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'*You Need a Network*': How Highly Skilled Refugees Build Social Networks to Convert Cultural Capital and Reclaim Professional Identities

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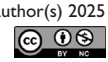

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Abstract

Drawing upon social network analysis and longitudinal research with recently resettled Afghans in London, this article advances understanding of social capital in navigating upward mobility and rebuilding professional identities. Forced migration may result in the sudden rupturing of social ties ('torn nets') and loss of status which may undermine one's sense of self. Even the most experienced and highly qualified professionals may face deskilling – 'starting from zero'. While acknowledging structural barriers, and racialised discrimination, it is important to understand refugees' strategies to rebuild careers. Building upon the 'presentation of the networked self', we explore the role of relationality in how professional identity is reclaimed. Social networks can be useful routes to jobs. However, we argue that the extent to which social connections may help with reclaiming one's former career depends, partly, on forging 'vertical ties' with those who are willing and able to recognise and legitimate that professional status.

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Introduction

Much has been written about deskilling and the 'Refugee Gap' (Bloch, 2004). Even the most highly skilled refugees may face 'under-employment' and struggle to find jobs commensurate with their prior qualifications and experience (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014). Researchers highlight factors such as discrimination, as well as language proficiency and institutional barriers to qualification transferability and accreditation (De Jong, 2019; Thondhlana et al., 2016). Moreover, female refugees may face additional obstacles in relation to gender discrimination, racism and deskilling, meaning that their former qualifications and work experience are devalued in the labour market (Carlbaum, 2022; Luimpöck, 2019).

However, as Bygnes (2021) notes, despite the 'riches to rags' narrative associated with deskilling and downward mobility, it is necessary to avoid such generalisations and consider diverse experiences. While acknowledging structural barriers, it is important to note active strategies adopted by refugees in their efforts to transfer cultural capital; for example, by mobilising social capital through social networks (Erel, 2010).

There is abundant evidence to suggest that social networks can play a significant role in helping refugees to access the labour market (Bernhard, 2021; Perino and Eve, 2017; Thondhlana et al., 2016). However, the ways in which networks can help overcome deskilling and downward mobility require further analysis (Dunwoodie et al., 2020).

In this article, we seek to advance understanding of the role of different types of social ties in helping highly skilled refugees to overcome deskilling and regain their professional careers. In so doing, we go beyond a simple view of networks, as direct routes to jobs, and consider the role of social ties in reclaiming disrupted professional identities. Applying the concept 'presentation of the networked self' (D'Angelo and Ryan, 2021), we examine how identities are expressed and reclaimed through relationality within social ties. Thus, we seek to inform understanding of how refugees may overcome network rupture (Heidinger, 2024; Perino and Eve, 2017), as they strive to build new ties in new places. In particular, we aim to advance research on opportunities and obstacles in forging 'vertical ties' (Ryan, 2011) and bridging capital as strategies to convert cultural capital, reactivate careers and reclaim professional identities.

The term 'refugees'[1] encapsulates heterogenous populations. People who are formally granted leave to remain move through different routes and time scales; moreover, their experiences vary depending on the structural and legal contexts in receiving societies (Senthanar et al., 2021). In this article, we focus on Afghans arriving in London, post 2021, through the UK government's relocation and resettlement schemes (explained below). While noting that their experiences are quite specific, especially their routes of arrival, nonetheless, engaging with wider literature, we suggest that some experiences may be shared with other forcibly displaced persons.

The article begins with a review of the relevant literature, then we briefly present our study and provide some context about the evacuation and resettlement of Afghans in the UK. Next, we present an overview of our findings and then, through three rich case

studies, we explore the various strategies people use to mobilise social capital to find employment, develop careers and reclaim professional identities. The article ends by summarising our key contribution to understanding how highly skilled refugees seek to forge social ties with people who recognise and reinforce the presentation of professional selves, as routes to re-establishing careers.

Social Networks and Career Identities

Networks are consistently recognised as key factors in the employment outcomes of refugees (Baillot et al., 2023; Bernhard, 2021; Carlbaum, 2022; Gericke et al., 2018; Perino and Eve, 2017). Nonetheless, the precise role that networks play in finding jobs is not straightforward and is difficult to ascertain (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014; Keskiner et al., 2022). Moreover, there is growing recognition of the need to understand how social ties may work differently in particular economic sectors (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018; Keskiner et al., 2022) and hence to situate networks within specific socio-structural contexts (D'Angelo, 2021). Further research is therefore required to analyse the complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic relationship between different types of bonding and bridging capital and refugee employment outcomes (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014; Dunwoodie et al., 2020). Moreover, rather than simply applying research on migrant networks to refugees, there are calls for more focus on the particularities of networks of refugees (Heidinger, 2024). This article seeks to advance that research.

