

Short Note

## Moving to Portugal: Conditions for Refugees' Identity (Re)Configuration Processes

Catarina Sales Oliveira \*, Ivan Novais, and Derisicleia Ramos

Department of Sociology, UBI, Portugal

\* Corresponding author ([csbo@ubi.pt](mailto:csbo@ubi.pt))

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### Abstract

This research seeks to explore how mobility interacts with identity (re)configuration processes. We take a comprehensive look at the impact of mobility on refugees' adaptation of their own social identity in diasporas. To build our analytical standpoint, we will discuss theories of mobilities and identity studies and explore points of intersection between relational approaches to collective identities, theories of co-constitution of social formations, and mobile subjectivities and narratives about diasporans' experiences, refugee hosting, and conditions for identity (re)configuration. Next, we apply our analytical perspective to a selection of existing empirical research on refugees in Portugal. We were able to identify some clues that indicate the relevance of our approach and suggest two lines for further empirical research in the Portuguese context.

### Keywords

hosting country; identity (re)configuration; mobilities; refugees; transit

### Issue

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### 1. Contributing to a Theoretical Update of Refugee Studies

This short note provides a theoretical update of refugee studies in the Portuguese context. It results from a literature review of research about conditions for identity (re)configuration processes of refugees currently hosted in Portugal. A refugee is a person that is "unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR, n.d., p. 3). An asylum seeker is an individual who is seeking international protection and might become a refugee if they are granted that protection (UNHCR, n.d.). Since 2015, internal and external conflicts in a number of countries increased the mobility of people seeking refuge in Europe (Statistical Office of the European Communities, 2022). Europe has a long history of receiving refugees

(UNHCR, 2022) but with very different realities at the national level. A longitudinal perspective of the mapping and flows of refugees is a complex intertwining of several factors where geopolitics and international relations play a central role. Nevertheless, other factors are important, especially the presence of historical ties and social networks (Fransen & de Haas, 2022) and, to a lesser degree, the asylum and refugee national policies (Spinks, 2013).

Refugees and asylum seekers are cases of forced mobility: "In the scientific literature, the term forced (or involuntary) mobility is used as an umbrella for characterizing human flows in which there is an element of coercion" (Tsapenko, 2021, p. 526). Forced migration and mobility are, therefore, situations where the degree of choice and agency is very low or absent. This is the case of refugees and asylum seekers because, as the Norwegian Refugee Council states, they move due to an "uncontrollable situation of being forced out of their homes and may not be able to ever return" (as cited

in Baranik et al., 2018, p. 117). Refugees and asylum seekers tend to have very limited opportunities to make choices. Their decisions regarding their trajectories and destinations are strongly conditioned by contextual constraints and chance (Spinks, 2013).

Shaped by these circumstances, their mobilities are typically dangerous, long, uncertain, and precarious. The central premise of this paper is that their mobility experiences frame their identity (re)configuration processes.

We conceptualize identity from a socio-anthropological perspective, convening the works of authors like Barth (1969) and Goffman (2008), who stress the relational interactive features of identity, with inputs by Rutherford (1990) and Bauman (2001), who have emphasised its unfinished and fluid character respectively. Identity can be described as a floating signifier for multiple meanings present in “different, even competing perspectives of individuals, collective bodies, ties and processes” (Conde, 2011, pp. 2–3). Identity configuration is, therefore, a central process in both individual biographies (Dubar, 2000) and public social life. Regarding the movement dimension in the identity process, Manderscheid (2015, based on Foucault) claims the influence of the socio-political realm in the construction of the mobile subjectivities, and Easthope (2009, p. 61) states that “both mobility and place are essential components of identity construction.”

These last two theoretical perspectives drive us to the realm of the mobilities paradigm, which is central to our approach. The theoretical background of mobilities studies remains scarcely used in research focusing on the identity reconfiguration processes of refugees (for some exceptions see Dağtaş, 2018; Declich, 2018; Nunn et al., 2016; Sharma, 2021). Considering mobility as a central human feature, mobilities studies address the conditions, meanings, and effects of the increasing movements of people in the second half of the 20th century particularly. Hannam et al. (2006, p. 2) argue that “mobilities and moorings are complementary and occur dialectically.” The use of the plural form of the concept of mobility—mobilities—is precisely to highlight its diversity and reach. This current of thought pays special attention to the social inequalities associated with mobility.

