees' professional skills and employment, without assigning these to specific actors. Macro-level national policies and programs thus are important to orient actors' roles and responsibilities. Thereby, even the absence of (adequate) state policies and programs influences the roles and responsibilities of actors. For instance, volunteer initiatives are formed precisely because their founders believe that the state is not effective enough.

We identified the following four actor groups as essential players within refugee employment ecosystems across Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands. Each of these four actors has a specific role and corresponding responsibility. The first actor group are *refugees*, who actively seek employment and engage in various activities to enhance their employment

prospects, especially by learning the local language and culture and, possibly, by undergoing additional professional training paid for by the government or by employers. The role of the second group, *employers*, is to recruit and employ refugees and to offer decent working conditions. The third actor group are *government agencies*. Next to providing basic settlement services, conducting asylum procedures, and legislating, they also organize and pay for basic language training and connect refugees and employers through the public employment service. The fourth group of actors, *support organizations*, which may be publicly or privately funded and are often staffed by volunteers, afford important contacts for refugees. The role of this actor group is to help refugees choose suitable training and to assist them in finding and applying for jobs.

Because they work toward the same goal and under the same national policies, the various actors and their responsibilities and activities are interdependent. For instance, a respondent working for a municipality expressed the variety of actors involved as follows:

We are negotiating with, for example, educational institutions, employers, status holders [refugees] themselves, volunteer organizations, with the whole societal field to see what they [refugees] need to find a job. (Expert 25)

In particular, the mentioning of "societal field" in this quote illustrates that actors have a sense of themselves as part of a multiactor effort to which interdependencies are inherent. In a similar vein, employers explained how they actively reach out to a number of potential partners after the decision to employ refugees:

After that [decision to employ refugees], we came into contact with various organizations ... We got in touch with the new co-boss [of the employer association] and ministry [the Ministry of Economy, Agriculture, and Innovation] to ask how we should approach this and how to seek those people out? We then went to the municipality, and I told them what we were planning. I inquired whether they wanted to work with us or whether they wanted to put us in touch with them. They liked that idea. [Eventually,] we tried to place a number of people, together with the [support organization]. (Employer 25)

Given this density of interdependencies among actors' roles and responsibilities, it is not surprising that interviewees occasionally mentioned tensions in relationships with other actors. For example, support organizations called for additional money from the state. Refugees endured instances of discrimination by employers and public employment service officers or experienced a mismatch between their vocational interests and job offers. Employers

criticized the state for hampering long-term planning. And representatives of the public employment service wanted employers to be more willing to hire refugees. However, despite these tensions, we found this multiactor effort to function considerably well in all three countries, and identified *complementarity* as the key mechanism underlying the ecosystem's functioning.

The Complementarity Mechanism

Ecosystem scholars have highlighted complementarity as a distinctive characteristic of ecosystems (e.g., Cobben et al., 2022). It is a specific form of interdependency, by which one actor's activity is facilitated or improved by the activity of another actor or several other actors. Stepping in, filling gaps, and adding to others' activities are prominent examples of complementarity in all three countries included in our study. For instance, an interviewee from a small local initiative recalled how their mentoring program was developed with the aim to "add something," support other actors who are "overwhelmed," and "fill gaps":

How can we as a refugee initiative add something on top [...] ? Because it became evident relatively fast that the [governmental] job centers are simply overwhelmed. This is where the initiatives jump in and say: "We want to fill that gap [between training periods] purposefully." (Expert 15)

On the other hand, there are also instances of misalignment where actors' roles and activities do not match or even hinder other actors. Examples include waiting times of several months between language courses and vocational preparation training, or language courses scheduled during regular working hours, which deters employers from hiring refugees. Actors are therefore eager to find solutions to reinstate the ecosystem's alignment when it has been disrupted, and they do so in different ways. Whereas small support organizations (as in the example above) connect local actors and build close relationships between refugees and training institutions, mentors, and potential employers, large support organizations launch large-scale programs that address systematic gaps in governmental activities or lobby to change employment policies. Refugees relieve the overloaded public employment service and support organizations by helping newcomers orient themselves in the local labor market and assisting them in their job search. As one counselor emphasized: "Without people from their community, that [fulfilling the support organization's role] would be hard" (Expert 3). Employers contribute to the ecosystem's

complementarity in various ways as well. For instance, some of them permit refugees to attend language courses or meet with a lawyer during their paid work hours, and some help refugees with basic administration: "Sometimes they receive a letter from IND [Immigration and Naturalization Service], but they do not understand it, so I tell them what it says" (Employer 24). Finally, governmental actors also complement the efforts of other actors to achieve the goal of refugee employment. For example, an adviser to an integration commissioner explained to us how the state "replaces" newcomers' lack of social capital with "state-aided networks":

How do you actually find work in Germany? Especially when it is about qualified professionals. This mostly happens through networks. And, of course, people who fled—they do not have the networks you need for it... We have a range of support networks, such as this Qualification Initiative network. Basically, it is supposed to replace the network for disadvantaged target groups like refugees—networks that you and I just have... And, in this network, there are people on-site in every federal state, and [they] talk to the employers. They do a bit of advertising and say: "We have some people here; don't you need them?" ... This is a sort of state-aided network. (Expert 11)

To develop a more profound understanding of how complementarity within the refugee employment ecosystem comes about, we further analyzed why and how actors engage in such activities. The next section presents our findings on these microfoundations of complementarity.