A specific experience shared by many forcibly displaced persons is network rupture. When people move quickly and unexpectedly, they not only lose material possessions but also inter-personal connections. Moreover, asylum processes, based on restrictive criteria, can split kinship and friendship groups (Senthanar et al., 2021). Hence, different asylum pathways may mean that networks are 'spatially fragmented' (Heidinger, 2024), scattered over many countries and indeed continents. These have been described by Perino and Eve (2017) as 'torn nets'. In addition, for those granted refugee status in receiving countries, they are often dispersed to particular locations depending on the availability of accommodation and support services, rather than considering pre-existing social networks (Carlbaum, 2022; Luimpöck, 2019; Speed et al., 2021). Hence, unlike migrants whose migration decision-making may be influenced, partly, by the availability of local networks including kinship ties (Ryan, 2011), refugees resettled in new areas usually need to build ties from scratch (Povrzanović Frykman and Mozetič, 2020).

But what is meant by 'networks'? Beyond a simple metaphorical use of 'networks' to describe all connections, there is a need for more precise analysis of the particular relationships, flow of resources and relative social location of actors within social ties (Ryan, 2011). In other words, we need more information about the form, function and meaning of refugees' networks (Baillot et al., 2023; Bernhard, 2021; D'Angelo, 2021)

Data suggest that recently arrived refugees usually have small, household-centred networks (Heidinger, 2024). Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that people experiencing social disadvantage and marginalisation tend to have small networks with low levels of resources (Desmond, 2012; Lubbers et al., 2020; Plickert et al., 2007). In the absence of wider social connections, relying on such limited networks may result in 'information stagnation' (Heidinger, 2024: 658), which can pose a challenge in terms of

accessing the labour market and reactivating careers (Perino and Eve, 2017). Moreover, in contexts of adversity, relying on a few ties may cause over-dependency and perceived 'burden', causing relations to burn out (Desmond, 2012).

In the absence of beneficial social capital inhering in inter-personal networks, refugees may rely on state agencies and NGOs to find jobs (Baillot et al., 2023; Bernhard, 2021; De Jong, 2019). However, such routes to employment may lead to deskilling in sectors that actually reinforce 'refugee identities' (Senthanar et al., 2021).

It has been argued that the most highly skilled refugees 'run into a double wall' (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018: 41). Their institutionalised capital 'is devalued because formal qualifications are assigned the status of a lower educational level' but their 'occupational identity is strong', making it harder to switch jobs (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018: 41). As Bourdieu (1986[2011]) reminds us, cultural capital, in the form of educational qualifications and credentials, can only be converted into economic capital – employment – if it is recognised and valued. This raises questions about how cultural capital travels across national borders and the extent to which skills, qualifications and credentials are validated within receiving societies (Erel and Ryan, 2019). Mobilising social capital, through networks, can help to access the necessary resources, such as advice, local know-how and practical support, to convert cultural capital into economic capital (Keskiner et al., 2022). In this regard, it is important to attend to class diversity among refugees. As noted by scholars such as Vickers (2016) and De Jong (2019), class is under-researched in relation to refugees. Those who are highly qualified, who speak the local vernacular and have professional expertise from their home country may experience initial deskilling but may have the resources to gradually convert cultural capital and improve their situation, over time. For example, research with refugee doctors in Norway found that 'classed resources represent an element of continuity in the post-migration context' (Bygnes, 2021: 34). Nonetheless, as discussed below, even the most highly skilled may experience difficulties in forging useful connections to support their career reactivation.

Newcomers need opportunities to meet and build connections with those in higher social positions who hold and willingly share relevant resources (i.e. 'vertical ties') (Ryan, 2011) to access bridging capital. Forging vertical ties with influential people requires reciprocity – that is, a shared interest in establishing contact (Ryan, 2011). New social ties can be formed around perceived commonality; people who share common interests and have opportunities to meet regularly are likely to develop the trust necessary for the reciprocal exchange of support and advice (Plickert et al., 2007). However, forming such new vertical ties can be challenging for recently resettled refugees whose commonality may not be recognised. Class hierarchies, language barriers and discrimination may be obstacles to such social encounters (Barwick, 2017). In other words, social networks involve power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1986/2011). Those with power and influence may see no advantage in forming connections with refugees (Baillot et al., 2023).

Hence, the challenge is how to establish new ties around reciprocity, shared interests and mutuality, or likeability (Keskiner et al., 2022). Finding influential people who share similar interests or identifications, and are motivated to forge a relationship (Plickert et al., 2007), can prove a key route to mobilising bridging capital. To understand these

social ties, it is necessary to consider how identity formations unfold within these relationships.

This article examines the inter-play between social networks, identities and sense of self. Webs of social ties reflect and reinforce distinct definitions of who we are and who we seek to be (i.e. the presentation of the networked self) (D'Angelo and Ryan, 2021). Forced migration and displacement can result in a loss of status and identity, resulting in what has been called 'biographic rupture' (Luimpöck, 2019: 306). Drawing on research with refugees in Germany, Bernhard (2021) explores how people aspire to rebuild their sense of self, reclaim their lost identities and the importance of inter-personal relationality in asserting particular kinds of identities. Claims to specific identities are shaped by cultural scripts that may form the building blocks and affordances for creative adaptations and inventions (Bernhard, 2021).

