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Immigrants' experiences of the importance and value of work in Norway: Implications for social work

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1 Background

There is a global concern about the conditions faced by refugees and asylum seekers. According to the United Nations (2018), promoting inclusion through social protection systems is key to developing social inclusion, reducing inequality, and preventing poverty. The World Health Organization (2019) focuses on health and access to health, as well as poverty and social exclusion as global threats particularly concerning refugees and asylum seekers. Refugees and asylum seekers have fled their country of origin and crossed an international border to find refuge (United Nations High Commissioner for refugees, n.d.). I use the term immigrants in this paper.

Groups experiencing marginalized, discriminated, and oppressed living conditions are key concerns in social work (Boccagni & Righard, 2020) and reflects a longstanding and established practice pertaining to displaced people. Social work has the potential to play an important role in immigrants' integration by caring for each client and implementing policy while upholding professional principles such as solidarity (Humphries, 2004; Rine, 2018). There is, however, concern that social works potential to assist immigrants is diminished by changes in social policy (Boccagni & Righard, 2020; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Lorenz, 2017; Rine, 2018; Weinberg & Banks, 2019).

The large influx of immigrants to Europe in 2015 set off a renewed and heated political debate in Norway about how to integrate immigrants into society. A broad political settlement resulted in a shift from relatively mild immigration politics to a more restrictive immigration policy with increased temporality (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). As the 'migration crisis' was unfolding, the Norwegian parliament (the Storting) received a white paper, on the need for an effective integration policy (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016). Furthermore, a committee was appointed to evaluate the cost of immigration, and its long-term consequences for the welfare state. A number of measures was recommended to counteract expected negative outcomes, (NOU 2017:2). Overall, the committee supported work as the most important factor in successful integration (NOU 2017:2).

This study aims to explore immigrants' experiences with integration and work and discuss the implications for social work practice. The purpose is to gain insight into and develop knowledge about how immigrants experience the importance of, and value of work when settling in Norway. Immigrants' experiences and their perspectives can provide knowledge important to promote their efforts to gain employment and contribute to improve professional social work practice. Enhanced contributions from immigrants' perspective contribute to reinforced social work principles of participation, solidarity, and non-discriminatory practices in professional practice.

Work, i.e., gainful employment, is generally considered the most important tool in integration-policies. Reduced economic differences between immigrants and the native population whilst facilitating and encouraging integration is the ambition (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016). Jakobsen, Korpi and Lorentzen (2019) identified lacking integration into the labour markets as a problem in the Scandinavian countries. The Norwegian labour market has a total employment rate of 75.5 % (Statistics Norway, 2021[SSB]). The employment rate for all immigrants is 65.4 %, whereas for ethnic Norwegians the rate is 78.1% (SSB, 2021). The Norwegian ambition to guarantee welfare by employment was first described in a white paper from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in 1995. Activation policies have since been the governing principle in the Norwegian welfare state. Schemes were specifically designed to strengthen the appeal of work and aimed at securing employment (Hansen, 2019). Halvorsen (2011) claimed the conjecture that generous benefits would undermine work as the preferred support-way to be misleading. According to Rugkåsa (2011) integration in the majority society is more than gainful employment. Work is important for each individual and their living conditions, although work should not be regarded the exclusive pathway to integration (Rugkåsa, 2011). Over the last few years, increased requirements of activity have been established in welfare states across the western hemisphere, although not exclusively aimed at immigrants (Borevi, Jensen & Mouritsen, 2017; Breidahl, 2017; Joppke, 2007). Adjustments are governed by the supposition that incentives will ease integration by motivating immigrants to make more effort (Breidahl, 2017; Djuve & Kavli, 2019; Hagelund, Øverbye, Hatland & Terum, 2016; Hagelund & Kavli, 2009). Sanctions play an important part in activation policies and are assumed to strengthen the incentive to seek gainful employment. According to Hagelund et. al (2016) sanctions are the potential drawback of activation politics. Hagelund and Kavli (2009) claimed that because of immigrants' difficulties in transferring into the labour market, activation politics is especially aimed at immigrants.

