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The Refugee Journey: An Exploration of the Role of Organizations and Psychological Processes

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Abstract. Throughout history, both human-made crises and natural disasters have displaced populations, forcing people to leave their homes. This not only results in lasting scars on those who flee but can also profoundly impact entire societies. Drawing from the fields of organizational studies, migration studies, and psychology, we argue that understanding the long-term effects of refugee migration requires a comprehensive examination of the entire refugee journey. During pre-, mid-, and postmigration phases, organizational actors play a pivotal role in shaping refugees' individual and collective experiences. At the individual level, refugees may experience posttraumatic stress disorder and posttraumatic growth. At the collective level, transgenerational trauma evolves into a shared memory, profoundly influencing the long-term outcomes of refugee migration, which is intersected by coping skills and spillover-crossover effects from work to family. By highlighting the intricate interplay between these psychological processes and organizations, we shed light on how much contemporary society has been—and will continue to be—shaped by the opportunities extended to, or withheld from, refugees. We underscore the imperative for organizational scholarship to more clearly theorize refugee migration as distinct from broader migration phenomena and outline a path forward for research, policy, and practice.

Throughout history, both human-made crises and natural disasters have uprooted populations, forcing them into displacement. The resulting trauma not only leaves lasting psychological effects on people who flee their homes but can also deeply impact societies. To illustrate this with one example: The Siege of Sarajevo, among the longest in modern warfare, demonstrates how an entire society can be disrupted. In 1991, Sarajevo was home to 525,980 people. By 1994, the city's population had dropped to approximately 300,000, with 60% of the prewar residents fleeing and many resettling abroad (Bassiouni 1994). Today, more than 30 years later, displacement and collective trauma continue to shape the Bosnian capital, fueling ethnic nationalism, economic stagnation, and disillusionment, leading to further emigration (Higgins and Zivojinovic 2024). Those that fled continue to experience the psychological aftermath, even as they establish new lives, facilitated (or

sometimes impeded) by a variety of organizational interactions.

As of 2025, humanitarian crises in Ukraine, Palestine, Myanmar, Venezuela, and other regions persist. We do not yet know the long-term impacts for these nations, as well as the countries receiving their displaced populations, but there is little doubt that these traumatic shocks will continue to result in lasting disruptions (Klüppel et al. 2018). Moreover, existing theoretical lenses—typically developed for voluntary migration—are insufficient for fully capturing refugee migration because they often yield incomplete or even misleading predictions (Szkudlarek et al. 2021). The motivation for our perspective article starts with these societal concerns and the realization that we lack an integrated scholarly understanding of the key factors that shape outcomes of refugee migration along their journey. We put forward three core arguments.

First, we contend that it is crucial to study the refugee journey in its entirety. This point has been made in migration studies but virtually ignored in organizational scholarship. The refugee journey begins with the premigration stage, where individuals face the life-altering decision to remain in their home country or flee abroad. During this stage, intergovernmental and humanitarian organizations serve as key actors that influence these choices. This is followed by the midmigration, or transit phase, which involves crossing international borders, and interacting with organizations such as smugglers and traffickers, refugee camps, and private foundations. The journey culminates in postmigration, which entails interaction with resettlement agencies and employing organizations in a new country (de Haas et al. 2020). These various organizational actors have a profound impact on shaping refugee experiences, whether in positive or negative ways.

Second, to better understand the interlinkages between these different organizations and the refugee journey, we must take into account the psychological processes that unfold at both the individual and collective levels. At the individual level, refugees' psychological responses to the external, often acute, circumstances are far more complex and nuanced than typically assumed. Individuals can experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and posttraumatic growth (PTG), sometimes concurrently (Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck 2014, Acquaye 2017). These experiences intersect with coping skills and spillover-crossover effects from work to family. At the collective level, transgenerational trauma "persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events, and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space" (Hirschberger 2018, p. 1).

Third, although historical traumatic shocks have been shown to influence organizational dynamics (Klüppel et al. 2018, Pierce and Snyder 2018), we propose that organizations also have the power to transform the outcomes of refugee migration through their responses to the needs of those affected. By deepening our understanding of the multitude of organizational actors involved at each stage of the journey and how these interactions impact refugee psychology, we outline potential policy and practice implications aimed at helping to mitigate the long-term effects of trauma and foster more positive outcomes—not only for individuals and organizations but also for broader society.

To ground these core arguments, we draw on three distinct yet interrelated bodies of literature: migration studies, psychology, and organizational scholarship. Arguably, the substantial gaps in theorization on refugee migration (de Haas 2021) are due to the lack of interconnectedness between these different fields.

Migration studies is a multidisciplinary body of work from sociology, anthropology, economics, law, population geography, and political science that specifically examines migration. In this literature, research on refugees has been largely policy-driven, addressing the causes of displacement, legal frameworks for refugee protection, and societal discrimination, yet with limited attention to the organizational actors involved (Fransen and de Haas 2022). The psychology literature on refugees typically focuses on microlevel processes and outcomes such as mental health (Steel et al. 2009, Chan et al. 2016, Bryant et al. 2023). Finally, organizational scholars have begun to engage more actively with the topic of migration only in the last decade, as illustrated by a steadily growing number of special issues focused on it in our journals. However, papers on refugees remain in the minority within this literature, and they focus almost exclusively on labor market integration in the host country, that is, the postmigration stage (see, e.g., Knappert et al. 2023 and Amin et al. 2025).[1]

We have organized this perspective piece as follows. First, we define the term "refugee" and explain how the refugee journey differs from the experiences of other forcefully displaced populations. We then address each stage of the journey, the organizational actors involved, the underlying psychological processes, and their interaction. Figure 1 presents an overview, emphasizing the interplay between organizations and psychological processes throughout the three stages of the refugee journey, influencing the outcomes of refugee migration. Although we highlight key elements that arise at each phase of the journey, we acknowledge additional nuances. By integrating insights from migration studies, psychology, and organizational studies (see summary in Table 1), we open new lines of inquiry, enlarge the scope of considerations, and offer fruitful avenues for future research.

Differences Between the Refugee Journey and Other Forms of Forced Displacement

Although all refugees are forced migrants, not all forced migrants fall under the legal classification of refugee. Forced migration broadly encompasses internally displaced persons (IDPs), asylum-seekers, refugees, and others in need of international protection (e.g., stateless persons) (IOM 2019).[2] IDPs remain in their home country but are forced to move to a different region; globally, IDPs make up the largest portion (nearly 60%) of forcibly displaced people (UNHCR 2025). Examples are Yemenis relocating within the country because of the ongoing civil war, Eastern Ukrainians moving to Western Ukraine because of the conflict with Russia, or people from places that are prone to climate related hazards relocating within their countries. The term "refugee," on the other hand,