Microfoundations of Complementarity: Individuals' Motives, Responsiveness, and Perseverance

Although the interviewees explicitly mentioned the collective nature of managing refugee employment and expressed awareness of their interdependence, they did not directly describe individual-level factors that spur the collective effort. They appeared to take those factors for granted. However, by analyzing actors' individual activities and attitudes, we teased out three microfoundations from our data that help further unpack the collective effort of managing refugee employment and explain the ecosystem's complementarity: first, individual motives that explain *why* people engage in this collective effort; second, responsiveness; and, third, perseverance. All three microfoundations provide explanations as to *how* people engage.

Individual motives. Although we found actors' activities geared toward refugee employment, the individual drivers differed substantially, stemming either from economic interests, from morality, or

from both. For instance, the employers in our sample often hire refugees to overcome labor shortages, which they see as “becoming really dramatic” (Expert 2). One employer explained to us how labor shortage drives her to “put warmth” in the employment relationships with refugees to make that relationship “successful”:

I think that the real reason to employ them [refugees] is that there are few other people to find. That is the main reason. We have a good feeling about the refugee employees, a better feeling than when someone comes from [other European country] who does not want to work and only comes for the money. ... The second step is inclusion, so that it [the employment relationship] becomes a success. Success comes also I think from us putting a lot of time in it. And we put warmth in it because that is also what makes people want to work. They have the feeling that they are doing something well, they get the self-esteem. (Employer 24)

This “warmth” may partly complement the activities by other actors. For example, some employers engage in truly compassionate acts, providing material resources such as money or housing “for free; one only has to pay the service costs” (Refugee 11), or inviting refugees to their homes for dinner: “For Easter, we had him in our family, we took him with my family to the farm” (Employer 7). These employers explained how they focus on the human being rather than the refugee label. As the owner of a small technical-services firm highlighted: “It’s actually the human at the center, not just a number, because you first have to know the human” (Employer 12). Employers’ humanitarian motivation also showed in their intentional selection of employees with altruistic attitudes and behaviors as buddies or mentors for their refugee colleagues.

It is less surprising to find expressions of humanity in support organizations more than in other kinds of establishments. After all, the members of support organizations are usually highly motivated to help people. Their belief in human rights and the dignity of refugees fuels their persistent efforts to support refugee employment and societal integration. For example, a project manager within a large refugee support organization explained how compassion for refugees impelled him to take action:

When I started this job, I said: “I hope I will never have to go to another country, leave everything behind.” And, if I have to, I hope people will say that “You are welcome” and that “We can help you look for a new home and job.” (Expert 27)

Refugees, too, follow these classic economic and moral motives. For instance, one refugee specified the material dimension of work as a means to an end: “When you have work, you have an apartment, you

have a car, you have money. That is why I wanted to work” (Refugee 5). Another one stressed the wish to be part of and contribute to the larger society: “Then they [refugees] want to give something back to society. Then they will feel valued, and they will also, as I said, think more in a Dutch way” (Refugee 19). Some of them also emphasized work as a mainspring of meaning and identity: “You cannot live without work. Work is life” (Refugee 8). For the ecosystem, it is not only important that refugees engage in finding jobs for themselves, but they often provide support to other refugees as well. The following quote by one refugee illustrates how his personal “independence” and development motivate him to engage in “voluntary” work to “help” other refugees:

That [work as interpreter] is voluntarily, what should I say? I am not obliged to do it, but I found it on the Internet, through the website of [large support organization]. And I like it, it gives me more independency and more experience with the language. I like to take the [language] courses, and the aim is to help people and that is very important for everybody at the moment. I mean for the refugees that came from Syria. (Refugee 20)

In sum, while actors agree on the importance of refugee employment, we found differences as to why they engage in complementary activities. However, as refugee employment is the goal of their activities, and because they are aware of their interdependencies with other actors in reaching that goal, they go above and beyond their own roles and responsibilities in order to ensure that complementarity on the level of the ecosystem emerges.

Responsiveness. The interviewees in our study frequently mentioned how they communicated their own strengths, weaknesses, and needs and how they perceived and responded to the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of others. This responsiveness was important in generating the ecosystem’s complementarity. Refugees often described experiencing other actors’ goals and attitudes as rather painful. Many of them reported how they sensed prevalent stereotypes and felt stigmatized by potential employers. To avoid ruining their opportunities for employment, some refugees made a conscious effort to ignore these negative images about them or tried to adjust their self-presentation. For instance, they deleted references to their nationality from their job applications, or they attempted to dissociate themselves from a refugee stereotype by demonstrating that they are hard working. The following excerpt from an interview with a refugee illustrates how, as a job applicant, he tried to anticipate the employer’s perspective, sensed his uncertainty, and therefore went to some

length to reassure the employer in his decision to hire him:

I wrote and sent out 40 applications and got invited to two interviews, two electrical firms. And then I met this boss here. At first, he was uncertain because I could not speak German well, and [he suggested], “Yes, do an internship first.” So I did an internship, a trial period. Then he was still uncertain [and said], “I know you can do this, but it is very dangerous [to work] with electricity and such.” I asked if I should do another internship, and [he said] I needed another one. After that, he gave me a contract right away ... He even told me, “I felt worried in the beginning, but thank God I took you!” It was also important for me to prove that he had made the right decision. (Refugee 13)

Employers also showed responsiveness in several ways. Some tried to accommodate special needs that refugee employees might have, providing tutors, childcare, or religiously neutral cafeteria food. Some sought ways to make refugees feel valued, such as by appreciating their strengths and ideas, acknowledging their work, and by giving them more responsibility. They thereby also addressed the refugees’ insecurities. Representatives of employer associations noticed insecurities of both the employers and the refugees and attempted to help both sides:

Where we as an association can help well is by providing the necessary knowledge and reducing initial fear so that one can say: “Look, here is help for you; they will tell you how it works; there are support programs available” and so forth. (Expert 19)

This quote illustrates how actors spot a feeling (“fear”) and a related need (“help” and “knowledge”) in others and address those in their activities.