Sayad (2004) suggested that immigrants' perception of work is different from that of natives. Moreover, it can never be the same because of the different experiences they carry (Sayad, 2004). Institutionalized barriers, personal endeavours to make sense of life events, challenges related to culture, context, identity, sociocultural discourses, individual struggles to preserve one's identity and heritage while embracing new societal norms are significant themes affect immigrants' interpretation of the meaning of work (Shenoy-Packer & Gabor, 2016).

Immigration is an integral part of the person, affecting all aspects of a person's life; individual and societal structures (Sayad, 2004). Scarred by former torment, immigrants encounter challenges starting a new life. They faced restrictions in receiving countries and had to overcome a wide range of obstacles (unfamiliar context, disregarded competence) to secure a job (Scheibelhofer, 2019; Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019). They met segmented labour markets, loss of status, unacknowledged skills, high levels of unemployment and discrimination, structural disadvantages, and the EU labour market outcomes for refugees were considerably worse than for other migrants (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Fasani, Frattini & Minale 2018). Immigrants' opportunities were affected by their own agency as well as socio-institutional settings, intertwined in social positioning largely related to their positions in the labour market (Scheibelhofer, 2019). Immigrants' own efforts (personality, motivation, and abilities), encounters with others as well as opportunities to participate in society affected their ability to transcend into their adopted country (Grue et al., 2019). Ahmed (2012) questioned the highly accepted belief that diversity neutralizes institutional racism and advocates transformation as a form of practical labour that leads to knowledge.

According to Popescu and Libal (2018) international human rights and migration laws provide a framework too narrow and too limited for recent developments in the global perspective of people in need. Social work is a normative profession aiming to prevent, reduce or resolve social problems for individuals, groups, or society. Furthermore, the profession is interwoven with the welfare state and social policy. Practitioners within the Norwegian welfare administration have experienced a strengthened focus on managerial forms of control and pre-defined terms (Jessen, 2015). Consequently, social work has over the last few years experienced a narrowing field for intervention, accompanied by growing managerial forms of control and standardized interventions (Lavalette 2011; Lorenz 2017; Morley and Dunstan 2013). Social workers' ethical obligation to provide each individual with the best suited measures can be weakened by reduced opportunities to apply discretion and make independent decisions (Jessen, 2015). According to Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) social workers to a certain degree protest to the neoliberal-imposed restraints, and their impact on professional practice. Street-level bureaucrats (see Lipsky) working with immigration were affected by policies and constantly reinterpreted their professional role to cope with the dilemmas in their practice (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017). Øvrelid (2018) concluded that standardization and managerial control required social workers to adapt to and master the system by developing individual coping strategies. Critical thinking and reflection seemed to create room for personal agency (Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

Because social work is intertwined with the economic, political, social, and cultural conditions in society, the ethics of social work is "… intimately connected with politics, as resources for welfare services and the role of welfare professionals are linked to politics and programmes for the distribution of wealth, taxation, and the conferring of citizenship" (Banks 2012, p 30). The changing social policy which in turn changes social work is thus an ethical problem. Grønningsæter (2013) states that the ethical challenges in social work include time and resources to reflect ethically upon professional practice. Humphries (2004) claims that social workers lacked critical view on their own practice, resulting in unethical practices.

The field of immigration is an important and constantly growing area of work for social work practice (Boccagni & Righard, 2020; Healy, 2004; Humphries, 2004; Nash et al., 2006; Rine, 2018; Valtonen, 2001; Viola et al., 2018). There is a lack of studies exploring immigrants lived experiences on the issue of work. It reveals a knowledge gap this study aims to fill. The research question is: *How do immigrants in Norway experience the importance of work, and how do they perceive the value of work?*

2 Method

This is a qualitative interpretative phenomenological (IPA) study, aiming to provide detailed insight into the participants' experiences, and how they perceive the value of work. As an IPA-study directs light towards the phenomenon within the wider context (i.e., the Norwegian labour market) it is well suited to analyse the data gathered in this study.

IPA recognizes that the researcher must interpret the data available (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The participants' talk, thought and emotional state was closely connected, and interacted in a complex manner. Participants are rarely prepared to share every aspect of a phenomenon. A lacking ability to express themselves precisely when speaking a second language may have limited their ability to elaborate their accounts. Furthermore, some of them had horrendous experiences, which may have caused them to withhold certain aspects in their accounts. This study is an attempt to understand what it is like for each participant to have particular

experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2008), based on the accounts deriving from the separate interviews.