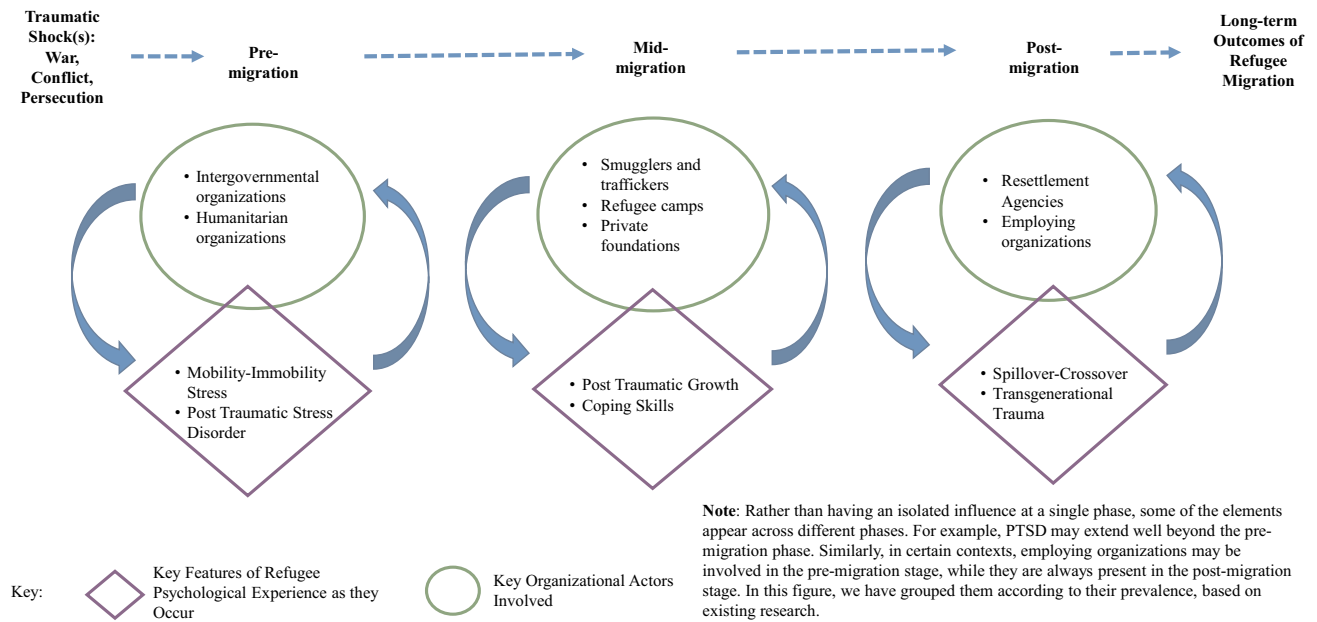**Figure 1.** (Color online) A Framework for the Refugee Journey

Note: Rather than having an isolated influence at a single phase, some of the elements appear across different phases. For example, PTSD may extend well beyond the pre-migration phase. Similarly, in certain contexts, employing organizations may be involved in the pre-migration stage, while they are always present in the post-migration stage. In this figure, we have grouped them according to their prevalence, based on existing research.

Table 1. Summary of Prior Research on Refugee Migration

Domain of scholarship	Focus/priorities	Key exemplars cited in this article
Organization studies: Management, international business, organizational behavior, strategy, entrepreneurship	Traumatic shocks and organizations	Klüppel et al. (2018)
	Recruitment, organizational support, and workplace integration	Guo et al. (2020)
		Hirst et al. (2023)
		Knappert et al. (2023)
		Lee et al. (2020)
		Loon and Vitale (2021)
		Szkudlarek et al. (2021, 2024)
	Organizational performance	Santangelo et al. (2024)
	Corporate social responsibility	Lee & Szkudlarek (2021)
		Reade et al. (2019)
	Refugee camps	Chowdhury (2021)
		Kodeih et al. (2023)
		Mintzberg (2001)
		Musa (2023)
	Refugee vocational identity	Amin et al. (2025)
		Wehrle et al. (2018)
	Media and public perception of refugees	Klein and Amis (2021)
	Refugee resettlement agencies and prosocial ventures	Jiang (2021)
		Mittermaier et al. (2022)
Migration studies: Multidisciplinary domain focused on migration encompassing sociology, anthropology, economics, history, law, population geography, and political science	Forced migration patterns	Betts et al. (2023)
		Fransen & de Haas (2022)
		de Haas et al. (2020)
		de Haas (2023)
	Mobility vs. immobility	Erdal and Oeppen (2018)
		Lubkemann (2008)
		De Haas (2021)
		Üstübici and Elçi (2022)
	Migration industry, smuggling, and trafficking	Betts (2021)
		Cranston et al. (2018)
		de Haas et al. (2020)
		Salt & Stein (2002)
	Legal frameworks for governing refugee migration	Aleinikoff and Zamore (2019)
		Aleinikoff and Owen (2022)
		Micinski and Lindey (2022)
		Rausis (2023)
		Welfens (2022)

Table 1. (Continued)

Domain of scholarship	Focus/priorities	Key exemplars cited in this article
	Refugee camps	Betts and Bradenbrink (2020) Böhme & Schmitz (2022) Hussam et al. (2022) Jansen (2018) Pollozek and Passoth (2024)
	Resettlement strategies and social and economic integration into host societies	Ahani et al. (2023) Beaman (2012) Betts (2021) El-Bialy and Mulay (2020) Mendola et al. (2023)
Psychology Applied psychology, clinical psychology, education and counselling, cross-cultural psychology	Refugee mental health, broad overviews	Echterhoff et al. (2020) Ermansons et al. (2023) Fazel et al. (2005) Steel et al. (2009)
	Posttraumatic stress disorder	Acquaye (2017) Bryant et al. (2023) Hussain and Bhushan (2011) Papadopoulos (2007) Shakespeare-Finch & Lurie-Beck (2014)
	Posttraumatic growth	Acquaye (2017) Chan et al. (2016) Hussain and Bhushan (2011) Papadopoulos (2007) Powell et al. (2003) Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck (2014) Sims and Pooley (2017) Sultani et al. (2024) Umer and Elliot (2021)
	Coping	Acar et al. (2021) Matos et al. (2021) Nickerson et al. (2022) Rakoff et al. (1966)
	Family experiences and refugee children psychology	Lustig et al. (2004) Tousignant et al. (1999)
	Mental health of women refugees	Starck et al. (2020)
	Transgenerational trauma	Danieli et al. (2015) Hirschberger (2018) Rakoff et al. (1966) Rudahindwa et al. (2020)

carries a specific *international connotation*, as defined by the 1951 U.N. Geneva Convention. It applies to a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or … unwilling to return to it" (The United Nations General Assembly 1950). At the time of writing, the largest numbers of refugees are from the Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Afghanistan (UNHCR 2025). The Geneva definition can also be applied retrospectively. For example, people who survived the Holocaust and fled their home countries because of it can be understood as refugees because their experiences align with the conditions that came to define refugee status in 1951.

Historically, the highest total of forcefully displaced individuals on record was after World War II, with 175 million, or 8% of the world population (Fransen and de Haas 2022). Today, that number—including

IDPs, asylum-seekers, refugees, and others in need of international protection—is estimated at 122.6 million people, constituting approximately 1.5% of the world's population (UNHCR 2025). Among them, the number of refugees as defined by the Geneva Convention is estimated to be 37.9 million. Because of the recognition of refugee status as a legal category in 1951, which set grounds for systemic data collection, the percentage of *refugees* as a portion of the world population has fluctuated between roughly 0.1% and 0.4%, depending on outbreaks and duration of violent conflicts, with no discernable linear trend (Fransen and de Haas 2022, UNHCR 2025).

In this perspective piece, we focus on the *refugee journey*. Although there is no universally accepted conceptualization of the journey, it is typically considered to be a three-phase process: premigration (traumatic shock in the country of origin), midmigration (flight/transit), and postmigration (settlement in a foreign

country). Refugee journeys differ from other forms of forced migration in four important ways.

First, refugees cross international borders—sometimes multiple borders. Second, they typically undergo a formal asylum process that involves screenings and assessments and may include interrogations and detention (IOM 2019, Pollozek and Passoth 2024). Their resettlement is often arranged by designated agencies in the receiving state, resulting in the deprivation of freedom of mobility (Beaman 2012, Ahani et al. 2023). IDPs rarely go through such a structured and rigid process. Third, refugees frequently undergo acculturation stress, which refers to the challenges of adapting from their original culture to a new host culture (Berry 1997, Starck et al. 2020). They must familiarize themselves with new cultural values and norms, navigate different social expectations, and often learn a new language (Lee et al. 2020, Hirst et al. 2023). In contrast, IDPs typically do not need to adapt to a new culture. Finally, although their numbers are significantly smaller than IDPs, refugees attract far more media and public attention because of their international context (Klein and Amis 2021, Fransen and de Haas 2022). They often face mislabeling, scapegoating, and stigmatization, being portrayed as threats to the national security or economic stability of the transit and receiving countries (Welfens 2022, de Haas 2023). These differentiators make the refugee journey particularly challenging.