Although not extensively researched, this interaction between networks and identity is especially important in relation to careers. As Ibarra and Deshpande have noted, career possibilities are shaped 'by the social networks that affect referrals and opportunities as well as the development and change in people's identities over time' (2007: 270). For example, being part of a professional association, a team of work colleagues or a business group, may enable someone to express a specific identity. Membership of these networks can legitimate this identity-claim and reinforce the sense of self with recognised status as a respected expert (Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007). Therefore, sustaining or reclaiming one's former professional identity depends upon a range of factors, including credential and skill recognition (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018), but also accessing social networks who can validate and reinforce that sense of self (Thondhlana et al., 2016).

Building on this body of literature, we now turn to our rich data drawn from longitudinal research with resettled, highly skilled Afghans in London. In so doing, we aim to advance understanding of how those with former professional careers attempt to generate social capital, particularly bridging social capital through vertical social ties, in order to convert cultural capital, reclaim their former professional identities and reactivate careers.

Our Studies

The overall aim of our qualitative, longitudinal research is to understand the experiences and needs of resettled Afghans in London. Following the Afghan government collapse and the massive evacuation in August 2021, 2.3 million Afghans registered as refugees in the region, mostly in Pakistan and Iran[2]. The British military evacuated about 15,000 people in 2021. By December 2024, around 32,000 Afghans had been resettled in the UK under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizen Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) pathways[3] (Sturge et al., 2025). Both programmes aim to assist Afghans who have worked with the UK government or British armed forces in Afghanistan and those at risk of human rights violations, such as judges, journalists and women's rights activists. Under the schemes, people are entitled to access welfare, healthcare, education and the right to work and to apply for British citizenship after five years in the UK. Local authorities voluntarily take part in the schemes to provide support

to resettled Afghans, including accommodation, dedicated caseworkers, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes and welfare and employment advice.

Our first project (2022–23), conducted in partnership with two Afghan organisations, focused primarily upon experiences of evacuation and arrival into temporary hotel accommodation. The second project (2023–24), conducted in partnership with key stakeholders, focused on experiences of leaving hotels, moving into accommodation, accessing council services and job-seeking. Both studies received ethical approval from London Metropolitan University ethics committee. Across both projects, we used a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A total of 59 Afghans (32 women and 27 men) took part. We also conducted 15 key stakeholders, including directors of migrant organisations and people involved in resettlement programmes in London local authorities. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed. One of the authors of this article is an Afghan woman, and MA student at London Metropolitan University, who played a vital role in the project as a native speaker of relevant languages, translator and transcriber, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the interview data. Transcripts were carefully cross-checked against original recordings to ensure they faithfully represented the original interviews. Data were anonymised to protect confidentiality and analysed thematically by all four authors using NVIVO software.

To generate longitudinal data, we undertook follow-up interviews: approximately one-third of the original 2022 study participants re-engaged over time in repeated online interviews. In the second study, after the initial interviews in 2023, almost all participants were followed-up during the life of the project with two rounds of re-interviewing (in person and online) in 2024 and 2025. The resulting combined dataset comprises over 100 interviews.

Thus, across both studies, we are generating a rich body of longitudinal data spanning four years. Follow-up interviews allow us to understand the on-going opportunities and obstacles participants are negotiating during these crucial years of resettling. We see networks dynamism, as relationships develop and change over time. Elsewhere, we are exploring different aspects of resettlement processes, but this article focuses especially on accessing the labour market and the role of networks in reclaiming professional identities.

Don't Be an Uber Driver: Highly Skilled Afghans Seeking Employment

Many participants were highly skilled, had held professional jobs in Afghanistan and were keen to reactivate their careers in Britain. Some had managed to do so relatively quickly. We interviewed several engineers who had worked for international companies in Afghanistan and could transfer their jobs to London. As evidenced in the literature (Thondhlana et al., 2016), some technical professions travel more easily. Thus, it was not simply about high qualifications per se but rather the transferability of specific forms of capital (Erel and Ryan, 2019).

As noted, female refugees may experience particular forms of deskilling, exacerbated by negative gendered stereotypes (Carlbaum, 2022). Dilaram, a Master's graduate,

seeking professional jobs in London, perceived prejudice among some employers based on overlapping gender and racialised stereotypes about Afghan women:

> if you were Afghan, you were definitely involved with terrorist activity . . . your CV is at the bottom . . . there always have been like things about Afghan women, ok, we may face some problems in terms of courage, in terms of commitment, in terms of freedom of movement. (Dilaram)

Racialisation defines groups of people through formulations of 'inferiority and backwardness' often based upon perceptions of 'cultural and traditional' practices in opposition to 'modern, liberal values' (Ergin, 2014: 331). Dilaram experiences the confluence of racialisation based on stereotypes of Afghan terrorism and so-called 'traditional' gender values, especially concerning women's freedom to travel for work meetings. Moreover, as Gans notes, racialisation is usually based on fear of perceived threats 'imagined or real' (2016: 345). In the current geo-political context, Muslims are racialised as potential Jihadists (Gans, 2016) and thus, as Dilaram suggests, if you are Afghan you are perceived to be associated with terrorism.