A qualitative analysis is inevitably a subjective process, drawing on the researcher's knowledge and experiences. Thus, the researcher's reflective awareness (i.e., critical self-awareness) is crucial to keep the interpretations valid and credible (Finlay, 2014). A research diary was kept, recording immediate reflections after each interview. Fore-conceptions and quotations that stood out were also noted in the diary. During the analysis the research diary was revisited to ensure inclusion of initial reflections in the interpretations.

2.1 Sample and recruitment

The sample is a strategic selection, resting on the following criteria.

- Refugees, asylum-seekers, or family-reunified with refugees or asylum-seekers.
- Aged 18 – 55.
- Men and women.
- Completed a year in the Introduction programme.
- Experiences on work and integration within the Norwegian welfare context.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and Introduction programmes (the governmental programme for newcomers in need of basic qualifications) provided the author with the participants' contact information. Based on the criteria listed above, potential participants were approached. Possible participants accepted that their contact information was forwarded to the researcher. One possible participant did not respond to numerous attempts to schedule an interview, and another withdrew before such an attempt was made.

Six men and four women from four different countries were interviewed. The participants all lived in urban parts of western Norway. They had lived in Norway between 1 ½ and 10 years at the time of interviewing. Seven participants had held jobs in countries other than their country of origin whilst all of them had worked in their motherland. Six participants gained formal education prior to arriving in Norway and achieved varying degrees of approval from the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). The participants' language skills varied, as did the amount of work-experience in Norway. Most importantly, they all possessed experience relevant to the phenomena under study.

Table 1. An overview of the participants

Name	Time in Norway	Family status	Country of origin	Level of education	Work experience	Employment status
Tarik	1,5	Unmarried	Syria	Interrupted bachelor's degree	Syria, Turkey, Norway	Enrolled in Introduction programme

Hamza	2	Married	Syria	University, unspecified level	Syria, Turkey	Enrolled in Introduction programme + Practice
Nadia	2	Married	Syria	University, unspecified level	Syria, Lebanon	Enrolled in Introduction programme + Practice
Omar	4	Married, 3 children	Syria	Primary school	Syria, Lebanon, Greece	Practice
Anwar	3	Married, 2 children	Syria	Primary school	Syria, Lebanon, Saudi-Arabia	Enrolled in Introduction programme + Practice
Mai	10	Married, 3 children	Burma	Primary school	Burma, Malaysia	Practice
Almaz	6	Married	Eritrea	Bachelor's degree	Eritrea	Student
Eyob	3	Married, 1 child	Eritrea	Bachelor's degree	Eritrea	Enrolled in Introduction programme + Practice
Iman	5	Unmarried, 1 child	China	Bachelor's degree	China	Enrolled in Introduction programme + Practice
Nebez	2	Unmarried	Syria	Primary school	Syria, Turkey, Norway	Enrolled in Introduction programme +

						Job

2.2 Data collection

The interviews were conducted in line with an interview guide containing both open and closed questions, allowing the participants to speak freely. The questions focused on the participants' experiences regarding work and integration and lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour and 45 minutes. The participants chose where the interviews took place. Interviews 1, 8 and 9 took place at the location of the Introduction programme. Interviews 2, 3, 4 and 5 proceeded in the participants' homes, while interviews 6 and 7 occurred in the researcher's office. Three interviews were conducted in English, the remaining six in Norwegian. All participants declined the offer of having an interpreter present. The use of a tape-recorder during the interviews ensured correct paraphrasing of the interviewee's statements and verbatim transcriptions. The transcriptions were executed applying consistent codes and accentuations.

2.3 Research ethics

A careful ethical consideration regarding uneven positions, voluntary participation as well as the affect participation could have for the participants' interests was performed. The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved personal data retention (reference number 55202). All participants received detailed information about the study and signed a consent form. Each participant was advised that they could withdraw at any time, with no explanation needed. All the participants upheld their consent. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym by the author.

2.4 Data-analysis

The interviews underwent an interpretative phenomenological analysis in line with the step-by-step approach outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The analysis started during transcribing as the initial listening created an awareness and familiarity with the text.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading aimed to sense specific wording and tone of voice to get a sense of each participant's voice. Reflections were noted, and the research diary was revisited.