Premigration: Imprints of Traumatic Shocks

"*No one leaves home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear*

saying-

leave,

run away from me now

I don't know what I've become

but I know that anywhere

is safer than here"

Warsan Shire, Writer and Poet, Daughter of Somali Refugees

Historical traumatic shocks, such as the Holocaust, the Cambodian and Rwandan genocides, or the Siege of Sarajevo, exemplify the severe trauma that communities and individuals face when confronted with conflict (DeAngelis 2023). These shocks reshape culture in enduring ways and influence the operations and viability of the organizations operating within the affected environments, sometimes even paving the way for the emergence of new organizational forms. The ways in which organizations react to premigration conditions,

in turn, influence the people living in the region and can cycle back to influence the conditions themselves.

Organizations in Premigration

Events that lead to displacement have a profound impact on local organizations, creating a range of challenges from operational disruptions and security concerns to the need for careful coordination. Organizations may either withdraw from or continue operating in conflict zones (Chen 2017, Oh and Oetzel 2017). They may engage in humanitarian actions and peacebuilding (Reade et al. 2019), but they can also become perpetrators (Slim 2012).

Focusing on profit in a highly unpredictable environment can lead to a pattern of decisions that, over time, "make a company short-sighted," that is, unable to grasp the local risks (Belhoste and Nivet 2021, p. 1575). An example is the French cement group Lafarge, with its subsidiary in war-torn Syria. The company brought its European employees back home, but it required the local Syrian workers to stay on the job, critically endangering their lives. They had to navigate dangerous checkpoints to reach their workplace amid heavy fighting (ECCHR 2016).

In contrast, some organizations have taken actions that help mitigate harm and contribute to conflict resolution. For instance, the media organization CNN—under the leadership of Christiane Amanpour—played a critical role during the Bosnian War (1992–1995) by broadcasting graphic, on-the-ground reports of civilian suffering. These powerful images and stories mobilized global public opinion, particularly in the West, and pressured governments to intervene. The resulting actions, including the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, helped bring an end to the conflict and reduced prolonged exposure to violence—thereby mitigating further psychological harm (Harvard Kennedy School 2025).

Less apparent is the way in which traumatic shocks can result in lasting cultural changes that disrupt organizational structures and strategies (Nunn 2009, 2012; Klüppel et al. 2018). There is some evidence that historical events, such as the African slave trades, leave behind enduring legacies—mistrust, ethnic fragmentation, and weakened institutions (Pierce and Snyder 2018)—but such studies are rare in our field(s).

Traumatic shocks can also trigger the formation of entirely new organizational forms. To illustrate, the aftermath of World War II prompted the creation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), both of which shaped international human rights frameworks, including the 1948 U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1989, IOM broadened the scope of its operations to encompass various aspects of migration management, whereas

UNHCR maintained its focus on forcefully displaced populations (IOM 2024). However, both organizations continue operating in conflict-affected areas, providing humanitarian assistance, emergency shelter, displacement tracking, and (mental) health services. There are also other U.N. organizations, such as the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, that coordinate humanitarian assistance and oversee the implementation of peace agreements, thus serving a vital role in the premigration context.

These last examples illustrate how traumatic shocks can catalyze the formation of organizations dedicated to addressing the complex needs of populations in conflict zones, thus potentially mitigating the long-term psychological impacts of trauma.

Psychology in Premigration

In the premigration stage, individuals experience a clash between their hopes and aspirations and the possibility of action (de Haas 2021). The decision to stay or migrate is highly complex. International migration is just one potential response to difficult circumstances, and various personal, regulatory, economic, and safety barriers can impede cross-border mobility (Erdal and Oeppen 2018). Lubkemann (2008) highlighted two forms of *immobility*: voluntary, where individuals choose to remain in their home country despite hardship and the risks involved, and involuntary, where individuals wish to leave but lack the resources or opportunities to do so. In both cases, the premigration stage is marked by significant stressors, which can further complicate the decision-making process and deepen the psychological burden of those considering emigration.

This psychological distress, alongside traumatic experiences such as violence, persecution, and the loss of family members and loved ones, is an often-overlooked contributor to PTSD, which is defined as a mental health condition that can develop because of exposure to a highly distressing or traumatic event. The American Psychiatric Association lists the following symptoms: "(a) re-experiencing the trauma in painful recollections, flashbacks, or recurrent dreams or nightmares; (b) avoidance of activities or places that recall the traumatic event, as well as diminished responsiveness (emotional anesthesia or numbing), with disinterest in significant activities and with feelings of detachment and estrangement from others; and (c) chronic physiological arousal, leading to such symptoms as an exaggerated startle response, disturbed sleep, difficulty in concentrating or remembering, and guilt about surviving the trauma when others did not" (APA 2023).

Research on PTSD among refugees in the psychology literature started gaining traction in the early 2000s (Fazel et al. 2005). Symptoms of PTSD can begin as early as three months after the first exposure to traumatic

event(s), which means they are likely to emerge during the premigration stage (NIH 2023). PTSD often also persists beyond the premigration stage, continuing into the mid- and postmigration phases. However, it must be noted that meta-reviews of studies in psychology indicate that empirical evidence regarding the prevalence of PTSD among populations exposed to war and conflict remains sparse and often conflicting because of the varied sampling approaches and methodologies (Morina et al. 2018).

To sum up, PTSD can and does occur as early as the premigration stage. The role of organizations is crucial in either amplifying (as in the case of Lafarge) or alleviating (as in the work of UNHCR) its risks.

Midmigration: Navigating the Migration Industry

"The humiliation was hard to bear. Many of the faces I saw spoke of the same thing. In their own countries, these people had power, even the respect of their communities. Here … we were barely human. We were the beasts that gave this place its name."

Gulwali Passarlay, Public Speaker and Author, Afghan Refugee

The shift from premigration to midmigration involves facing the tangible physical, psychological, and emotional challenges of displacement. This stage is rarely mentioned in organizational research on refugees (Szkudlarek et al. 2024). The broader field of migration studies has given more attention to midmigration, but it is still frequently regarded as just an "in-between" phase: liminal, challenging, or even "meaningless" (Crawley and Jones 2021). However, millions of refugees experience prolonged periods of transit, and permanent resettlement numbers are extremely low (Bryant et al. 2023).

Midmigration is anything but "meaningless." It is often a dangerous period for refugees, characterized by heightened risks and uncertainties. Many find themselves trapped, with onward travel rendered impossible because of insufficient economic and social capital (Aleinikoff and Zamore 2019). A case in point is Syrian refugees in Turkey, who aspire to move to Western Europe but are unable to do so because of these limitations (Üstübici and Elçi 2022). At the same time, however, many become highly mobile within transit countries, moving between different refugee camps, from camps to urban areas, within cities, or across provinces (Betts et al. 2023).

Various organizational actors play a role during this stage in both positive and negative ways. They are often collectively referred to as the "migration industry" (Cranston et al. 2018, de Haas et al. 2020). This includes a range of entities such as smuggling organizations and human traffickers, humanitarian groups, and refugee camps; private firms are less often involved but may

support or build camp and border infrastructure (Salt and Stein 2002, Light 2013, Ballesteros and Gatignon 2019).

The interplay between organizational actors and refugee experiences during midmigration has a profound impact on individuals' psychological well-being. Many refugees find themselves in situations where they have little to no control over their circumstances. As Viktor Frankl (1962) poignantly observed, when we are no longer able to change a situation, are we not then challenged to change ourselves?