In their efforts to overcome obstacles to career development, including prejudice and discrimination, many participants mentioned the salience of social networks. A lack of relevant professional networks was identified as particularly damaging. Shabnam, a focus group participant, was a law graduate. Despite having completed her degree at a British university, she felt hampered by the lack of professional networks: 'I have applied with people for some positions where they had connections and I didn't have, so they get the job'.

Liloma, in her mid-30s, was a women's rights activist, employed by a large NGO in Afghanistan. She was evacuated from Kabul in 2021. While living in a hotel, she got a job as a refugee liaison worker at a local hospital; this example illustrates how refugees may find work in sectors that value their linguistic and embodied cultural capital rather than their professional skills (see Carlbaum, 2022; De Jong, 2019). As all hotel accommodation was withdrawn by the UK government, the Home Office offered her a bedsit in another city, far away from her job:

> I'm starting to apply for new job but I couldn't find anything for now. Because most of the time you need to have a network, it works more than applying in some website. If you have a network, they can refer you and people more trust you . . . I think I don't have enough big network now . . . (Liloma)

The observations by Liloma and Shabnam are insightful in highlighting how important they perceived networks to be in the UK context. As newcomers, they felt that such connections could offer recommendations to future employers, ensuring the necessary trust to overcome negative stereotypes and discrimination and gain a foothold on the professional ladder.

Most participants had small networks composed of few ties with low levels of resources. The networks they could access were not necessarily the 'right' professional ties they wanted or needed. In some cases, they had one vertical tie based on connections

made while in Afghanistan. For example, Malala, who had worked in journalism, had a vertical tie to a British journalist, who helped facilitate her evacuation, and was a source of advice and support during resettlement in London. However, Malala was mindful of placing too many demands on this one contact every time she encountered a problem: 'I just didn't want to contact her and kind of destroy my relationship with her'.

Abubakar, a man in his 50s, had been a senior government official in Afghanistan. His ties to a British politician enabled his safe and speedy evacuation. However, after arriving in the UK, Abubakar was disappointed that this politician, despite being approached several times, seemed too busy and was unable (or unwilling) to meet up and help with career reactivation. In desperate situations, people may rely on one 'weak tie', creating perceived burden and strain (Desmond, 2012). Moreover, people experiencing disadvantage and downward mobility are unable to reciprocate – that is, they have little to offer in return (Lubbers et al., 2020).

When we interviewed Abubakar in his temporary hotel accommodation, he immediately presented us with his newly printed business cards, decorated with both Afghan and UK flags. This presentation of self clearly underlined his professional status and aspiration to claim a place in British professional circles. Despite being multi-lingual, Abubakar was worried that his lack of English proficiency would limit job options in Britain: 'my English is a little bit weak. I will improve my English, but I can speak Pashto, Urdu, Dari, a little Arabic.' Furthermore, Abubakar was mindful of the palpable risk of deskilling and, without the right networks, how challenging it might be to reclaim his professional identity. He recounted advice given by fellow Afghans in London: 'they told me "Don't work in the Pizza Hut and minicab in the Uber . . . you should work with the government or in the charity"'.

Re-interviewing participants over time, we are keen to understand how some have managed to reactivate their careers and what role networks played in the process of reclaiming professional identities. Given our large corpus of data, we adopt a case study approach, following Thomson (2007), to explore particular themes within this rich dataset.

Case Studies

Taara: 'My Lovely Job'

Taara was interviewed three times: twice in person in 2023 and 2024, and online in 2025. She was a high school teacher in Afghanistan and evacuated because her husband worked alongside the British army. The couple arrived in London with their five children in summer 2021. At that time, Taara did not speak any English but was determined to learn. She actively participated in English classes and watched English YouTube videos, while living in temporary hotel accommodation. Meanwhile, the couple's children were enrolled in a nearby school, which, in collaboration with the local council and NGOs, was providing volunteering opportunities for Afghan mothers. Taara seized the opportunity to gain new local experience and improve her English language skills. As part of the Resettlement Scheme, she and her family were supported by a local authority in London to find suitable accommodation. The family were also assigned a dedicated caseworker who provided practical support including help with registration for free ESOL classes, provided

in partnership with the local council, at a nearby college. Because her family was rehoused by the council in the same borough as their temporary hotel accommodation, Taara and her children could remain at the same school. This was immensely fortunate and afforded the family continuity that is not necessarily provided to all resettled people.