Support organizations, too, have an important role in noticing and reducing other actors’ insecurities as a responsive activity. These organizations typically find themselves in a mediating position, addressing employers’ needs, providing information, and preparing employers to be “open for other cultures” (Expert 2) while also considering refugees’ individual needs and explaining local specificities to them. Similarly, government representatives attend to the alignment of refugees’ and employers’ needs by ensuring that refugees have basic language and job skills before they venture onto the job market—partly to protect them and prepare them well “before we let them enter the lion’s den” (Expert 13). Taking the responsiveness by the involved actors together, the many small acts of communicating their own and responding to others’ strengths, weaknesses, and needs create complementarity at the level of the ecosystem.

Perseverance. All interviewees reported major efforts and struggles in dealing with the many

obstacles to obtaining and keeping refugees’ employment (e.g., legal uncertainties, nonrecognition of formal credentials, and biases). Individuals show a great deal of persistence and resilience when setting up and maintaining their own activities and aligning them with those of others. Perseverance in the form of focused, proactive, and tenacious activities thus appeared to be crucial for the continuity of the refugee employment ecosystem functioning.

Refugees demonstrated tremendous endurance and proactiveness in surmounting the barriers to employment they encountered. They worked hard to learn the local language, overcome repeated rejections, undertake internships and apprenticeships, accept jobs incommensurate with their qualifications and interests, or engage in unpaid volunteer work in order to gain work experience and get to know locals. They tried to overcome stigmatization and meet expectations of adapting to their host country’s culture, and they renewed their motivation so as not to be discouraged from asking for help in navigating an unfamiliar system of work and education. The refugees in our sample thus made great efforts to be appreciated in their role as good employees. The following excerpt from an interview with a refugee illustrates the effort and “diligence” that many refugees invest to “satisfy” their colleagues and supervisors and ensure a continuous employment relationship beyond job search and selection:

And if someone is absent—I don’t live far. I’m here in [town]. For example, when someone calls in sick, they call me directly: “[Name], are you at home? Can you come, we don’t have enough staff today.” Even if I’m off, I always say, “Okay, I’m coming.” Because I don’t have anything to do at home and like to go [to work], and they are satisfied, because I am diligent. (Refugee 12)

Many employers made an effort to learn by reflecting on “lessons learned from the things we did, the things that went wrong and that went well” (Employer 23). Employers also managed other internal actors and went to great lengths to create a bias-free work environment for refugees to enable them to engage in their work effectively. Our data show several instances in which employers took longer-term, ongoing action to counter stereotyping and discriminatory behavior by employees or customers and sought to build mutual respect. For instance, they provide employee training on unconscious bias or intercultural communication or simply act as role models and allies to enhance an inclusive working climate for refugees. One manager of an inn in the countryside engaged in repeated talks with his regular customers who had reservations about the newly hired

young Afghan, and emphasized that the refugee was a very good employee and that there was no reason why guests should prefer to be served by locals rather than the refugee (Employer 1).

Support organizations engaged in various activities to convey a positive image of refugees to the public, disseminate information to employers, and convince them to hire refugees. This task requires a lot of energy and endurance. As the founder of a local refugee initiative put it:

But the big handicap is that the small- and medium-sized enterprises simply do not have professional HR [human resource management]. So I have to make endless calls because apparently “the boss hasn’t seen it [my message],” “it ended up in the spam folder,” or “we’ll call you back.” (Expert 9)

Interviewees working for regional governmental organizations struggled mainly with bureaucracy and the complexity inherent in managing and regulating refugee employment successfully. To overcome those issues, they invested much effort in coordinating activities and holding other actors accountable.

Taken together, we found that individuals’ perseverance across actor groups is needed for complementary behaviors to be effective and to sustain the refugee employment ecosystem functioning.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we asked how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed, and identified common design principles of refugee employment ecosystems. Proceeding from the observation in the literature that refugee employment often involves actors beyond refugees and employers and that interactions between all these actors is characterized predominantly by conflicting interests and logics (e.g., Hardy, 1994; Richardson et al., 2020), we examined