Organizations in Midmigration

Many governments attempt to prevent asylum seekers from crossing their countries' borders by employing deterrence policies (Aleinikoff and Owen 2022, Rausis 2023).[3] Such measures are not without consequences. Evidence from case studies shows that they often lead to more asylum seekers turning to smugglers or traffickers and undertaking illegal overland and maritime journeys (de Haas 2023). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has noted that human smuggling and trafficking are among the fastest growing transnational for-profit activities (OECD 2015). The two are not the same. *Smuggling* refers to "the use of paid or unpaid migration intermediaries to cross borders without authorization" (de Haas et al. 2020, p. 35). Smugglers are not always "the bad guys" but can also be family members, friends, and small humanitarian organizations that want to help asylum-seekers. In contrast, *human trafficking* refers to the use of coercion and various forms of exploitation against vulnerable individuals, which can lead to extreme conditions that strip individuals of any choice or agency (de Haas 2023).

Although it is hard to obtain estimates of profitability for black-market organizations that facilitate refugees' arrivals to a new country's border, there is substantial evidence that their gains are considerable. Some estimates suggest that globally, annual profits from human smuggling and trafficking activities amount to between $7 billion and $30 billion, which surpasses what the European Union or the United States contributes to global humanitarian aid (UNODC 2018, European Council, Council of the European Union 2023). To illustrate this with specific examples, the smugglers in charge of a cargo ship with 360 migrants and refugees that Italian border authorities intercepted in 2015 earned close to $3 million, with each person paying between $4,000 and $8,000 for the illegal transportation (Coleman 2015). A more recent BBC investigative journalism series on illegal passages from France to the United Kingdom across the English Channel indicated a cost of around $3,300 per person (Harding et al. 2024). It is a troublesome reality that, despite the high risk of exploitation, many refugees voluntarily engage with smugglers or traffickers because to be granted legal protection under international law they must first physically arrive at the destination country's border (de Haas et al. 2020).

Other important organizational entities during transit include refugee camps. According to the UNHCR, in summer 2023, Kutupalong camp in Bangladesh hosted more than 900,000 refugees, whereas the largest refugee camp in Africa, Kakuma in Kenya, hosted around 201,000 people (UNHCR 2023). By contrast, the largest refugee camp in Europe, the Moria center in Greece, at its peak hosted around 20,000 persons (Pérez-Sales et al. 2022).

An individual's duration in a camp can differ greatly, from days and weeks to years and even decades. Many refugee camps, although initially intended to be a temporary solution, have evolved into lasting settlements or even "accidental cities" (Jansen 2018). In migration studies, refugee camps have been theorized as spaces of power and control that enable the institutional exclusion of refugees from broader society and restrict their individual agency (Böhme and Schmitz 2022, Pollozek and Passoth 2024). They are (massive) organizations often referred to as *total institutions* (Goffman 1961), that is, highly bureaucratic places, "where the inhabitants are depersonalized and where people become numbers without names" (Harees 2012, p. 566). In other words, individual identity—such as a person's education, profession, and life experience—is replaced by an institutional identity (i.e., "refugee"), which undoubtedly impacts individuals' psychology (Musa 2023).

Similarly, the limited research by organizational scholars on refugee camps focuses primarily on the extreme precarity of these camps as nontraditional organizational settings (Mintzberg 2001, Chowdhury 2021, Hultin et al. 2022, Musa 2023). However, Betts and Bradenbrink (2020) suggested an alternative view on what refugee camps could be, with business organizations playing a key role in creating economic opportunities within them. An example is the IKEA Foundation's program in Dollo Ado, the largest private sector involvement to date in a refugee camp context. The main mission of the program was to shift from focus on charity to refugee self-reliance. Other studies have also confirmed that employment in refugee camps generates positive outcomes, including improvement in the psychological well-being of refugees (Hussam et al. 2022, Kodeih et al. 2023).

In brief, multiple organizations—both illicit and institutional—shape refugee experiences during the midmigration phase and, in turn, impact their psychological responses.

Psychology in Midmigration

From the psychological perspective, midmigration triggers flight stress and acceptance of extremely risky

conditions. Refugees often have no other choice but to place themselves at the mercy of smugglers or traffickers when attempting to cross borders (Echterhoff et al. 2020). In his memoir, Afghani refugee Gulwali Passarlay wrote, "One of the strangest things about this journey was how whenever a smuggler or a driver gave us an instruction, we simply followed it … Without questioning or really even thinking, we put our lives into the hands of strangers, time and again" (Passarlay and Ghouri 2015, p. 167). He describes in intimate detail how such experiences of risk-taking and suspension of one's agency can have negative psychological effects on individuals.

Although documenting these adverse outcomes is essential, it is equally important to recognize that not all refugees who have been exposed to traumatic premigration events and the precarity of midmigration continue to suffer PTSD symptoms. Psychology researchers caution that overly pathologizing refugee experiences may obscure the diverse and nuanced psychological responses to trauma (Sultani et al. 2024). A growing body of research in psychology explores post-traumatic growth (PTG) within refugee contexts (Chan et al. 2016, Wehrle et al. 2018, Umer and Elliot 2021). PTG is defined as "the positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances" (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004, p. 1). Notable early insights into PTG include Carl Jung's exploration of how psychological distress can support growth and Viktor Frankl's work after his own survival in the World War II concentration camps (Frankl 1962, Sultani et al. 2024).

Importantly, PTSD and PTG can occur in traumatized individuals concurrently—they are not two opposite ends of the same continuum (Acquaye 2017). However, PTSD is likely to occur earlier in the journey than PTG. In the premigration stage, chronic exposure to war and violence typically leads to survival-focused coping, which limits the cognitive space needed for growth processes. PTG theory holds that growth occurs after the individual has had time to reflect and rebuild meaning—conditions rarely available in active conflict zones yet more likely to occur in midmigration. A meta-analysis by Shakespeare-Finch and Lurie-Beck (2014) noted that time since trauma is positively correlated with PTG.

The phenomenon of PTG is close to the concept of resilience. However, there are qualitative differences; whereas resilience is individuals' ability to adapt to adversity by retaining characteristics that existed before (e.g., elasticity, self-confidence), PTG is about developing new qualities that did not exist before the exposure to traumatic events. In other words, when adversity strikes, it pushes individuals to the brink; however, astonishingly, reaching these limits can be transformative, potentially leading to the discovery of new horizons (Papadopoulos 2007).

PTG is typically measured by the PTG Inventory (PTGI), which captures five areas: relating to others, new possibilities, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). PTG is not isolated to a few unique circumstances—estimates are that about half to two-thirds of trauma survivors have moderate to high levels of PTG (Collier 2016), suggesting that it is more common than one might think. Experts argue that similar estimates likely apply to refugee populations (Sultani et al. 2024). Studies exploring why some refugees are more likely than others to develop PTG show mixed results. There seems to be a general consensus, however, that female refugees tend to score higher on PTG compared with male refugees, possibly because they are more inclined to engage in productive and contemplative rumination and stress-related emotion management (Vishnevsky et al. 2010, Sultani et al. 2024). Furthermore, interestingly, there are some indications that PTG may be more prevalent among refugees than among IDPs (Powell et al. 2003).

Those refugees who experience PTG often rely on effective coping skills (Acar et al. 2021, Matos et al. 2021, Umer and Elliot 2021). There is emerging research in migration studies (Böhme and Schmitz 2022) and in psychology (Nickerson et al. 2022) on coping strategies of refugees during midmigration. According to the Stress and Coping paradigm by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141), coping is defined as "changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person." This theory further differentiates between emotion-focused and problem-focused types of coping. The former involves managing one's own emotional responses to stressors, whereas the latter aims to directly address and resolve the external issues. When external circumstances are beyond one's control, emotion-focused coping may prevail (Lazarus 1993, Nickerson et al. 2022).