After volunteering at the school for one year, managers recognised Taara's potential and she was offered part-time paid work, initially a few hours per week. When we first interviewed Taara in 2023, she was working 16 hours per week as a teaching assistant in the nursery part of the school. She continued to attend ESOL classes for nine hours per week, in conjunction with her part-time job, while her husband helped with childcare. When we met again in 2024, she had increased her paid work to 20 hours. At both interviews, we observed that she arrived wearing her staff ID card on a lanyard around her neck. Of course, it could be that she hurried to meet us directly from school and forgot to remove the lanyard or it might also have been a way of asserting her professional identity.

Taara was undertaking an apprenticeship programme that would enable her to get a qualification as a teaching assistant. She regarded this as a first step to regaining her professional status as a teacher in the UK context. Moreover, her English fluency had notably improved. During the first interview she needed interpreting support. The second interview, less than one year later, was conducted entirely in English.

It is noteworthy that her husband, whom we also interviewed three times, spoke markedly less English than Taara and was struggling to find a job. Moreover, having worked with the army, he did not have the kind of professional accreditation that could be transferred and converted to the UK job market. We observed that several former Afghan soldiers got jobs as security guards. By contrast, Taara had a clearly recognised profession as an experienced teacher. Nonetheless, it was apparent that she could not simply transfer this cultural capital to the British educational system but through volunteering in a school she found a route to rebuild her career.

Initially her networks appeared very small, with ties mainly to her household in London, reflecting patterns observed elsewhere in the literature (Carlbaum, 2022). In follow-up interviews, it was clear that Taara had developed many more connections, especially through her job. By 2024, her school contacts were not only more prevalent but also indicated significant overlap between work and friendship. For example, she described her manager as especially supportive: 'my manager, is my friend'. Taara explained how her manager supported her throughout the last two years and was always encouraging: 'She understands me – "Oh Taara, I'm proud of you. Taara, you're so good. You're talking English"' (Taara interview, 2024).

As noted elsewhere (De Jong, 2019), volunteering can provide highly skilled refugees with a route to gain local experience and thus convert their cultural capital in new employment contexts. However, volunteering can be exploitative and may not help refugees to realise their professional goals (Senthanar et al., 2021). For Taara, her previous experience as a teacher, the practical support provided through the Resettlement Scheme, such as free ESOL classes, as well as vital encouragement from her school manager, enabled her to make the transition from volunteer to paid worker, through an apprenticeship programme. Moreover, this job provided access to an English-speaking environment that enabled Taara to quickly improve her confidence and language proficiency.

Furthermore, her networks of friends and colleagues grew as she established herself as a valued member of the school team, enabling her to assert a professional identity.

While her transition from a high school teacher to nursery assistant could be seen as deskilling, given her initial lack of English language proficiency, this was probably the only route available. Deskilling can mean moving down the occupational scale and/or to a totally different sector (Thondhlana et al., 2016). However, Taara stayed within her professional sector and she was very proud of gaining this foothold, so quickly, in the British educational system. She contrasted her experiences with a former female colleague in Afghanistan who is now banned from teaching: 'She's a science teacher. She's a clever teacher . . . For her it's too hard.' Hence, her transnational networks enabled Taara to acknowledge the situation facing female teachers inside Afghanistan, in contrast to the active agency she could assert to reclaim her career identity in London.

In our 2025 interview, Taara emphasised the hard work and dedication required to advance her English studies, while working 20 hours per week and looking after five children. Nonetheless, she remained immensely proud of her achievement and is still enjoying 'my lovely job'. Time will tell if Taara manages to regain her professional status by completing her qualification and securing a job as a teacher but, for now, she feels that she is on the right track to achieve her goals.

Hamza: 'I Didn't Find the Key People'

When interviewed in 2022, Hamza, aged mid-40s, had recently arrived in London with his wife and young family. He had 20 years' experience in government posts in Afghanistan, involving extensive international travel to the USA and across Europe. He reflected on his loss of status and identity: 'when you leave your country and come to a new country and you begin from the scratch, from zero' (Hamza interview, 2022).

Hamza's quest for a job had been disappointing. He was ambitious and wanted to find 'executive'-level jobs of similar status to his position in Afghanistan. However, he explained the challenge of transferring cultural capital to the UK context: 'you have to sell yourself, you have to sell your transferable skills in a proper way'. Despite speaking fluent English and having a law degree from an international university, he found that employers wanted evidence of UK work experience.

Hamza clearly illustrates how highly skilled refugees may 'run into a double wall' (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018: 41). His professional identity, built over 20 years, was strong, resulting in high career aspirations but his former qualifications and experience were not recognised in the UK. Like many other interviewees, Hamza described his downward mobility as starting 'from zero'.