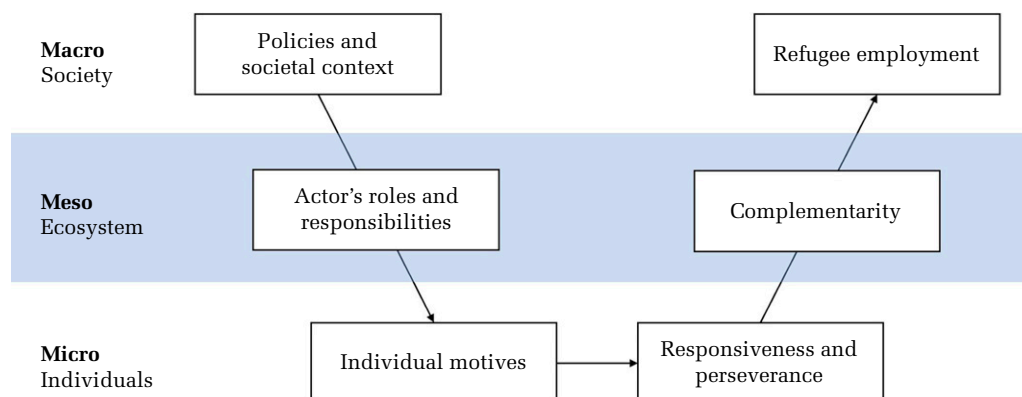
how the goal of refugee employment is nevertheless being achieved. As a milestone in our abductive process, we observed that actors’ roles and responsibilities translate into varying interdependent activities that complement one another and result in regular, stable, and adequately paid employment of refugees. This finding brought us to the notion of an ecosystem and complementarity as a key mechanism underlying its functioning (Adner, 2017; Cobben et al., 2022). Three individual-level factors drive the complementarity mechanism: individuals’ motives, responsiveness, and perseverance. These microfoundations are therefore critical for understanding how the ecosystem of refugee employment functions.

A Microfoundational Model of Managing Refugee Employment

To synthesize our findings, we propose a model that explains refugee employment as resulting from a specific interaction between macro-, meso-, and micro-level phenomena. More specifically, the model highlights the centrality of complementarity as a necessary meso-level mechanism that explains how micro-level activities and interactions of actors aggregate to achieve refugee employment on the macro level. Figure 2 depicts the model, which resembles the classic bathtub model developed by Coleman (1986). In the following, we elaborate on the steps Coleman proposed for microfoundational explanations, starting at the macro level with policies and the societal context, then moving down to the level of the ecosystem where actors take on certain roles and responsibilities, cascading further down to the level of individuals’ motives, responsiveness, and perseverance, and moving back up again to complementarity and eventually refugee employment.

The policies and societal context of a country present the starting point of our explanations (in the

FIGURE 2
A Microfoundational Model of Managing Refugee Employment



top left corner of the model in Figure 2). Studies interested in refugee employment in context may focus on the relations between those macro-level antecedents and refugee employment (e.g., Ortlieb & Knappert, 2023). However, attributing one macro variable to another limits understanding of underlying causes of the relationships, and, hence, does not answer the question of “why one relation holds rather than another” (Coleman, 1986: 1322). By incorporating the meso level, we were able to show how state policies and programs—that support (and sometimes restrict) the overarching goal of refugee employment—trigger the formation of the refugee employment ecosystem in which actors interact and take certain roles and responsibilities. Bringing the meso level into our analysis also revealed the interdependency between actors’ activities. This interdependence may result in struggles and conflict, but we also found it to take the shape of complementarity (i.e., when actors fill gaps, step in, and add to others’ activities).

To understand how this complementarity comes about, we searched for explanations yet another level deeper—that is, on the individual level. As individuals make sense of the state and policy context in which they take on certain roles and responsibilities, their motives are influenced by these macro- and meso-level factors—the “more distant features of the context” (Foss & Pedersen, 2019: 1597). Furthermore, individuals’ economic or moral motives create the conditions of their actions—the proximate context” (Foss & Pedersen, 2019: 1597). In combination, the distant and the proximate contexts drive actors’ activities. For example, alerted by nationwide labor shortages, employers are motivated to secure their firm’s survival and—encouraged by state policy—steer their activities toward hiring refugee employees. The micro-level actions that follow are characterized by responsiveness and perseverance and add to or improve others’ actions, collectively creating complementarity at the meso level, which in turn ensures refugee employment at the macro level.

In sum, driven by individuals’ motives, responsive and perseverant activities aggregate to complementarity at the level of the ecosystem that is needed to achieve refugee employment on the macro level. In order to highlight important theoretical implications, we discuss our findings and model assumptions in more detail and in light of prior literature in the next section.

Theoretical Implications

By conceptualizing refugee employment as an ecosystem consisting of multiple levels, we diverge from previous research, which focuses on refugees’

individual tactics to overcome barriers to finding a job (e.g., Baranik, Hurst, & Eby, 2018; Pajic, Ulceluse, Kismihók, Mol, & den Hartog, 2018) or on support from other people in dyadic relationships with the refugees (e.g., De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010; Gericke et al., 2018; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020). Picking up on an initial mentioning of a refugee career ecosystem (Richardson et al., 2020), we spell out the elements of a refugee employment ecosystem, the actors’ interdependencies, and how actors engage with one another to achieve the goal of employment for refugees. Therewith, our study integrates prior research findings on single actors and illuminates the complex interdependencies and dynamics among a host of actors to develop theory in this largely undertheorized research area (Lee et al., 2020; Szkudlarek et al., 2019).

A refugee employment ecosystem consists of numerous actors who enter the ecosystem and act on their own account rather than only as directed by other actors. Although some actors may possess formal legitimacy or financial resources that they occasionally use to instruct other actors to take action, the ecosystem has no formally defined governing unit. Nor are there fixed boundaries or formal rules about how actors become members of the ecosystem, behave in it, or leave it. Actors can either be individuals (such as volunteers and the refugees themselves) or organizations (such as the public employment service and refugee support groups), but organizations also rely on activities of their individual members. Changes in the activity of one actor affect that of others. This interdependency entails tensions and conflict but also engenders complementarity. Although actors’ opposing logics may seem hard to bridge (Hesse et al., 2018), complementarity in the refugee employment ecosystem is the mechanism that governs the array of values in a rather “unorganized” system (Hardy, 1994). Our findings suggest that actors are able to complement each other in their alignment of the refugee employment ecosystem precisely because they hold varying logics and contribute varying activities to it.