The concept of “mobility justice” (Sheller, 2018) addresses the uneven situations and processes that mobility can involve, from the freedom to travel full time of the digital nomads to the forced mobilities of refugees. Nevertheless, until recently was not usual to see interpretations of refugees’ situations from a mobility focus. As Scalettaris (2009, p. 52) states, “within refugee policies, mobility is considered incompatible with solutions to displacement. So refugees and asylum seekers are considered not to have the agency to actually be mobile.” Their situation has been more embedded in perspectives highlighting dominance, structure, and discrimination. But “refugees today (i) travel longer distances, (ii) are less likely to seek protection in a neighboring country, (iii) are less geographically concentrated, and (iv) are more likely

to reside in a high-income OECD country” (Devictor et al., 2020). Therefore, to represent refugees as victims, helpless people completely deprived of agency, is a common depiction that might not correspond entirely to reality (Dağtaş, 2018; Mainwaring, 2016; Wimalasiri, 2021).

Agency is a central piece in identity (re)configuration. In this respect, Nóvoa (2018) claims that mobility can potentialize identification with a place (in his study, the development of a European identity) only when it empowers individuals. A great number of refugee and migration studies highlight how identity and agency can be affected by these conditions. In fact, a stigmatization process starts immediately when people are labeled as refugees (Goffman, 2008; Scalettaris, 2010) and all the loss of control over circumstances that happen in most trajectories. Later, while settled or resettled, there is the more subtle *looking effect* of local citizens (Anderson, 2019) that maintains the otherness boundary. Being a refugee is a condition that tends to devalue not only the social status of the individuals but also their self. Nevertheless, some authors point out cases where, surprisingly, the agency of refugees is “evidenced in their own accounts of their journeys” (Mainwaring, 2016). This perspective is particularly interesting from an intersectional perspective. Women refugees coming from patriarchal societies are usually represented as especially vulnerable. However, these women refugees can experience a plurality of situations during displacement that empowers them (Dağtaş, 2018; de Almeida, 2021; Mainwaring, 2016) because they come into contact with different realities having left their familiar and/or religious background behind. In the same sense, the decision-making power of refugees—when they have the opportunity to make decisions—is influenced by their journeys. “Decisions are made on the run, and may change according to circumstances encountered during their journey, or information (real or rumoured) heard along the way” (Spinks, 2013, p. 9). This demonstrates how pre-established ideas about refugees’ lack of agency can be reductive and how it can be relevant to look at their mobility experiences as a possible important element in the process of redefining their identity.

## 2. Testing Our Model: Portuguese Refugee Studies in the Light of a Mobile Subject

### 2.1. Methods and Context

After having identified the problem, we decided to essay an application of this analytical framework. We are involved in two academic research projects about refugees hosted in Portugal. We are, therefore, familiar with the current research on the Portuguese case. We essayed a comprehensive revision of this literature regarding the intercross of mobilities and identities. We retained data from ten documents. In Table 1, we present a list of the materials used. Three are institutional reports (ACM, 2018; de Oliveira, 2021; Sousa

**Table 1.** List of references analysed.

Reference	Type	Language	Keywords
ACM (2018)	Technical report	Portuguese	flows; hosting; integration
de Almeida (2021)	PhD thesis	Portuguese	trajectories; hosting; identification
Moleiro and Franco (2017)	Newspaper article	Portuguese	escape; hosting; desidentification
de Oliveira (2021)	Technical report	Portuguese	refugees hosting; flows
Ribeiro (2017)	Master's dissertation	Portuguese	hosting policies; flows
Rodrigues (in press)	Master's dissertation	Portuguese	families; hosting; autonomization; identification
Santinho (2011)	Phd thesis	Portuguese	hosting policies; trajectories; boundaries
Santinho (2013)	article	Portuguese	trajectories; hosting; identification
Sousa et al. (2021)	Research report	Portuguese	hosting policies; institutions practices; (des)identification
Teles (2018)	Master dissertation	Portuguese	hosting policies; institutions practices; (des)identification

et al., 2021), one is a newspaper article, and the rest is academic research. The dimensions vary from extensive studies involving official registers, in the case of the reports, to small samples of less than 20 cases, in the mainly qualitative approaches of the other researchers. In the first phase, we collected descriptions and narratives about the trajectories and displacements of the refugees (dimension mobilities). Then, using thematic analysis, we categorized the collection of excerpts accordingly to the presence of references to belonging, identity processes, or bounding (dimension identities).