When we met Hamza, two years later in 2024, he was working in an NGO as an advice worker for refugees – though interestingly not Afghans. This job could be viewed as reinforcing his identity and embodied experience (Carlbaum, 2022). Nonetheless, because he was not working with Afghans, it could also be an opportunity to utilise his skills and acquire UK work experience.

We were curious to understand how he got this job and how his employment-seeking strategies had developed since our first interview. He explained that it had been very difficult and taken him almost two years to find a job: 'I was so desperate honestly speaking

and I applied to a number of jobs and even I didn't receive the response'. He stated that this had undermined his confidence. He highlighted racialised discrimination and negative stereotypes about Afghan men: 'a man came from Afghanistan and sometimes people, they don't know whether he's a fundamentalist, whether he has terrorist background'. Hamza opined that some employers were wary of hiring Afghan men in case they exhibited fundamentalist attitudes in the workplace. As noted earlier, in relation to Dilaram, racialised views of Afghan men and women can be gendered in ways that impact their employment opportunities.

Hamza was relieved to have a job: 'it is better than having nothing'. Nonetheless, this was far from his dream job: 'I'm getting distanced with my background, with my career'. Thus, he continued to apply for higher-ranking, professional jobs in international organisations. He also planned to undertake additional study and gain extra qualifications to enable career progression: 'I'm planning to move forward, yeah'.

When talking with Hamza, it was notable that he did not mention networks explicitly. Instead, he focused on formal job applications. When we enquired about the role of networking, he seemed sceptical: 'I did some sort of networking, but, unfortunately, it was not useful'. After further probing, Hamza explained:

> Networking is very important. I understand . . . but so far I couldn't find it so useful. People, they don't have time. It's difficult sometimes, yeah . . . . I didn't find the key people. Maybe it is the key people and maybe there was not some sort of willingness [to] support somebody.

Hamza elaborated on the challenge of connecting to the 'key people':

> I attended different events, not only with the Afghans, with the other communities as well. I've met a number of people on different levels. I also met a couple of people who are running business here. But, I couldn't find so useful, especially in the world that if they don't think that you are useful for them, they don't waste time. (Hamza interview, 2024)

This quote gets to the heart of the challenge for people forging vertical ties in new places (Ryan, 2011). Hamza, as a recently resettled person, despite high levels of cultural capital in Afghanistan, encountered difficulties generating social capital in the UK, especially making connections with influential people who could help to reactivate his professional career. He could not connect to the 'key people' because he lacked the necessary mutual contacts to broker introductions, provide recommendations and build trust. Moreover, due to his downward mobility and deskilling, his professional identity was undermined. As noted earlier, identities are enacted, claimed and recognised relationally through interactions with others (Bernhard, 2021). The 'key people' did not recognise his professional status.

Hamza had a small network in the UK: 'I have a circle of people. Very limited.' These were mainly Afghan professionals: 'we knew each other from long time ago. And we are like each other and we understand each other.' This powerful quote suggests the vital role that close, long-standing ties may play in helping to sustain identity after the rupture of forced displacement. These people know and understand him as the professional person he used to be and wants to be again. However, this group of close ties may not be well

placed to help him reactivate that professional identity if they are unable to broker relations with 'key people' in British society.

Zaman: 'Do You Know Me?'

Zaman was interviewed three times between 2022 and 2024: in person at an NGO office, in a walking interview around his neighbourhood in North London and a follow-up interview online.

In Afghanistan, Zaman had been a qualified doctor with many years of experience as a senior clinician. He had come to London to study for a Master's degree. Having arrived on a student visa, when that expired he needed to apply for the new ACRS scheme and was temporarily status-less until the Home Office granted his resettled status.

Zaman was deeply conscious of his deskilling, and this became palpable during the Covid-19 pandemic when he could not even help out by administering vaccinations: 'I'm a qualified doctor . . . I'm a specialist . . . here, even I cannot be allowed to inject the medicine!'

In his 40s, he felt it was too late to begin the process of re-training as a doctor in the UK: 'looking to my age I think I won't be able to'. He emphasised the long road he had already travelled to achieve his professional standing in Afghanistan: 'You know medicine is seven years in Afghanistan . . . I got specialisation, which is three years, that's 10 years. I got a degree and PhD two years, so it was 12 years.' He felt that all this knowledge and expertise was now unrecognised: 'here, I'm nothing'. He powerfully articulated how this loss of status made him feel:

> Sometimes I want to stop people and tell them that, 'Do you know me? I was the (senior clinician). When I was walking in the streets of Kabul people were standing in front of me and now you don't care who am I!'