Step 2: Initial noting extended the deepening intimacy with the particular accounts. The exploratory comments included a multitude of notes, and each dataset grew extensively.

Step 3: Developing emergent themes required focusing on parts of the text, aiming to produce a concise statement of significant notes extracted from pieces of the data. Every comment represented the accounts given by the participants, as well as the author's interpretation.

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes involved developing a new structure. The themes were cut out and spread on a sheet of paper. Depending on how the themes related, clusters of themes emerged. The flexibility in the method allowed revisiting sections of the narrative to re-evaluate the importance of the themes to ensure that the most important and central aspects of the participants' accounts were included. When satisfied that the clusters of themes mirrored essential elements in the accounts, superordinate themes were allocated new names.

Step 5: Moving to the next case meant repeating the procedure for each interview. The themes and interpretations in the former case should be bracketed, still acknowledging the changed fore-structures deriving from the analysis.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases called for a renewed and broad open-mindedness towards the data. A hard copy was put on the wall. Similarities, differences, and connections were marked with colours and connective lines. Patterns emerged beyond the single cases, and the names of the superordinate themes changed to present a potent and robust analysis.

The superordinate themes are as follows: *(1) Lacking employment: Deprived of control and autonomy, (2) Secondary employee: Marginalized and excluded, (3) Diminished self-image: Underestimated and categorized, (4) Formal education, experience, and skills: Devalued and de-skilled*

Table 2. Example of analysis

Exploratory comments (descriptive, *linguistic*, conceptual)	**Original transcript**	**Emergent themes**	**Super-ordinate themes**
She said no. *Very emotional, still clear and coherent.* The power of the documents, and resistance from the authorities	*Almaz*: So that's why I said no. I don't want to sit at home and take the welfare money. But I would rather do that and stay at home and wait for work. Because they never gave me the chance! They just need to see the papers, and I said to them, the paper will come. I have this paper. I have graduated. But they need the approval from NOKUT. I called NOKUT and asked for a temporary permit until the authentication was done. A paper that says that I can work. Yes, but – it took a long time, so.	Working without pay. Never a chance to prove herself and demonstrate skills. Impossible to get a temporary approval.	Lacking employment: Deprived of control and autonomy Formal education, experience, and skills: Devalued and de-skilled

	Interviewer: Uhm.		

3 Results

The results from the analysis will be presented next.

3.1 Lacking employment: Deprived of control and autonomy

To the participants, access to the labour market represented the path to self-sufficiency, the overall feeling of self-worth, and the opportunity to become independent providers who did not rely on welfare benefits. Obtaining and holding on to a job suggested financial independence, a sense of belonging and appeared to be a measure of success in adapting to their new context.

The importance of a job was evident in terms of what it would mean financially, although several participants focused more on the opportunities improved finances would facilitate. They talked about starting their own businesses, buying their own homes and the ability to pay tax. Paying tax represented inclusion and belonging, and a sense of having earned the right to benefit from the welfare state. It also meant having a job. Iman put what a job would mean into words.

> To get a job… I would be so happy! It would be like to suddenly see the light. Like if you are in the desert, so thirsty, and then you find a drink. The feeling of getting a job, it will be as good as that.

Participants stressed that work could provide a relief to trauma they had suffered. Anwar explained: 'If I don't work, and just sit at home, I become stressed and start thinking about other stuff; my country, what I did there. What problems I had. When you work you don't think, just work, work, work.' The absence of work had considerable impact on the participants. Mai expressed how she felt: 'Just staying home, I felt like I was in a small prison.'

The participants were enrolled in the Introduction programme or schemes governed by NAV. They felt deprived of autonomy and control as they were confined by the limitations set by the support-system. NAV could cancel or reduce their benefits if they failed to uphold the rules. Although grateful for the support they received, participants perceived the rules as demotivating and constricting. Violating the requirements was likely to lead to severely reduced financial benefits, and they were unable to choose freely for themselves. Omar said: 'We, who are receiving benefits from Nav, we can't go abroad [to visit family]. If you do, NAV will stop your payments.' With already limited finances, this left the participants feeling deprived of control and autonomy. The requirements embedded in the system did not appear to contribute to participants' achieving self-sufficiency or raise opportunities for them to provide for themselves. Several of the participants highlighted being able to make their own decisions as a key feature in what a job would promise.