The effectiveness of different coping strategies is contextual, depending on the intensity of external stressors (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). For example, Nickerson et al. (2022) studied coping strategies among 1,216 refugees from various ethnic backgrounds transiting through Indonesia. These authors found that positive emotion-focused coping—specifically, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, and hope—was strongly associated with better mental health in lower-stress conditions. However, under extremely high-stress conditions, the effectiveness of these same coping strategies on refugee well-being was diminished, suggesting that acute external stressors may counteract the positive emotion-focused coping.

In short, refugees' psychological responses to the external circumstances encountered on their journeys toward safety are far more complex and nuanced than

typically assumed. They may experience PTSD and/or PTG, in which positive changes, facilitated by effective coping, emerge following adversity. Organizations play a pivotal role in this context by providing conditions that either heighten or reduce stress. Traffickers create high-stress environments that strip refugees of agency and expose them to extreme risk. In contrast, innovative private-public sector partnerships within refugee camps foster self-reliance, supporting pathways toward PTG.

Postmigration: Adjusting to New Realities to Rebuild Lives

"*A refugee is someone who survived and who can create the future.*"

Amela Koluder, Manager and Author, Bosnian Refugee

Postmigration—typically defined as the period following the granting of asylum in a host country—has received far more attention compared with premigration and midmigration. However, across different academic disciplines, most studies on refugee postmigration focus on Australia, New Zealand, and high-income countries in Europe and North America (Betts 2021, Fransen and de Haas 2022). In contrast, we have very limited insights into resettlement dynamics in other parts of the world, where, in fact, the majority of refugees reside. As we write this in mid-2020s, 71% of all refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR 2025). Before the war in Ukraine, this number was 83% (UNHCR 2022).

High-income countries are better equipped to allocate resources to resettlement programs and conduct research on their effectiveness (Kovacs 2015, Knappert et al. 2023). For instance, in Germany, the largest European host of refugees, annual nationwide household surveys have enabled the collecting and analyzing of data on refugees' language proficiency, family situation, employment, and housing since 2013 (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2024). Similarly, the New Zealand government regularly evaluates its resettlement programs, including reception, community orientation, and housing support (New Zealand Immigration 2024). However, the allocation of resources toward refugee-related causes can fluctuate in response to shifts in public opinion. For instance, Mittermaier et al. (2022) examined how prosocial organizations in Germany, which provided support to refugees, were negatively impacted by public incidents allegedly committed by refugees, threatening their access to funding.

Outside of wealthy countries, many host states are unable to provide refugees with basic legal assistance or access to public services because of the economic challenges faced by their own citizens. The absence of formal resettlement frameworks leaves refugees in the dark regarding their protection rights and options, and responsibility is often allotted from the governments to nonprofit organizations (Rausis 2023).

Across these distinct contexts, the involvement of organizational actors influences refugee psychology, but refugees also found and contribute to organizations. Furthermore, as we will explain, the stress associated with adapting to new social and employment systems affects the emotional state of not only individual refugees but also entire families, in some cases even transcending generations.

Organizations in Postmigration

Refugees typically have little to no choice over their resettlement location because in most destination countries, placements are coordinated by resettlement agencies. For example, in the United States, refugee resettlement is typically managed by specialized nongovernmental organizations (Jiang 2021, Ahani et al. 2023). The location choices made by these organizations determine refugees' access to welfare and employment opportunities (Ermansons et al. 2023). An important factor in these resettlement efforts is the presence of similar refugees. Beaman (2012) assessed the placement of various nationalities of refugees by the International Rescue Committee, a major resettlement agency in the United States, across multiple cities. This author found that having a greater number of longstanding network members (i.e., other refugees of the same nationality in the same city) improves the chances of finding employment and results in a higher hourly wage. On the other hand, an increase in the number of social network members who have been resettled in the same year or one year prior to new arrivals resulted in poorer labor market integration outcomes of the latter.

Ineffective placement is exacerbated by systemic barriers, including language skill prerequisites, discrimination or xenophobia, and the devaluation of refugees' prior educational credentials and work experience, what Lee et al. (2020) referred to as the "canvas ceiling." In a study of nearly 120 employing organizations in Australia, Szkudlarek and Lee (2024) found that those companies that had no previous experience in hiring refugees tended to harbor more misconceptions regarding refugees as a viable talent pool. These authors suggested that strengthening partnerships between resettlement agencies and potential future employers could reduce such biases. The complementarity among diverse organizational actors—that is, each of them not only fulfilling its own role but also sharing knowledge and enhancing others' efforts—is a critical mechanism for reducing the canvas ceiling and accelerating refugees' integration into the labor market (Knappert et al. 2023).

Once employed, there are stark differences in refugee treatment among organizations. There are documented instances of companies that knowingly lowered their

management standards under the excuse that they were being socially responsible by providing jobs to those who most needed them. A *New York Times* series exposed abuses of underage refugees in the United States forced to work 14-hour shifts in dangerous conditions under the guise of "repaying sponsorship" (Drier 2023). An academic study in Denmark found that particularly those firms that exhibit higher levels of job insecurity profit from hiring refugees because of their willingness to accept lower pay, work long hours, and put extra effort to retain their jobs (Santangelo et al. 2024).

However, there are also companies that have developed specific programs for refugee integration into their workforce. In The Netherlands, ABN AMRO Bank has committed to hiring refugees under an initiative that includes a coaching scheme focused on language and cultural training, along with individual support (Kohlenberger et al. 2023). Similarly, Daimler, Telekom, Allianz, ThyssenKrupp, and Siemens have created apprenticeship and employment schemes designed to meet the specific needs of refugee recruits. Between 2016 and 2019, under the "Wir Zusammen" (We Together) initiative, these companies, along with 30 other corporate partners, provided employment to more than 33,000 refugees in the German labor market (Wir Zusammen 2019, Kohlenberger et al. 2023).

The peak in private sector involvement is probably still to come. In 2022, the World Economic Forum established The Refugee Employment Alliance. Within one year, this initiative developed partnerships with 140 Chief Human Resource Officers from more than 20 industries, including multinational enterprises such as Adecco, Flex, and IKEA. This is another example of how a traumatic shock—Russia's invasion of Ukraine that led to widespread displacement—has catalyzed the formation of a new global organizational initiative. Two core objectives of the WEF Alliance highlight how a response to a traumatic shock can shape future involvement of the private sector, the first one being to "distill learning from the rapid labor market integration of Ukrainian refugees" and the second to "build capability and resilience for future refugee crises" (WEF 2024).

Beyond large organizations responding to a crisis, there are also examples of refugee entrepreneurs, such as George Soros and Peter Munk, who survived the Nazi occupation of Hungary during World War II, crossed multiple borders, and went on to become highly successful founders and philanthropists (Rohmer 1997, Osnos 2022). A more recent example is Hamdi Ulukaya, founder and CEO of Chobani, a U.S.-based company, who, as a Kurd forced to leave eastern Turkey, partnered with a local community college to train hundreds of refugee workers—who now make up 30% of Chobani's workforce (Gibson et al. 2021).

Ulukaya also established the Tent Partnership for Refugees, which collaborates with more than 400 companies worldwide to provide mentoring, educational opportunities, and other pathways for refugees to integrate into the workforce (Tent Partnership for Refugees 2025).

There are, of course, many other examples of refugee intellectuals and scientists who have shaped the cultures in which they settled (Moser et al. 2014, Heilbut 2019, Micinski and Lindey 2022). To name just a few globally renowned figures, we have the following: Hannah Arendt, Albert Einstein, Enrico Fermi, Czesław Miłosz, Edward Said, Wole Soyinka, and Robert F. Williams.