Throughout that first interview he repeated the words 'I am lost here'. While desperate to build new relationships and find his place in society, he did not feel drawn to established Afghan groups in London and was shocked by some of the attitudes he encountered:

> When I was living in Afghanistan, the circle I was living in at least, we were freely expressing our ideas . . . and criticising the culture. But here, I experience that the communities of Afghans here, they are more fundamentalist at least than the circle that I had there in Afghanistan. (Zaman interview, 2022)

Later in 2022, we met Zaman for a walking interview in the neighbourhood where he and his family had been rehoused by the local council. During our walk, as we passed the local shops and cafes, he again reiterated his frustration about the more conservative views of his mostly Muslim, working-class neighbours. He had little in common with his neighbours as they were 'from the different class of the society'. He also felt that, within that neighbourhood, there was pressure to conform to religious norms. This observation reiterates the complexity of 'communities' (Speed et al., 2021) and how class, rather than

simply religion or ethnicity, can play a key role in how people seek to form new relationships and express their identity.

Zaman was keen to connect with people he considered open-minded and resembled the educated, professional class he had interacted with as a senior physician in Kabul. He also believed that such new ties would help his career activation. To achieve this goal, he had started to volunteer with an NGO made up of highly educated, professional Afghans in the UK. This charity had a core aim of promoting women's rights. Like Taara, above, Zaman hoped that volunteering would lead to new opportunities and a route to reclaiming professional identity.

When we caught up with Zaman in 2024, he seemed on a clear path to reactivating his professional standing. He had secured a full scholarship to undertake a PhD at a prestigious London university. Interestingly, he was deeply reflexive about how networking enabled him to achieve this goal.

Like Hamza, above, Zaman had encountered a lot of difficulties in getting a professional job: 'after some setbacks, some failure getting a proper job . . . I had two options whether to go to prepare for medicine or should I go to the PhD'. Having decided to abandon medicine and pursue an academic career in the area of health policy, he then began networking on two fronts simultaneously: 'The source of my network . . . has two routes'. Indeed, Zaman presented himself as an active networker (D'Angelo and Ryan, 2021). He described reaching out to professors in various London universities to find PhD opportunities. Meanwhile, he established a network of Afghan PhD students in the UK: the 'majority of them knew me from that time'. The fact that they 'knew me' before is clearly important. Like Hamza, these pre-existing network ties helped to validate his former professional sense of self. However, for Zaman, this new network of Afghan PhD students played another important role by sharing opportunities to help rebuild his professional status:

> I think a network is needed so we are connected to each other. Now we are connected through this WhatsApp chat group and we share opportunities to each other. (Zaman interview, 2024)

Through this network, Zaman found out about a scholarship programme. He then mobilised his existing academic contacts, especially his former MA supervisors, to provide feedback on draft applications and serve as referees:

> (Prof . . .) reviewed my proposal. And provided some recommendations. Not only him, but there are some other Afghans who previously came to the UK and they had done their PhDs here. Oh, I tried to use all the resources which were available. Maybe around five or six people reviewed my proposal and they provided very constructive recommendations. (Zaman interview, 2024)

In this quote, we see how Zaman is aware of the social capital accessible through his academic networks and is able to mobilise these to help achieve his goals: 'I had planned to try each and every strategy that works that can lead me to get the offer of PhD'.

He invested time and energy in the pursuit of an appropriate PhD supervisor and applying for the scholarship. He was successful on both counts and in autumn 2024 announced that he had begun his PhD programme.

Discussion

As noted earlier, we are interested in the inter-play between social networks, professional identities and career reactivation. Identity claims are supported or hindered by interpersonal relationality (Bernhard, 2021). Social ties may reinforce expressions of who we are and who we seek to be (i.e. the presentation of the networked self) (D'Angelo and Ryan, 2021). Therefore, as well as practical support with career progression, some kinds of networks can be immensely beneficial in asserting and validating specific professional status (Ibarra and Deshpande, 2007). However, forcibly displaced persons face the challenge of how to forge vertical connections to career-enhancing networks, especially in contexts of downward mobility and racialised discrimination. The three case studies presented in this article not only offer different examples of how resettled Afghans are attempting to rebuild their careers but also the different roles of networks in reclaiming professional identities.

Taara illustrates the well-worn volunteering route, through formal networks and the support of local statutory and voluntary agencies, that can provide access to work experience. However, volunteering can be exploitative (De Jong, 2019; Senthanar et al., 2021) unless it includes a pathway to training, re-skilling and ultimately a route back into professional employment. Working in a school setting and forging ties with teachers, not only enabled Taara to embark upon a training programme, to acquire UK cultural capital, but also to begin reclaiming her former professional identity as a teacher. Networks also played another key role: contrasting her experiences in London with former teaching colleagues back in Afghanistan, enabled Taara to feel that her route – albeit long and demanding – was at least heading in the right direction to secure her professional status.

Hamza illustrates the limits and obstacles of networking. Despite being highly skilled and experienced in his field, he struggled to convert his cultural capital partly because he could not connect with the 'key people'. This example shows how even the most highly skilled may struggle to access resource-rich networks. Moreover, even attending some networking events, as Hamza mentioned, in the absence of mutuality and reciprocity (Plickert et al., 2007), it can be difficult to make meaningful connections. He also encountered prejudice and racialised stereotypes about Afghan men. Thus, despite his efforts, Hamza had not yet managed to forge vertical ties to influential people or access bridging capital to help advance his career.