3.2 Secondary employee: Marginalized and excluded

The expectation of transfer into the workforce was strong amongst the participants. The society and way of life were unfamiliar when the participants arrived in their adopted country. They faced anticipations and rules of conduct conflicting with their previous experiences. Moreover, the unaccustomed mechanisms within Norwegian society that aim to provide and guarantee equal rights in the labour market, struck the participants as excluding.

The participants lacked sufficient knowledge to navigate the support-system successfully. At times, they did not know or understand expectations and failed to meet requirements. Their lacking knowledge about the expectations were regularly interpreted as a deficiency which in turn affected their employability. Omar exemplified such an event:

> I had to stay home [with my kids] and missed practice. I did not know that I had to apply for time off. They [the employers] probably wondered what I was thinking. I now know that this is a rule, but I didn't know it then. They [the employers] could have given me some time to adjust, but they didn't.

Although wrong-doing was the result of a misunderstanding, potential employers tended to interpret mistakes or confusion as a confirmation of lacking employability. The participants' pre-existing knowledge about how to gain employment was not transferable to the Norwegian context. The participants were expected to validate formal skills and experience by letters of recommendation from previous employers to be eligible for employment. Hamza commented: 'In Norway you need references. It doesn't matter if you have references from your country, if you have papers – if you have whatever. Here, in this system, if you don't have references from Scandinavia, it's hard to find a job.' Norwegian employers did not accept recommendation letters from acquaintances. Nor were opportunities to demonstrate practical skills available. Employment appeared unattainable, and left the participants speculating whether their unfamiliar names, customs or appearance were the cause. Almaz wondered: 'Maybe – I always speculate – it is because my name is different.'

Participants described feeling discouraged, and unable to work out how to make their skills relevant to the Norwegian labour market. The system and its regulations - aimed at protecting and ensuring equal treatment - actually limited participants' opportunities. The rules prevented friendship and kinship being a facilitator in securing work. Because their previous knowledge on how to gain work was considered unjust and illegal in Norway, the system in itself appeared unfair and discriminating. They found themselves in an inferior position, which left them powerless, and dependent on the mercy of employers and NAV.

3.3 Diminished self-image: Underestimated and categorized

The participants experienced that they were deprived of their ability to support themselves and felt underestimated and categorized. This was devastating to them and affected their self-image negatively. Frequent rejections seemed to confirm the participants' impression that there was something the matter with them. They regularly interpreted lack of opportunities as a failing of their own capacity.

Prior to settling in Norway, the participants were able to maintain an income to support those dependent on them, despite difficult or harmful working conditions. In Norway, they needed additional benefits from the authorities to be able to support their families. Mai explained: 'Even though we live in Norway, we are reliant on benefits, and it doesn't feel good. In my motherland there are a lot of poor families, yet no one begs.' They expected to be able to

provide for themselves in compliance with their own societal norm. Their inability to do so affected their self-image, inflicting a sense of shame and helplessness.

The participants were aware of the prevalent public debate about 'welfare refugees'. They were confused and upset by the idea that anyone would believe their motivation for seeking protection in Norway was the raised level of benefits. Hamza said: 'Norwegians and Swedes respect you if you have a job: if you don't come here expecting to be supported by NAV.' They were conscious that their appearance and conduct reflected on all immigrants and felt an obligation to demonstrate good intentions on behalf of all immigrants. To the participants it was evident that sincere intentions could best be demonstrated through employment. Tarik's reflections were:

> Maybe this will affect how the state regards immigrants. I think I should get an education or a job to give back to the state. Because the state helped me and gave me a safe place to stay. Money to start, to study, so… I keep thinking I must do something good in this country.

To be perceived as an immigrant rather than their individual self, felt belittling and categorizing to the participants. They still seemed to accept ill-fitting descriptions without contesting their accuracy.

As the participants struggled to secure jobs, they tended to look within themselves, their abilities, and their personality to find the reason for failing to secure a job. It appeared increasingly difficult for the participants to uphold their belief in their own abilities and equal chances. The participants appeared to surrender to unequal treatment and accept that their chances of obtaining a job were poor.