To contextualize our object of study, we will briefly present the national context. Portugal has a long past of mobility. Despite its small size and scarce economic resources, Portugal has founded the oldest of the modern European colonizing empires spread over many locations that now belong to more than 50 nations (Haag, 2012). Through the 20th century and already in the 21st century, the country has experienced intense emigration flows mainly connected with the search for better economic conditions and escaping the Portuguese colonial war (Rocha-Trindade, 2000). After the democratic revolution of 1974, the country witnessed an intense flow of entrance into the country of inhabitants of the former colonies. This movement greatly affected Portuguese society (Rocha-Trindade, 2000). Soon after these movements and with the entrance into the EU (at the time EEC), Portugal started to receive immigrants from Europe, especially from Eastern countries. In recent years, immigration has continued to grow. Currently, Portugal can be described as “a country of migration” (Góis & Marques, 2018). However, this general label hides fundamental geographical differences: More than 70% of the foreign population is located on the coast (de Oliveira, 2021) and some neighbourhoods in the bigger cities can be described as cases of super-diversity (see Dias, 2019), but in other locations, mainly in the interior, the welcoming of immigrants is a recent phenomenon.

Portugal has a short history of hosting refugees and asylum seekers. The first experience was in the context of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) when flows of political refugees sought asylum (Santinho, 2011). Since then and until very recently, this social situation has remained marginal, contrary to what happens with migration. During the last decade, when the number of refugees entering Europe started to rise, Portugal was one of the least chosen countries as a destination. In 2020, Portugal had only 0.2% of the EU applications for international protection (de Oliveira, 2021). The country's location can be a reason since more far-away destinations demand resources that diasporans cannot afford (Müller-Funk, 2019). Interestingly, this situation doesn't correspond to a lack of national interest in hosting refugees. Unlike several other EU members, the Portuguese government has offered to take many more refugees than it was asked to. Yet the refugees themselves seem unenthusiastic about coming and staying in Portugal (Goldberg, 2021; Nyman et al., 2017). Portugal presents an interesting case study due to these specificities and contradictions. How does the lack of will to move to the country affect the experiences of refugees currently hosted there?

## 2.2. Results

We will now present the more significant results of our narrative analysis.

### 2.2.1. Double Forced Mobilities

Refugee's mobilities to Portugal are doubly forced. A common theme of all the studies revised is that Portugal is not chosen as a destination country and is also often an unknown country (de Almeida, 2021; Santinho, 2011, 2013; Sousa et al., 2021). In several cases, Portugal had been just a transit country until refugees' circumstances made them stay and settle. Therefore, moving

to Portugal is, in fact, a non-reality. Most refugees in the country didn't move to Portugal; they ended up *stuck* there. This can increase the constraints and conflicts experienced. Some stay against their will; others choose to return to the road with all the risks and loss of rights associated with escape (Teles, 2018). Refugees' escape movements from Portugal are not a marginal phenomenon; 31% of the refugees received between 2015 and 2017 did so (ACM, 2018; Moleiro & Franco, 2017). This *escape mobility* has not been addressed yet by research, so this information was obtained from the media and in studies about the role of hosting institutions (see, e.g., de Oliveira, 2021) that do not present interpretations and details of this phenomenon.