Our study elucidates how individual-level factors and their interplay undergird the complementarity of the refugee employment ecosystem and thus foster the system’s functioning. Responding to calls for improved understanding of microfoundations in management (e.g., Barney & Felin, 2013; Felin et al., 2015), we theorize that the attitudes and behaviors of the people involved constitute the central explanatory underpinning of how the refugee employment ecosystem and its complementarity mechanism work. By pointing to these individual-level factors, we do not suggest that context is irrelevant. On the contrary, following Felin et al. (2015) and the logic behind Coleman’s

(1986) original bathtub model, we assume that context shapes people's attitudes and behaviors. We take into account the societal context as well as other actors in the focal people's environment and unveil them as decisive factors within the actor's perceived context. A particularity of our study is that it uses data from three countries to identify the common design principles of refugee employment ecosystems. These principles are not fully independent of context, but they seem robust against contextual differences between specific actors, legal frameworks, and other societal factors. We therefore propose that our three identified micro-level factors extend to other highly regulated high-income countries and possibly beyond them, making an important contribution to the literature on managing refugee employment at large.

First, individual motives drive the functioning of the refugee employment ecosystem, but actors need not have identical motives in order to share the system's value proposition. Our study shows that motives to engage in refugee employment may vary from person to person, with some people being compelled by economic considerations and others by morality. Energized by this proximate context (Foss & Pedersen, 2019), actors pursue both the ecosystem's overarching goal of refugee employment and their self-interests. Importantly, actors of the refugee employment ecosystem need not necessarily to commit themselves to a common collective identity and similar values, as some studies claim (e.g., Hesse et al., 2018; Kornberger et al., 2018). Parallel to ecological ecosystems for which diversity is crucial (Petchey, 2003), actors of the ecosystem may act according to contrasting motives instead yet still create complementarity and achieve the goal of refugee employment.

The second factor that figures into complementary and, thus, the ecosystem's functioning is responsiveness. Individuals in the refugee employment ecosystem are quite open to considering the interests, resources, and institutional logics of other actors. Although actors differ in power, this disparity does not automatically mean that the responsiveness of actors flows only up the scale of relative power. For instance, governmental actors can control the activities of refugee support organizations and employers through financial resources and wage subsidies, but we found cases where officials of governmental agencies also willingly accommodated actors who depended on them, as did employers toward refugees. Responsiveness is important in refugee employment ecosystems particularly because it enhances the flexibility of their complementarity, which is where our findings contribute to classical conceptualizations of ecosystems (e.g., Jacobides et al., 2018). We show how actors who step into the roles of those unable to play

their part avert misalignment and contribute to building a dynamic and resilient ecosystem.

The final individual-level factor informing the refugee employment ecosystem is perseverance. Perseverance is similar to resilience, which has received a great deal of attention in a variety of disciplines, and which Tarba, Cooper, Ahammad, Khan, and Rao-Nicholson (2019) recognized as a key factor of success and endurance. The primary difference is that resilience focuses on endurance in reaction to adversity, whereas perseverance refers to a *proactive* form of endurance also typical of entrepreneurs (van Gelderen, 2012). Indeed, many activities of the actors we found to be contributing to refugees' formal and stable employment went above and beyond their assigned roles and were guided by their own initiative.

Prior research that hinted at the importance of perseverance in managing refugee employment concentrated on refugees (e.g., Bauer, Boemelburg, & Walton, 2021; Newman, Bimrose, Nielsen, & Zacher, 2018; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002). A few studies documented this factor for employers as well (e.g., Boese, 2015; Lundborg & Skedinger, 2016). Specifying these findings further, we discovered that perseverance is a crucial feature underlying the behavior of all actors involved, particularly their interactions. It is far more than a character trait of refugees who are successful at finding a job or of employers who are successful at hiring refugees. We find that perseverance is key to complementarity and, thus, the functioning and continuation of the refugee employment ecosystem.

The interplay of individuals' motives, responsiveness, and perseverance forges the complementarity of the joint activities at the level of the ecosystem. It is this dynamic that adds up to more than the sum of the individual activities. Furthermore, the three factors are likely to influence one another. For example, the strong motives of individuals may increase their perseverance and responsiveness, and an individual's responsiveness may stimulate another individual to persevere. The interrelated nature of these factors calls for future research on the microfoundations of ecosystems and how they affect the functioning of the ecosystem. For instance, a study on the timeline of micro-level explanations could investigate what triggers an actor's involvement in the ecosystem and when exactly the different micro-level factors interlace. A study comparing microfoundations of rather successful ecosystems with those of less successful ones could bring to light the differentiating factors and explain their value for the ecosystem's functioning.