Psychology in Postmigration

Aside from potential continuation of both PTSD and PTG, postmigration may be characterized by "spillover-crossover," which is comprised of the interrelationship between the home domain and the work domain. Bolger et al. (1989, p. 175) differentiated between the two constructs: "In spillover, stress experienced in one domain of life results in stress in the other domain for the same individual," whereas crossover "involves contagion across people, whereby demands and their consequent arousal cross over between closely related or otherwise linked individuals." Put simply, the former refers to the same individual transmitting the feeling of being stressed at work to the personal life domain (or vice versa), and the latter refers to a situation in which stress in the workplace results in affecting the individual's family members (or vice versa).

Research in psychology has demonstrated that the emotional state of refugee parents significantly influences their children's ability to cope with resettlement distress. For instance, when refugee parents experience unemployment during their first year of resettlement, it is associated with higher levels of stress and anxiety in their children (Tousignant et al. 1999). This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that refugee parents often rely on their children as cultural liaisons, given their quicker language acquisition and host-country schooling (Lustig et al. 2004).

Migration scholars have also observed that nuclear refugee families tend to rely less on traditional reciprocity norms compared with other types of relationships. Although people generally favor relationships characterized by a roughly equal exchange of support, this expectation appears to be less prominent within refugee families, where maintaining reciprocity is often not a primary concern. Despite differing integration goals across individual family members, refugee families often adopt a shared perspective that frames these varied goals as part of a collective effort to benefit the household as a whole (Klok and Dagevos 2023). Building on this understanding of family dynamics, it is important to recognize that the psychological

consequences of resettlement extend beyond the immediate family context and may persist across generations (Smelser 2004, Hirschberger 2018). The concept of transgenerational trauma—the passing of psychological effects stemming from experiences like war, injury, or poverty across multiple generations—was first introduced in the 1960s (Rakoff et al. 1966). The study of the connection between PTSD and transgenerational trauma in the context of refugees is very recent, with many questions remaining. This gap is due partly to the limited intersection between these two domains of research within psychology (DeAngelis 2023).

The few existing studies that examine PTSD across generations have mostly focused on Holocaust survivors and their offspring. For instance, Danieli et al. (2015, p. 233) identified distinct behavior patterns in adult children of Holocaust survivors, "including the potential for offspring to be insecure about their own competence, to feel the need to protect their parents, to be alienated from their peers, to be obsessed with the Holocaust, to feel the need to always be in control, and to be immaturely dependent." She termed these responses *reparative adaptational impacts*, suggesting that the children, often unconsciously, attempt to "repair" the world for their parents, grandparents, and themselves. In a different context, Rudahindwa et al. (2020) studied the transmission of PTSD symptoms in Rwandan genocide survivors and their offspring, comparing them to a group of Rwandan refugee families living abroad that had not been directly exposed to the genocide. They found that PTSD symptoms were experienced in the same vein across both groups and generations. Although the control group was not directly affected by the genocide, their mental health was impacted.[4]

As we illustrated in this section, refugee psychology in the postmigration phase is very complex, and its effects can extend beyond individuals. These effects can be negative, such as the transmission of trauma across generations, but there are also more positive outcomes, as we illustrated with the examples of successful refugee entrepreneurs, scientists, and intellectuals.

Research, Policy, and Practice Implications

Given the significant gaps in the theorization of refugee migration, there is a great opportunity for organizational scholars to contribute (de Haas 2021, Szkudlarek et al. 2021). Unfortunately, much of the research to date remains siloed in separate disciplines, each addressing different issues and challenges, with little integration across them. By integrating insights from organizational science, migration studies, and psychology, we next propose potential pathways for research, policy, and practice (See Table 2 for a summary).

Understanding Organizational Actors Throughout the Refugee Journey

Our understanding of the premigration stage is very limited. Emerging research examines how firms operate in conflict zones, including the potential negative impacts of providing materials, infrastructure, or financing to authoritarian regimes or armed groups and, in extreme cases like Lafarge, contributing directly to human rights violations (Belhoste and Nivet 2021). However, to the best of our knowledge, this body of research has not explored how firms might hinder individuals' capacity to emigrate, exacerbating the consequences of traumatic shocks. For instance, researchers could examine technology companies that provide surveillance used to monitor or block escape routes, private firms managing border security, or airlines conducting visa checks before boarding and enforcing measures that block refugees from fleeing.

We also know very little about the potential positive actions of firms that engage in humanitarian aid and facilitate safe emigration. Research on companies that provide logistics and transportation expertise to deliver supplies in areas with damaged infrastructure or on companies that offer mobile connectivity could help us rethink how we frame and study humanitarian aid in the premigration context. We also encourage organizational research on the humanitarian efforts in (and beyond) conflict zones provided by the IOM, UNHCR, and other specialized UN agencies, along with their cross-sectoral partnerships that have received little attention in scholarship. From the policy perspective, this line of research would directly contribute to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10.7 (facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals).

Regarding midmigration, migration scholars have repeatedly highlighted the theoretical and empirical gaps in this area, describing it as the "black box" of migration research (Cranston et al. 2018). As we have described, organizations are key actors in this phase of refugee migration. Organizational scholars are well equipped with tools to analyze legal and illegal forms of organizations within the migration industry. For instance, smugglers and traffickers are adept at establishing transnational contacts, partnering with stakeholders internationally, and using digital technologies, social media, and cryptocurrencies to commit crimes (IOM 2021). In other words, they function as transnational organizations (Salt and Stein 2002). However, this has received scant attention in the business and management literature (Crane 2013, Hajro et al. 2023). Such research could draw from existing studies of black-market organizations such as mafias (see, e.g., Gambetta 1993 and Gond et al. 2009). Like mafia structures, human trafficking entities can be best understood

Table 2. Recommendations for Research, Policy, and Practice

Sample research questions	Concepts/theories[a]	Methods[b]	Context	Potential policy and practice implications
Premigration				
How do organizations hinder opportunities to emigrate from conflict-affected zones?	• Corporate complicity (Ruggie 2008)	• Archival	• Regions in crisis	• Provide possibilities for those with aspirations to move
What organizational actors provide (humanitarian) support in the re-migration phase, and how?	• Corporate social responsibility (Carroll 1991)	• Autoethnographic • Case studies • Ethnographic		• Improve conditions of border crossings
What social and/or psychological factors influence an individual's decision to stay or leave, and why?	• Organizational justice (Guo et al. 2020)	• Migration databases[c]		• Establish and foster cross-sectoral partnerships for humanitarian aid in conflict zones
What psychological factors contribute to or mitigate the emergence of PTSD in the pre-migration phase?				• Contribute to SDG10.7 "Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned/well-managed migration policies"
				• Create a roadmap for public-private sector partnerships in pre-migration; contribute to SDG17 "Partnership for Goals"
Midmigration				
How do legal and illegal organizations within the migration industry interact to facilitate the transit stage?	• Transnational organizations (Salt and Stein 2002)	• Qualitative (interviews, focus groups, narrative analysis, content analysis)	• Physical journey • Transit regions • Refugee camps	• Reduce or eliminate illegal transnational business activities of human trafficking
What can existing research on mafia structures teach us about human smuggling and trafficking in the context of refugee migration?	• Total institutions (Goffman 1961)	• Intervention Studies • Longitudinal		• Improve refugee camps conditions and efficacy; shift to focus on employment and self-reliance
What are the long-term psychological implications of risk-taking when in the hands of smugglers or traffickers?	• Accidental cities (Jansen 2018)			• Develop best practices for corporate involvement in mid-migration
What processes foster PTG among refugees?				• Contribute to SDG8.7 "The eradication of forced labor, modern slavery and human trafficking"
How can organizations shift from a focus on charity to refugee employment and self-reliance to challenge views of camps as spaces of power and exclusion?				• Contribute to SDG10.7 "Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned/well-managed migration policies"
				• Create a roadmap for public-private sector partnerships in mid-migration; contribute to SDG17 "Partnership for Goals"