3.4 Formal education, experience, and skills: Devalued and de-skilled

The participants found it immensely difficult to obtain employment, especially jobs in line with their previous skills and knowledge. Regulations and rules regarding practice placements, formal education, experience, and skills became obstacles since the rules seemed to prevent them from obtaining employment.

Practice placements were supposed to ease their transfer into the labour market. Several of the participants experienced that their skills were disregarded and overlooked when practice-placements were assigned. Participants, who obtained placements in line with their competence, and skills, filled in for absent employees - contrary to the purpose of practice.

Participants did not receive a salary, and their position remained secondary to employees. The participants felt devalued and de-skilled. As Omar expressed: 'Repeated practice-placements is a heavy burden. It is like working for free. I receive money from Nav, but I would like to feel that I am working and earning money to support myself'. The placements were rarely perceived as the first step towards a job; they were more often an unsatisfactory substitute. According to the participants, practice placements did not lead to positive outcomes in terms of securing lasting employment.

There was a significant difference between the participants with formal education approved in Norway, and those who lacked formal skills. Those who had formal competence approved in Norway were likely to see the route to additional education within the Norwegian education system as an achievable, even preferable, route to accessing the labour market. Almaz

explained: 'When they approved my papers, I realized that I could go to University and learn. […] . Then I just started studying in the University!' The participants who left school at an early age to provide for their families, saw the road to formal skills as a lengthy, time-consuming, and less favourable option. Anwar said: 'If I start studying, I will need a lot of time because my Norwegian is not that good, and I don't speak any English'. They tended to have more limited options as they held on to the belief that they had sufficient experience and skills to find a job. What they wanted and needed was a chance to demonstrate their skills, a chance that proved impossible to achieve. Still, they seemed to possess a great deal of entrepreneurship, and worked hard to gain or create opportunities where there were none.

Though participants encountered difficulties, they remained hopeful of gaining stable and secure employment. Nevertheless, there was both frustration and confusion amongst the participants. Being able to make the most of the situation was an enormous challenge, reliant on personal skills, and the ability to make sense of their new circumstances.

4 Discussion

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into and develop knowledge about how immigrants experience the importance and value of work in Norway. Differing understandings of what a job means and how the current measures governed by incentives and penalties affect immigrants' experiences, chances, and abilities to enter the workforce are discussed. Furthermore, the impact that their experiences on work and integration have on the participants' self-perception and sense making as well as the significance of education level are considered. The findings' implications for social work complete the discussion.

The participants' perception of the importance of work implied an expectancy of employment and, thereby, contribution. Furthermore, work was essential to realize what they subjectively considered a good life. According to the findings, the immigrants' main ambition was to gain regular employment. The authorities stressed employment as the most important facilitator for integration. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security (2016) pinpointed the obligation to become a productive and contributing citizen, highlighting immigrants' individual responsibility for securing a job. The shared objective for immigrants and the authorities was transfer into the labour market to achieve self-sufficiency. The governmental focus was directed towards the fiscal impact for the individual and the general society (Djuve & Kavli 2019; Hagelund & Kavli 2009). The participants also were preoccupied with the fiscal impacts. However, psychological fulfilment and personal growth was important to them as well. The authorities seemed to have a much narrower focus on the importance of work than the participants (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016). Social work practice was and is greatly affected by this idea as practioners act as agents for the welfare-state. It has become an integral part of social work. Boccagni and Righard (2020) and Lavalette and Ferguson (2006) suggest a need to re-structure social work, honouring the principles of social work rather than carrying out practice reproducing and maintaining structural inequality. Accepting and internalizing a narrow understanding of integration and diversity work can promote a practice that reduces immigrants to numbers and statistics, violating ethical principles of social work and accepting neo-liberal changes (Boccagni & Righard, 2020; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Humphries, 2004; Lorenz, 2017).