Whereas our microfoundations perspective suggests that the strengths of how refugee employment ecosystems operate lies in the human factor, at the same time, this also exposes a vulnerability of refugee employment ecosystems. As Teece (2007) noted,

there are obvious risks if a system's effectivity and survival rests on people instead of on structures and routines independent of the human factor. Individuals' motives and perseverance provide major impetus toward realizing the goal of refugee employment, but what happens when such involvement fades? For example, an increase in public and media attention to the plight of refugees in 2015 initially inspired citizens and employers to contribute to refugee integration, but these external frames, subject to ideologies, eroded over time (Klein & Amis, 2020). External shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many workplaces and national borders were closed, economies shrank, and unemployment skyrocketed, are likely to have severe consequences for actors in the refugee employment ecosystems and for the internal alignment of the entire system. The fragility and vulnerability of refugee employment ecosystems and the role of external shocks therefore call for further investigation (Tansley, 1935).

By uncovering the microfoundations of refugee employment systems, we also contribute fresh insights for ecosystem research in management studies (Cobben et al., 2022). We have addressed the calls for research on *how* ecosystems work toward their shared goal (Adner, 2017) and have responded to Shipilov and Gawer (2020), who argued that ecosystems cannot be explained if researchers confine the concept of actors only to organizations or other aggregated entities and their activities. We agree that scholars "need to realize that organizations are not unitary actors with cognition or agenda; they are coalitions of people who pursue activities within organizational structures" (Shipilov & Gawer, 2020: 116–117). Our study therefore delineates people's actions beyond their assigned roles (their actorhood) and shows how they follow their individual personhood (Voronov & Weber, 2020) through individual motives, responsiveness, and perseverance, therewith inhabiting the ecosystem.

Our conceptualization specifically contributes to studies on ecosystems with purposeful value creation (Cobben et al., 2022). A question remains as to the topic-specificity of the microfoundations we identified. The motives of actors may differ across ecosystems that form around social causes as opposed to ecosystems that focus on leveraging business potential. Research has shown that individuals' motives to engage in social causes within and outside their organizations are likely to rest on shared moral convictions and compassion (e.g., Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Kornberger et al., 2018; Shantz, Saksida, & Alfes, 2014). We argue that paying more attention to how these factors play out in different types of ecosystems in different settings may help spell out the differences between ecosystem types and may further advance

humanization in scholarship on purposeful ecosystems. Such research should explicitly consider "humans with a reflective capacity and sense of self, who engage with multiple institutions through the performance of institutional roles" (Voronov & Weber, 2020: 1).

The high numbers of forcibly displaced people is certainly one of the great challenges that the world faces today (e.g., George et al., 2016). A key concern is the care in camps located in the lands neighboring the countries from which the refugees come (Betts & Collier, 2017; de la Chaux, Haugh, & Greenwood, 2018). In the three European states studied here, the arriving refugees are viewed as a humanitarian, societal, and political challenge (De Vroome & Van Tubergen, 2010; Gericke et al., 2018; Martín et al., 2016; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2020). Thus, refugee employment in Europe is a piece of the mosaic in the refugee grand challenge. Literature on grand challenges does highlight multiactor and multistakeholder perspectives (e.g., Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; Martí, 2018; Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2022; Selsky & Parker, 2005), but much of that work concentrates on the macro and meso levels and neglects attitudes and behaviors of individual actors. Our study demonstrates that going one analytical level deeper and searching for microfoundations can lead to fresh theoretical insight not only into refugee employment but also into the management of other grand challenges.

Practical Implications

What can practitioners learn from our research? Taking an ecosystem perspective signifies a cognitive shift that helps actors see more than problems and struggles; it offers insights into how to improve processes. An awareness of the complementarity mechanism in the refugee employment ecosystem can show practitioners the value of monitoring how their activities align with those of other actors and might help actors resist the temptation to harvesting the fruits of each other's engagement. Ecosystems emerge when actors have the same goal (Adner, 2017) despite their possibly diverging motives. More explicit agreements on that goal, on the ways to work toward it, and on actors' responsibilities are likely to help an ecosystem thrive (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016).

Our findings also indicate the importance of having a diverse set of actors engage in mutually complementary activities. Practitioners can use this study as a point of departure for mapping the various actors involving themselves in their ecosystem and identifying each actor's role and responsibility. They can use such a map to assess whether there are under-resourced or vacant roles and responsibilities that could enhance the functioning of the ecosystem.

Governments could install orchestrators such as independent expert committees to help coordinate the actors' activities (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen & Nätti, 2018; Nilsen & Gausdal, 2017). However, our recommendations regarding explicit agreements, maps, and orchestrators should not be misunderstood as advocating more formalism and hierarchical management. On the contrary, our study highlights the power of informal interaction and self-organization among the actors, so governments should provide refugee employment ecosystems with adequate resources rather than give concrete directives. They could, for instance, organize round tables to facilitate communication among stakeholders or channel financial support to a variety of actors instead of a few state agencies. Such "backbone" assistance would address the vulnerability of such ecosystems and increase their resilience (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016).

In addition, our identification of the three micro-foundations can help actors understand how they might contribute to the refugee employment ecosystem. For instance, specialized training could be arranged for individuals in refugee employment management in order to enhance their capacity for reflection and compassion so that they understand not only the experiences of other actors but also the requisites of mutually supportive action (Hougaard, Carter, & Afton, 2021). Simultaneously, however, the ecosystem relies on people's perseverance as a form of proactive endurance and outreach beyond assigned roles, so it also entails additional costs for individuals. Refugees, for example, must cope with and compensate for discriminatory practices, and volunteers must deal with their own high emotional involvement and related self-neglect. Such costs and individualized risks have to be mitigated in order to sustain the ecosystem in the long run. Governmental and other organizational actors should therefore diagnose where individual costs are particularly high and should acknowledge and support—financially or otherwise—the individuals on whose shoulders the success of ecosystems stands.