Table 2. (Continued)

Sample research questions	Concepts/theories[a]	Methods[b]	Context	Potential policy and practice implications
Postmigration				
How can organizations foster refugee labor market integration?	• Canvas ceiling (Lee et al. 2020)	• Intervention studies	• Host-countries	• Improve refugee resettlement practices
What happens when a company gains a reputation for treating refugees well?	• Organizational justice (Guo et al. 2020)	• Longitudinal	• Organizations employing or supporting refugees	• Create organizational incentives for increased employment of refugees; reduce devaluation of refugee prior educational and professional credentials ("canvas ceiling"); improve refugee policies and practices in organizations (e.g., equity, diversity and inclusion, organizational justice, CSR)
How can organizations mitigate the impact of external influences on refugee integration, such as xenophobic biases, fears, and polarization?	• Diversity Climates (Hajro et al. 2017) • Workplace inclusion (Nishii 2013) • Cross-sector partnerships (Gibson 2022)	• Qualitative (interviews, focus groups, narrative analysis, content analysis) • Survey-based • Migration databases	• Refugee households	• Design organizational interventions to promote PTG in refugees (e.g., storytelling, motivational interviewing, self-affirmations)
What organizational interventions could promote well-being in refugees?				• Create and validate cross-cultural measures for PTGI
How do spillover and crossover between family and workplace domains affect refugee integrative processes?				• Support refugee families in resettlement; develop policy and practice advice specifically for refugee women with children
How do various forms of social identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and ability, intersect to shape refugees' psychological processes and resettlement experiences?				• Contribute to a scientifically informed public narrative on refugee intake
When and how do refugee migration experiences result in transgenerational trauma?				• Contribute to SDG8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth"

[a]We provide suggestions as to potential concepts and theory bases to ground the research questions, recognizing that there are other alternatives that could be drawn upon.

[b]Although many methods could be used at each phase of the journey, we highlight those likely to be the most promising given the challenges associated with particular methods at a given phase.

[c]Examples of internationally recognized databases on migration: Refugee Population Statistics Database (managed by UNHCR), Migration Data Portal (managed by the IOM), International Migrant Stock (managed by UNDESA), International Migration Database (managed by OECD), Indicators of Immigrant Integration (managed by OECD), Global Bilateral Migration Database (managed by the World Bank), and Migration and Remittances Briefings (managed by the World Bank).

as profit-maximizing organizations that thrive in spaces in which legal support for asylum-seekers is fragile and scarce. Furthermore, a better understanding of how these organizations function has the potential to contribute to policy solutions. Eradication of human trafficking is embedded in SDG 8.7 (the eradication of forced labor, modern slavery, and human trafficking).

Concerning the study of refugee camps, although in migration studies they are often theorized as spaces of power and control that institutionalize the exclusion of refugees from broader society, organizational scholars could explore alternative perspectives. The example of the IKEA Foundation involvement in Dollo Ado offers many important lessons about not only improving camp conditions but also building sustainable refugee economies (Betts and Bradenbrink 2020). As organizational scholars, we should be asking ourselves the following questions: How can our research contribute to creating a roadmap for public-private sector partnerships in refugee camps? What are the preconditions for such collaborations to be successful? Which organizational entities within firms should be responsible

for such engagement—corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments, human resources, operations management—and why? Research on these questions could move beyond descriptive work to include prescriptive and normative elements with an impact on practice.

As we mentioned, the postmigration phase—specifically, refugee integration into the labor market—has been the primary focus of organizational scholars. This is commendable; organizational scholarship has much to contribute to the multidisciplinary conversation on refugee resettlement. We have a long history of studying diversity (Ely and Thomas 2001, Hajro et al. 2017), workplace inclusion (Nishii 2013), organizational justice (Colquitt 2001), CSR (Carroll 1991), cross-sector partnerships (Gibson 2022), and cross-cultural management (House et al. 2004). These perspectives could not only strengthen existing scholarly understanding but could also help organizations develop effective practices for supporting refugees during resettlement (Guo et al. 2020, Loon and Vitale 2021).

Yet there are still many gaps to be filled. For example, research in our field on resettlement agencies remains limited (Jiang 2021). Also, although we know that organizations can mitigate the impact of external influences such as anti-immigration attitudes, biases, fears, and public polarization (Tracey and Phillips 2016), how they do so in the context of refugees is not yet fully understood (Mittermaier et al. 2022). The case of Chobani illustrates how an organization can combat refugee stigmatization by progressively embracing rather than distancing itself from its association with the refugee workforce. This also raises important questions: What happens when a company gains a reputation for treating refugees well? What impact does this have beyond its boundaries? Furthermore, as we write this, it is still unclear how the WEF Refugee Employment Alliance will evolve. This initiative holds the potential to foster a cultural shift in how the private sector views refugees, making it another promising subject for research.

Finally, to briefly return to our earlier differentiation between refugees and IDPs, although some of the questions and research pathways presented in this section also apply to the latter, in the postmigration stage key differences emerge, such as organizational challenges related to cross-cultural management or language barriers, as well as legal and policy connotations associated with the term "refugee," which are generally less pronounced in the case of IDPs. We encourage future research examining these differences.

Understanding Psychological Processes Throughout the Refugee Journey

Refugees constitute a heterogeneous population consisting of individuals with varied predispositions, needs, and mental health outcomes (Mendola et al. 2023). However, in public discourse and even in some of the academic literature, they are typically portrayed as highly susceptible to mental health issues (El-Bialy and Mulay 2020). We do not deny the severity of psychological consequences resulting from the refugee journey. Nonetheless, as research on forced migration in our field advances, organizational scholars should avoid over-pathologizing the refugee experiences. One surprising observation that has surfaced in meta-reviews on PTSD is that its prevalence among refugees might be much lower than some frequently cited claims both in science and in public discourse (Steel et al. 2009, Chan et al. 2016, Bryant et al. 2023). This is important to note because assuming higher numbers of PTSD among refugees than is actually the case can be misleading and harmful to those so labeled as well as to organizations that employ them.

The reality is complex; some refugees merely survive, many adapt to their new circumstances, and others even thrive. More scientific insights are needed to challenge the many inadequate narratives surrounding refugees. If we are to contribute to policy and practice, how we frame forced migration and view refugee experiences matters. Being a refugee in itself is not a psychopathological state: "Despite being exposed to the most devastating nature of the events, not everybody is crushed by them. In fact, the majority of individuals do not require professional attention because a great deal of their healthy functioning remains intact and unaffected by the devastation" (Papadopoulos 2007, p. 308).

Specifically, we suggest gaining a better understanding of PTG among refugees. On a micro level, PTG and coping are processes that can be promoted by organizations through fostering individual competences, trust, and connection (Matos et al. 2021, Umer and Elliot 2021) as well as appreciation for inherent human dignity (Gibson et al. 2023). We encourage research that tackles the following questions: What is known about specific coping processes that foster PTG among refugees in organizational contexts? What, if any, theoretical frameworks from our field could contribute to a better understanding of the positive transformation after trauma? What potential organizational interventions could be used to promote PTG in refugees? For instance, we know very little about the applicability of narrative interventions—writing or storytelling sessions that support healing and transformation—for fostering PTG in organizational settings (Umer and Elliot 2021). Storytelling can enable refugees to establish a sense of social connection and belonging (Sultani et al. 2024). We also encourage researchers to engage in longitudinal studies that explore the efficacy of other types of organizational interventions such as motivational interviewing (Ehret et al. 2015), self-affirmation

exercises (Cohen and Sherman 2014), or cultural shifts at the collective level to cultivate mutual perspective taking, reciprocal respect, embeddedness, and communal advocacy (Gibson 2022). Providing evidence on whether and how these interventions have the power to improve the work lives of refugees illuminates a way forward for practice.