A comprehensive body of knowledge supported the idea that stable and secure employment was hard to achieve (Bratsberg, Raaum & Røed, 2016, 2018). The participants reported insufficient assistance to achieve formal credentials as a major obstacle to securing stable employment. The immigrants in this study had different needs depending on their individual

preconditions as well as the competence and skills they held. This resonates well with the findings of Willott and Stevenson (2013). The inability to secure suitable employment resulted in a considerable drop in motivation and loss of self-esteem for the immigrants (Willott & Stevenson, 2013). The Norwegian support systems, designed to endorse the governmental aims of productivity and self-sufficiency, seemed to assume that immigrants had the same needs, regardless. Support from the authorities was governed by incentives and penalties (Djuve & Kavli, 2019; Hagelund et al., 2016; Hagelund & Kavli, 2009). Activation policy draws on incentives and relies heavily on control systems including sanctions, information and cautions (Hagelund et al., 2016). Social work practice within the welfare-state implemented and effectuated control, as experienced by the participants in this study. Humphries (2004) suggest that social work has assumed an unacceptable role by implementing immigration policy and has downplayed solidarity with immigrants. Moreover, findings in this study suggested that incentives and penalties had the opposite effect to their intention. Requirements and mandatory obligations seemed to cause the participants to judge themselves as inadequate. Although the findings suggested that the participants regarded the measures as incomplete, they tended to interpret lack of employment as a flaw on their part. Consequently, they struggled to uphold their motivation. Furthermore, they seemed to become more uncertain on how to secure a job. The governmental eagerness to transform immigrants into productive tax-paying citizens can disregard that the immigrants are more than a potential employee. Categorizing heterogenic groups of people and lacking individual evaluations suggest that the highly specialised Norwegian labour market (Djuve & Kavli 2019), have become more reliant on managerial control-measures and standardisation (Jessen, 2015; Lorenz, 2017; Øvrelid, 2018). In turn this had negative effects on the participants' motivation and at times moved them further from lasting employment. Different starting points indicated that tailored support in line with social works focus on each clients' specific neds, might prove a more fruitful strategy. As the authorities focused on upholding the welfare state (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2016, NOU 2017:2), their centre of attention seemed limited to productivity in society.

The perception and treatment of immigrants as a homogenous group challenged their sense of self. The participants appeared to be highly influenced by the general society's perception of them. Furthermore, they seemed to surrender to an unreliable interpretation suggesting that they had fewer valuable credentials than natives. Unfamiliar regulations and rights made it difficult for immigrants to challenge and confront the regulations (Kosny et al., 2019). The participants tended to accept directions presented to them. They failed to exercise their right to challenge rules, and advocate for renewed and better suited schemes. Although they were able and willing to pay their own way by working for their money, they were not able to work out how to establish their foothold on the labour market. Instead, their lived experiences were incorporated into their sense of self, and in their narratives (Sayad, 2004). The findings suggest that social work should play a more prominent role in support for immigrants, advocating individualized approaches corresponding with professional ethical conduct.

Findings suggested that practice rarely contributed to the participants gaining ordinary jobs. Practice placements were supposed to provide opportunities to learn and gain experience to ease the transfer into the workforce (Djuve & Tronstad, 2011). The participants experienced that the aim of the authorities was language-practice or work-practice, without necessarily expecting practice to culminate in regular employment. Practice was assumed a stepping-stone to a regular job by the participants. Hence, it gradually became a disheartening reminder of their inadequate ability to contribute and to support themselves and their family.

The participants requested measures to confirm their credentials, and opportunities to validate their skills because available jobs required formal competence or a certificate of apprenticeship. Acknowledgment of their competence and skills was likely to ease their transfer into the workforce (Willott & Stevenson, 2013), as well as add to their psychological fulfilment. Findings in this study suggested that immigrants without formal education had fewer options than those with approved education. Participants who obtained education prior to arriving in Norway were able to continue their education and obtain degrees in demand in the Norwegian labour market. Education, especially if obtained in Norway, made immigrants more employable (Hermansen, 2013), suggesting that education raised the probability to secure a job. Formal credentials would provide immigrants with a stronger control of their situation, and limit society's control over them.

Rules regulating the labour market were implemented to protect employees, and make sure that they received fair and equal treatment. For those without formal credentials, the rules kept them outside the workforce rather efficiently. Regulations designed to protect employees seemed to prevent work-seeking immigrants from joining the workforce. This paradox also occurs in other fields, such as socio-economic integration (Hermansen, 2017). Whether the egalitarian and generous Norwegian welfare state promotes or inhibits integration amongst immigrants and their descendants (Hermansen (2017) is an important question for social workers.