Limitations

A side effect of concentrating on the common design principles of refugee employment ecosystems is that our study cannot account for the details and nuances of specific local ecosystems. We call for more case studies on them, and suggest that our simplified representation of the ecosystem and its constituent elements could serve future theorizing on refugee employment. For instance, zooming in on how refugee employment is managed in a particular province or city and comparing multiple cases would enhance the understanding of the cultural, social, and

material attributes of more versus less successful ecosystems (Spigel, 2017). We have consciously focused on common patterns between the three countries included in our study, but we also see promising avenues for research that compares refugee employment ecosystems, for which our study might contain valuable input.

Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands represent highly regulated high-income countries with low unemployment (at the time of data collection), functioning governments, and a broad spectrum of equal employment policies. The actors identified in our study are relevant in the contexts we have described, and it may well be that we would find different sets of actors in other settings. To identify the boundary conditions of our propositions and their applicability to other contexts, we recommend that future research extend to other countries where unemployment is high and antidiscrimination policies are scarce.

Our interest in the ecosystem's complementarity as a fruitful topic for theorizing about how refugee employment as a multiactor effort is managed implies that we were less focused on power differentials between actors and related contestation. For instance, we did not systematically capture actors' access to financial resources or the disproportionate costs that individual actors have to bear to keep the ecosystem functioning. However, these aspects, too, are important because powerful actors such as the government or employers may exert control in various ways, as when they decide which programs receive temporary funding or when they issue guidelines governing the activities of volunteers and support organizations (Danis & Nazli, 2019; Fleischmann, 2019; Maletzky de García, 2021). Power imbalances and related flows of money certainly shape the dynamics within an ecosystem, and it would be fascinating to compare ecosystems with varying actor structures, financial resources, and related distribution of power for differences in their success.

Lastly, again owing to our focus on the more abstract level of common design principles of refugee employment ecosystems, we did not fully take account of the heterogeneity within the four actor groups we identified. However, we acknowledge not only the diversity of actors involved in managing refugee employment but also the value that this diversity has for the ecosystem. Surprisingly, we found no indications that demographic differences within our sample of refugees affected how refugee employment ecosystems work in Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands, although the interviewees either represented or spoke about various refugee groups in terms of gender, age, educational level, origin, and religion. We recognize that dealing with refugees as a

homogeneous group is problematic (e.g., Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Knappert, Kornau, & Figengül, 2018; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002), so we recommend undertaking research on how the refugee employment ecosystem works from one refugee group to the next. Similarly, the diversity of such characteristics as member structures, ideologies, or resources within the other actor groups should be included in future studies.

CONCLUSION

Although scholars have recognized that refugee employment involves multiple actors, the understanding of how these actors collaborate in managing refugee employment is limited. This article sheds light on those endeavors through the lens of ecosystems theory. Based on 80 interviews in three countries, the study found that, despite power struggles and divergent interests, the various activities of actors contributed to achieving the goal of refugee employment. Most importantly, a key mechanism that aligns this multiactor collaboration is complementarity, which is driven by peoples' motives, responsiveness, and perseverance. As these dynamics are much more pronounced than previous literature would suggest, our findings invite scholars in the field of refugee studies to shift focus from conflict to collaboration. Such a reorientation is likely to generate new theoretical insights and help actors in the ecosystem achieve their shared goal. After all, collaborative efforts are essential for tackling the grand societal challenges of our times.

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APPENDIX A: ATTRIBUTES OF THE REFUGEES IN THE SAMPLE

TABLE A1
Attributes of the Refugees in the Sample

Interview identifier	Age	Gender	Country of residence	Country of origin	Years in host country	Highest educational level (in country of origin)	Current position
Refugee 1	16	Man	Austria	Iran	2	Basic schooling	Roofer apprentice
Refugee 2	18	Man	Austria	Afghanistan	3	No schooling	Retail management assistant apprentice
Refugee 3	22	Man	Austria	Iran	2	High school	Retail management assistant apprentice
Refugee 4	21	Man	Austria	Afghanistan	5	Basic schooling	Retail management assistant apprentice
Refugee 5	20	Man	Austria	Afghanistan	1.5	Schooling (10 years)	Retail management assistant apprentice
Refugee 6	27	Man	Austria	Syria	3	University, not completed	Kitchen help
Refugee 7	28	Man	Austria	Syria	3	High school	Bartender
Refugee 8	25	Man	Austria	Syria	2	Basic schooling and vocational experience	Carpenter
Refugee 9	21	Man	Austria	Afghanistan	6	Basic schooling in country of origin and Austria	Retail management assistant apprentice
Refugee 10	19	Man	Austria	Syria	2.5	Basic schooling and vocational experience	Metal technician apprentice
Refugee 11	29	Man	Germany	Afghanistan	2.5	University	Painter apprentice
Refugee 12	20	Man	Germany	Mali	3	Basic schooling (7 years)	Elderly care apprentice
Refugee 13	21	Man	Germany	Stateless	5	Secondary school in Germany	Electrical engineer apprentice
Refugee 14	30	Man	Germany	Afghanistan	3	Basic schooling	Cook apprentice
Refugee 15	24	Man	Germany	Syria	2	Basic schooling (6 years)	Cook apprentice
Refugee 16	26	Man	Germany	Syria	2.5	University	Cook apprentice
Refugee 17	23	Man	Germany	Iraq	2	High school	Pharmacist apprentice
Refugee 18	24	Man	The Netherlands	Senegal	3	High school	Warehouse employee
Refugee 19	32	Woman	The Netherlands	Armenia	17	University of applied sciences in the Netherlands	Legal assistant
Refugee 20	44	Man	The Netherlands	Syria	2	University of applied sciences	Interpreter
Refugee 21	24	Woman	The Netherlands	Armenia	17		Production employee