Another gap in the current research on PTG among refugees is the lack of a culturally sensitive measurement. The PTGI was originally developed and validated in the United States on samples of American students (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996, 2004). It may be interpreted differently or be less valid in other countries (Powell et al. 2003). Cross-cultural management research has shown that there are significant differences between Western and non-Western cultures (House et al. 2004) from which refugees most often originate. Thus, the PTGI should be used with caution and, where possible, supported by qualitative studies (Sultani et al. 2024). Organizational scholars have pioneered the field of intrafirm global mobility and have a strong understanding of its various aspects, such as culture shock, cross-cultural adjustment, and organizational support (for recent reviews, see Cooke et al. 2019, Fan et al. 2021, and Lazarova et al. 2023). They could leverage this knowledge to create a cross-culturally validated measure of PTG to better inform policy and practice regarding which strategies or experiences maximize it.

From the family perspective, organizational scholars have explored the spillover-crossover dynamics in the context of corporate expatriates and their partners or spouses (Lazarova et al. 2010, Reiche et al. 2023). Expatriates may encounter different or increased job responsibilities and adjustment stress, and the spouses who accompany them on international assignments may be sacrificing their own careers and social circles (Dimitrova 2018). How refugees are affected by spillover and crossover remains largely unexplored. Refugees' and their families' adjustments have little in common with those among expatriates (Szkudlarek et al. 2021). Thus, a better understanding is needed as to how spillover and crossover between family and workplace domains affect refugee integrative processes. Examining these various issues would yield a better understanding of within- and across-family differences in the refugee resettlement and workplace integration. Although several of these research pathways apply to IDPs as well, we should note that the family dynamics can differ significantly because crossing international borders often places additional burdens on refugees and their children, as discussed.

Finally, we want to acknowledge methodological challenges in conducting research on refugees. First, studies on refugee psychology have been based predominantly on data from Western Europe, North America, and Australia and New Zealand (Fazel et al. 2005, Betts et al. 2023). Although it is very important to understand the settlement dynamics and integration trajectories of refugees in these regions, we should not ignore the selection bias inherent to this research. Because statistically those refugees who manage to arrive and apply for asylum in high-income countries are a minority, our current picture of forced mobility in the global context is all but complete.

Second, to gain a more holistic understanding of refugee integration, we should address a wider range of intersectionality features, including social class, religion, race, and gender. For instance, there is empirical evidence in psychology that refugee women are more likely to develop both PTSD and PTG than refugee men (Vishnevsky et al. 2010, Acquaye 2017, Sims and Pooley 2017). This is particularly important in those cases, like Ukraine, where women constitute the largest number of refugees employed by host country organizations (Aigner et al. 2024). Hence, future studies should explore unique experiences of women refugees, complex ways in which they respond to adversity, and organizational factors that may promote integration in the workplace.

Third, potential biases and idiosyncrasies can include conditions arising from the personal background of the researchers and their motives for doing the research. Yet, as noted by Yin (2015), there are many examples of insightful studies on comparably sensitive topics, for example, white researchers who studied black families' social life (see, e.g., Hannerz 1969 and Stack 2008), as well as studies by those with closely matched racial or ethnic identities (see, e.g., Valenzuela 1999, Sarroub 2005, and Brubaker et al. 2006). Our suggestion is that data collection teams should ideally include both researchers who have similar backgrounds to refugees and those who do not. Such arrangements would enable the research teams to, on the one hand, be sensitive to cultural signals and engender trust and, on the other hand, bring fresh eyes to the research setting.

A qualitative research approach that could be particularly useful in these contexts is engaged scholarship (Bansal et al. 2018). According to this perspective, researchers cannot be fully separated from what they are studying (Van de Ven 2007). The researcher's presence at any stage of the refugee journey inevitably influences the research context, and the two are likely to shape each other in a reciprocal manner. We suggest that by adopting an engaged scholarship approach, the connection between the researcher and refugee participants can be seen as a strength, providing deeper insights into emotions, coping mechanisms, and psychological outcomes. Empathy also plays a crucial role because researchers must ensure that refugees fully understand the purpose, risks, and potential benefits of the research, especially given the traumatic experiences they have endured. Engaged scholarship also often connects findings more directly to practice, given that

researchers are immersed in the context and may serve as participant-observers, consultants, or action researchers.

Understanding Long-Term Outcomes of Traumatic Shocks and Refugee Migration

The impacts of refugee migration extend beyond the individual and span across generations. There are many open avenues for future research into these transgenerational effects. Traumatic shocks may influence the formation of new national or ethnic narratives and identities, which in turn can reshape key organizational elements like values, norms, and purpose. Yet the heterogeneous impact of transgenerational trauma on organizations from a historical perspective remains understudied (Klüppel et al. 2018). We encourage more research into these aspects in the context of refugee migration.

Research on transgenerational trauma in psychology has concentrated primarily on its psychopathological, health-related effects. There is a recognition of the need to examine it also in terms of its broader cultural, social, and political consequences (Smelser 2004). Similarly to psychological responses to trauma by individuals, the collective memory of traumatic shocks can lead to both a paralyzing, paranoid outlook or, in contrast, a potential for growth (Hirschberger 2018). However, the mechanisms that establish and sustain these processes at the individual and collective levels can differ greatly, warranting further exploration.

This presents a significant opportunity for organizational scholars. The various types of organizations discussed in this perspective piece (e.g., firms, resettlement agencies, IOM, UNHCR) play an important role in assisting communities affected by traumatic shocks. As we have emphasized throughout, examining the interplay between the refugee journey, psychology, and organizations can shed light on how contemporary society has been influenced by traumatic shocks and, hopefully, provide pathways for mitigating their negative effects in the future.

Conclusion

Our motivation for writing this perspective article began with the need to understand the key factors that shape the outcomes of refugee migration. By drawing on research in organizational scholarship, migration studies, and psychology, we delineated the intricacies of the refugee journey, the organizations that hinder or facilitate it, and the underlying psychological processes of refugees. We proposed potential pathways for research, policy, and practice. Our final message is that as organizational scholars, we can and should shape a scientifically grounded narrative that has the power to influence business practice, policymaking, and public perception of refugees and, most importantly, improve human lives.

Endnotes

[1] Please see introductory editorials and individual papers from the following Special Issues on migration published in management and business journals (listed by guest editors' names): Dietz (2010), Barnard et al. (2019), Hajro et al. (2021), Andresen et al. (2023), Groutsis et al. (2023), Szkudlarek et al. (2024), Hernandez et al. (2025), Minbaeva et al. (2025), and Wehrle et al. (2025).

[2] There are other forms of forced displacement that are beyond the scope of this perspective article. For example, in migration studies, slavery—whether historical transatlantic slavery or modern slavery—is considered a distinct category of coercion and human rights violation rather than a form of refugee migration.

[3] Deterrence policies refer to asylum-seeker detention and prosecution as well as various forms of resistance endorsed by the state. Examples include the 2016 E.U.-Turkey deal, the 2022 U.K.-Rwanda Asylum scheme, and the Manus Island Regional Processing Center funded by the Australian government from 2001 to 2017. Historically, countries in Africa and Asia that host the largest numbers of refugees have rarely used deterrence policies or closed their borders to asylum-seekers (Aleinikoff and Owen 2022). This may be shifting, because recent policy research indicates that these countries are also starting to adopt more restrictive policies modeled after those of higher-income nations (Rausis 2023).

[4] Recently, researchers have also begun examining another potential pathway for transgenerational trauma through the lens of epigenetics—the study of how genes can be affected by environmental factors (DeAngelis 2023). Although still nascent, this research highlights how trauma experienced by one generation may leave biological imprints, potentially affecting the health and mental well-being of future generations (Sarigedik et al. 2022).

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