Zaman provides a fascinating case study of identity loss and gradually rebuilding professional status through strenuous efforts to forge new social connections, utilising all the available resources therein. In our repeated interviews, he reflexively articulated actively seeking new networks to support his goals. Having decided to pursue an academic route, he consciously constructed relevant social ties. His two-pronged approach involved connecting with like-minded co-nationals, already known in Afghanistan, as well as forging new vertical ties within British academia. Mobilising this social capital, he was able to convert his cultural capital to achieve new opportunities to build an academic pathway to reclaim a professional identity.

A key difference between Hamza and Zaman was that the latter had a degree from a British university and so his local cultural capital carried greater currency. Moreover,

while both Zaman and Hamza had social ties to former Afghan colleagues in the UK, people who had known them as professionals, the social positioning of these contacts varied significantly. Rather than vague notions of networks and networking, it is necessary to understand the precise relationships between alters, the actual flow of resources and the relative social location of actors (Ryan, 2011). Hamza's contacts lacked the necessary resources in the UK to provide the support he needed. By contrast, Zaman's contacts had already established footholds within British institutions and hence were able to share information that helped to advance his career goals. Moreover, these co-ethnic ties were well placed to act as bridges (Ryan, 2011) to other social connections who held valuable know-how and resources. Hence, beyond simply having networks, the resources available and willingly exchanged among those social ties is of crucial importance.

Conclusion

Drawing upon literature from migration studies, social network analysis and career development, we aim to advance understanding of how highly skilled refugees attempt to rebuild careers and reclaim professional identities in new socio-economic environments. Forced migration can result in deskilling, starting 'from zero', as prior qualifications and professional experience are under-valued. Hence, transferring cultural capital to new labour markets may prove challenging. While social networks may prove useful in finding jobs, in this article, we have taken a somewhat novel approach by focusing on social ties as mechanisms for sustaining or reclaiming professional identities.

Through our analysis of rich, longitudinal qualitative data, we have explored how networks involve particular presentations of self (D'Angelo and Ryan, 2021). We define ourselves through relationality with others (Bernhard, 2021). The sudden rupturing of social ties or 'torn nets' (Perino and Eve, 2017) through forced migration can undermine our sense of self, resulting in biographic rupture and a loss of identity (Luimpöck, 2019). Following relocation, the extent to which one can reclaim former professional standing depends, partly, on rebuilding social ties that help to legitimate and reinforce that sense of self.

As we show, the challenge for newly arrived, highly skilled people is not simply to forge new ties in new places, but to access resource-rich, influential social networks. The networks that are most easily accessible are local connections to statutory and voluntary services that may reinforce 'refugee' identity (Senthanar et al., 2021). Moreover, horizontal ties (Ryan, 2011) to other migrants may offer routes into low-paid, low-skilled jobs (Thondhlana et al., 2016) such as Uber drivers.

Furthermore, newly arrived Afghans may be confronted by racialised stereotypes, based on religion, gender and nationality, that impact on their employment opportunities. Perceived association with fundamentalist religious practices or jihadist sympathies may foster a sense of potential threat and result in discrimination (Gans, 2016).

Against such a backdrop, career reactivation may benefit from vertical ties to people who are willing and able to provide useful advice and establish trust, make recommendations and overcome job-seeking barriers (Ryan, 2011). However, these vertical social contacts can be difficult to forge, especially for those whose cultural capital is devalued, who appear to offer little reciprocity, and thus may be perceived as a 'burden' (Desmond,

2012). Gans (2016) reminds us that racialisation processes cannot be fully understood without paying attention to class and gender, among other factors. As we have shown throughout this article, class intersects with immigration status and racialised gendered stereotyping to shape access to social capital and the economic capital therein. Our article adds insights into the active strategies adopted by recently arrived Afghans and the barriers they need to overcome in forging new, career-enhancing social ties. As our case studies show, beyond simply meeting 'key people', it is necessary to establish mutual trust, based on perceived commonalities and shared interests (Plickert et al., 2007), in order to forge meaningful connections and facilitate the exchange of bridging capital.

To conclude, our analysis indicates that forging social ties with those who recognise and validate professional standing, and, moreover, willingly share relevant resources and opportunities, can facilitate refugees in their efforts not only to reactivate careers but also to challenge negative stereotypes and reclaim professional identities.

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Notes

1. We use the term 'refugee' here to mean displaced people who have sought sanctuary in a different country. We recognise that there are different legal routes to gain settlement rights in the UK. The Afghans included in this article are formally considered 'resettled persons'.
2. UNHCR. Afghanistan. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/countries/afghanistan
3. MoD, 2024. Guidance: Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-relocations-and-assistance-policy/afghan-relocations-and-assistance-policy-information-and-guidance

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