TABLE A1
(Continued)

Interview identifier	Age	Gender	Country of residence	Country of origin	Years in host country	Highest educational level (in country of origin)	Current position
Refugee 22	26	Man	The Netherlands	Syria	2	University in the Netherlands	Hairdresser
Refugee 23	31	Man	The Netherlands	Syria	1.5	High school	All-round employee
Refugee 24	34	Man	The Netherlands	Syria	2	University	Interpreter
Refugee 25	31	Woman	The Netherlands	Eritrea	5	University in the Netherlands	Accountant associate
Refugee 26	30	Man	The Netherlands	Syria	3	University	Bartender
Refugee 27	23	Man	The Netherlands	Syria	3	High school	n/a (apparel industry)

APPENDIX B: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ATTRIBUTES OF THE EMPLOYERS AND EXPERTS IN THE SAMPLE

TABLE B1
Personal and Professional Attributes of the Employers and Experts in the Sample

Interview identifier	Gender	Country	Type of organization	Current position
Employer 1	Man	Austria	Mid-sized country inn	Manager
Employer 2	Woman	Austria	Large supermarket chain	HR manager
Employer 3	Man	Austria	Large supermarket chain	Store manager
Employer 4	Man	Austria	Mid-sized technical-services firm	Owner-manager
Employer 5	Man	Austria	Mid-sized care home	Manager
Employer 6	Man	Austria	Small restoration firm	Owner-manager
Employer 7	Woman	Austria	Small supermarket	Owner-manager
Employer 8	Woman	Austria	Small property management firm	Owner-manager
Employer 9	Woman	Austria	Small social enterprise	Project manager
Employer 10	Man	Austria	Large supermarket chain	Regional manager
Employer 11	Woman	Austria	Small job agency	HR manager and customer manager
Employer 12	Man	Germany	Small technical-services firm	Owner-manager
Employer 13	Man	Germany	Small technical-services firm	Owner-manager
Employer 14	Man	Germany	Small technical-services firm	Owner-manager
Employer 15	Man	Germany	Small bakery	Owner-manager
Employer 16	Man	Germany	Small design firm	Owner-manager
Employer 17	Man	Germany	Small design firm	Owner-manager
Employer 18	Man	Germany	Small construction firm	Owner-manager
Employer 19	Man	Germany	Small manufacturing firm	Owner-manager
Employer 20	Woman	The Netherlands	Large consultancy company	Program manager refugee talents
Employer 21	Woman	The Netherlands	Large consultancy company	Corporate social responsibility manager
Employer 22	Woman	The Netherlands	Large employment agency	Program manager social development and inclusivity
Employer 23	Man	The Netherlands	Mid-sized social housing organization	Manager
Employer 24	Woman	The Netherlands	Small agriculture firm	HR manager
Employer 25	Man	The Netherlands	Large employer association	Board member
Expert 1	Woman	Austria	Small support organization	Project manager, counselor (refugee women)
Expert 2	Man	Austria	Boarding school for unaccompanied minors	Owner-manager
Expert 3	Woman	Austria	Small support organization	Advisor, interpreter
Expert 4	Woman	Austria	Small support organization	Advisor, manager
Expert 5	Man	Austria	Public employment service	Advisor (specialized in refugees)
Expert 6	Man	Austria	Employers' association	Section head
Expert 7	Man	Austria	Employers' association	Region head
Expert 8	Man	Austria	Large humanitarian organization	

TABLE B1
(Continued)

Interview identifier	Gender	Country	Type of organization	Current position
Expert 9	Woman	Austria	Small local support initiative	Vice department head (migration, among others)
Expert 10	Man	Austria	Large humanitarian organization	Founder, spokesperson
Expert 11	Man	Germany	Federal government	Project manager (migration and asylum)
Expert 12	Woman	Germany	Federal government	Adviser to the integration commissioner
Expert 13	Woman	Germany	Municipality	Head of division at Antidiscrimination Agency
Expert 14	Woman	Germany	Municipality	District coordinator for migration and inclusion
Expert 15	Man	Germany	Small local initiative	District coordinator for newly immigrated people
Expert 16	Woman	Germany	Large support organization	Integration moderator
Expert 17	Man	Germany	Large support organization	Program manager
Expert 18	Woman	Germany	Employers' association	Board member
Expert 19	Woman	Germany	Employers' association	Consultant
Expert 20	Woman	Germany	Employers' association	Program manager
Expert 21	Woman	Germany	Employers' association	Program manager
Expert 22	Woman	The Netherlands	Municipality	Consultant
Expert 23	Man	The Netherlands	Municipality	Reintegration coach, women
Expert 24	Woman	The Netherlands	Municipality	Account manager
Expert 25	Man	The Netherlands	Municipality	Policy employee economics and labor market
Expert 26	Man	The Netherlands	Large support organization	Advisor refugees
Expert 27	Man	The Netherlands	Large support organization	Consultant job support
Expert 28	Man	The Netherlands	Mid-sized support organization	Project manager
				Advisor

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