### 2.2.2. Agency vs. Territorial Forced Mobility Policies

Agency is a central element in refugees' trajectories but is commonly absent. Hosting policies can worsen the lack of agency refugees typically experience. Despite it being more common to experience refuge as a disempowerment condition, de Almeida's (2021) results show a different process in the case of the women and girls she interviewed. As they were travelling alone, their role in the mobility decisions was central, allowing them to have an important agency (de Almeida, 2021). De Almeida concludes that when women have the power to decide and to lead their own trajectory, this affects both their travel experience and, later, their self-esteem, family relations, and settlement. In the case of women, refugees having agency has specific impacts since it challenges the dominant model of gender relations in their countries of origin. However, we found that the power to make decisions about mobility and settlement is central in other research and, when lacking, can bring great dissatisfaction. Ribeiro (2017) claims that Portuguese hosting policies seem to serve the national interest better than refugees. Hosting is ruled through a national plan (ACM, 2018) in which several principles are defined. One is an option for a decentralized policy based on the rationale that it is important to integrate this population involving the community directly and that small-scale solutions can work better (ACM, 2018). Consequently, refugees are currently placed in different localities of the country according to partnerships created between the government and local municipalities or social institutions. The process includes a matching between the profile of the refugees and the institutions/locations but other factors come into play, such as the availability of places and the connection with social innovation projects that aim to repopulate deprived areas (ACM, 2018). In the end, refugees are being pushed to move into the nation's interior when they do not wish to do so. Recent research followed 13 refugees' families and concludes that all of them wished to stay in Lisbon; however, they had to move to 11 other municipalities all over the country where they had no contacts (Rodrigues, in press). This territorial forced mobility can represent a de-identification

practice, especially when refugee communities and networks of belonging are still absent in Portugal (Santinho, 2011). De Almeida's (2021) interviews in Fundão and Castelo Branco (two inner country councils in the centre of Portugal) illustrate how loneliness and isolation are present in the refugee's daily life. So at the same time that our findings highlight that agency in displacement is very important to effective settlement, we discover that the current status quo of Portuguese hosting policies deprives the individuals of agency and promotes the internal displacement of refugees.

### 3. Final Remarks

To conclude, the application of our perspective has provided evidence that mobility plays a central role in the complex puzzle of refugee hosting. In the narratives explored, we find relevant connections to what the literature states regarding the central role of agency in empowering diasporans, the complexity of trajectories, and the invisibility of the experiences of refugees on the move. We discover that the refugees moving to Portugal face additional barriers that make their mobilities even more complex: They come to an unwanted and unknown country, usually just expecting to cross it as a transit country. When they end up staying here and even being officially welcomed, they are subjected to relocation policies that internally displace them against their will. The considerable number of cases of escape mobilities from Portugal indicates this dissatisfaction. Among those who stay, this situation has the potential to unbalance the fragile social and institutional connections that they have established. Representing much more than just a physical move, mobility experiences reconfigure paths and social and family relations; they redefine refugees' plans and their futures. Therefore, we believe it is essential to hear from refugees to more deeply understand (a) the profound effects these mobility experiences have on identity processes and (b) their expectations and representations of Portugal. These results will be important not only to enlarge scientific knowledge but also to inform a possible redesign of the Portuguese refugee hosting policies.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## About the Authors



**Catarina Sales Oliveira** is a PhD in sociology. She is an assistant professor at the University of Beira Interior (UBI) and a researcher at CIES-IUL (Center for Research and Studies in Sociology). Her research interests are gender and citizenship, mobility, transport, and inequality, work, entrepreneurship, and organizations. She developed these specializations through several multidisciplinary European research projects. She works to promote gender equality both in higher education and at the local community level, participating in projects, and until 2021 as a chairwoman of the UBI Equality Commission (CI-UBI).



**Ivan Novais** is a bachelor in anthropology and PhD candidate in sociology. His research interests are ethnography, identity, refugees, and migration. He currently teaches at the Department of Sociology at UBI and does field work for his thesis about refugees' identity reconfiguration processes in Portugal. He is also a professional photographer and is currently engaged in an artistic residence involving a refugee centre.



**Deriscléia Ramos** holds a bachelor's and a master's in social services and is a PhD candidate in sociology. Her research interests are identity, racism, human rights, and education. She works at the University of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, and is currently doing fieldwork for her thesis about structural racism and positive actions in HEIs.