According to Humphries (2004) social work has taken part in implementing immigration policies without considering the ramifications. Lafayette and Ferguson (2006), Boccagni and Righard (2020) and Lorenz (2017) all suggest that there is a need for awareness towards neo-liberal changes in social work. Evidence reveals that the authorities' objectives at times are different from the immigrants', as do my findings. Social work aims to uphold human rights as well as provide a podium to present immigrants' voices (Popescu & Libal, 2018). This should suggest social work to assume a challenging and questioning approach towards practices and policies identified as constricting and ill-fitting. Enhancement of practices relying on dialogue as a methodological approach could combine caring for people in need and implementing policy within the welfare-state. Social work must uphold principles central to professional practice (Humphries, 2004). Furthermore, take on the role to advocate for clients' needs through challenging unjust practices within the welfare state.

5 Conclusion and implications for social work

Social work practice aims to care for each client and implement policy while upholding professional ethical principles. Evidence from those with lived experiences must prompt development of professional practice better suited to aid immigrants as they strive towards employment and ultimately, integration. Though this study is situated within a Norwegian context, the findings are relevant to countries sharing characteristics such as focus on integration through employment (i.e., Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, Canada).

The findings have implications for social work as they reveal that the importance and value of work related to immigrants' entire world. A job meant positive identity, self-provision, self-worth and integrity, freedom and autonomy, psychological fulfilment and hope, something meaningful to do as well as independence, belonging and inclusion. Lacking a job caused confusion, sadness, despair, and feeling deprived of control and autonomy, marginalized, and excluded, underestimated and categorized, de-valued and de-skilled. Hence, a job meant everything as the participants attempted to establish a new life. Having a job or not affected their integration into their adopted country. Their ability to succeed in adapting to a new

society was affected by previous experiences, but also by events they encountered in new circumstances. Immigrants' experiences of work suggested that the focus on gainful employment and swift transitions into the labour market disregarded their individual needs as well as integration as something more than gainful employment.

Social works principles of participation, solidarity and non-discriminatory practices suggests that professional practice should promote the immigrants' broad understanding of the importance of work rather than the narrower of the authorities. Social work should critically evaluate current practices and establish ethical practices. This implies that social work must re-evaluate its practice. There is a need to investigate the lived experiences of immigrants in the Norwegian labour market further to inform social work practice and promote inclusion of immigrants' lived experiences. Future research should explore immigrants' strategies for securing work, consequences they suffer when unable to establish stable and lasting employment as well as whether the policies aimed at integrating immigrants through work are successful in terms of enabling the immigrants to secure meaningful and permanent jobs.

An employment rate closer to that of the native Norwegians (78.1 %) seemed to be a common goal for the authorities and the participants. Professional social work practice with emphasis on dialogue to ensure participation is vital to include the immigrants' perspective on the importance and value of work. A diversity of voices carries the potential to spark understanding and bring forward new ideas which could ultimately result in schemes better suited to raising the participation of immigrants in working life while upholding the principles of social work.

5.1 Limitations

Smith et al. (2009) recommends a homogenous group of participants. Differences amongst the participants such as country of origin, reason for departing, language-skills and residual length of stay suggest possible limitations. A different selection strategy could have gathered a different sample, as could a different research design. However, homogeneity in IPA relates to the ability to enlighten the phenomena (Smith et al., 2009). Those who have lived longer in Norway may have experiences different from other participants. Yet, differing backgrounds, diversified experiences or varied length of stay do not reduce the trustworthiness, as the aim is gained knowledge and insight rather than generalization. The participants' accounts concur, and their varied backgrounds could thus imply that the findings are robust and dependable. Varied level of language-skills suggests another limitation. An interpreter might have contributed to the participants' ability to express their thoughts more precisely. However, the possibility of an interpreter limiting their ability to speak freely support the participants' decline.

This is a qualitative study; interpretations are influenced by my fore-conceptions. My background as a social-worker as well as built-in-biases may have affected the interpretations. To counteract biases and fore-conceptions, critical self-awareness as well as research ethics guided the analytical process to ensure trustworthiness and transparency. Furthermore, the possibility of biases and fore-conceptions affecting the analysis was a crucial topic in discussions with the supervisors.

Despite such limitations, I believe that the findings provide information, suitable to gain insight into and develop knowledge about how immigrants experience the importance and value of work in Norway.

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