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### Citation

Glastra, F. J., & Vedder, P. H. (2010). Learning strategies of highly educated refugees in the Netherlands: Habitus of calculation? *International Migration*, 48(1), 80-105. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16673>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16673>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



doi:10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00532.x

# Learning Strategies of Highly Educated Refugees in the Netherlands: Habitus or Calculation?

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## ABSTRACT

In an analysis of 25 semi-structured interviews with highly educated asylum seekers and refugees in The Netherlands, we have traced their learning strategies, the stability of their educational and professional career patterns between home and host country, the calculative nature of the choices made in this context and the influence of family ties. In the analysis, we explored the fit of two competitive theoretical perspectives: Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and the biographical approach. The respondents showed a surprising degree of stability with regard to their career patterns, calculation with regard to educational choices was weak and there was a strong influence of family ties. From these results, it would seem that the field theory shows a better fit than the biographical approach. Longitudinal research is needed to test this hypothesis in more rigorous ways. Moreover, the research has pointed at omissions and ambivalences with regard to the relationship of changes in field structures and habitus change, the relative relevance of mental and material conditions for human agency in the work of Bourdieu. In the analysis, several variables specifically related to the situation of refugees and asylum seekers could be traced that additionally explain the findings.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a research project with regard to the learning strategies of highly educated refugees and asylum seekers in The Netherlands. Highly educated refugees and asylum seekers are those who have

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enrolled in higher education and access courses leading there in The Netherlands. In the new host country, they face the demanding task of rebuilding their lives. Getting to know the educational system, learning the language, accessing higher education and retraining are pivotal activities for many of them. However, unemployment statistics and research on the careers of refugees in The Netherlands (Klaver et al., 2005; Maagdenberg, 2004) point at the dominance of a persistent breakdown pattern. Research with regard to the position of refugees on the Dutch labour market (CBS, 2004; Van den Tillaart, Olde Monnikhof, Van den Berg, and Warmerdam, 2000; Warmerdam and Van den Tillaart, 2002) shows that there is an extremely high level of unemployment among refugees (from 24 to 48 per cent for different nationalities) and that, when employed, refugees work in jobs well below their educational qualifications and work experience. Often these jobs have little connection with their study or profession in their home countries (cf. RETAS, 2004). Retraining in the Dutch educational system is an option open only for those who have obtained a residence permit. Research shows that this happens after an average of over three years of forced passivity during the asylum application (Klaver et al., 2005). Depending on educational choice, retraining takes three to eight more years of study (Kalsbeek and Bleichrodt, 2004). At the same time, the Dutch labour market faces a severe shortage of highly educated personnel due to the expansion of knowledge intensive and professional jobs, and to general demographic trends such as an ageing work population and a low birth rate. In reaction to labour market forecasts, the Dutch government relaxed the admission procedure for 'foreign knowledge workers' in 2003. At that time, asylum seekers and refugees were still represented in the dominant political discourse as an undifferentiated wave that had threatened to drown The Netherlands, had not the government stopped it. However, in 2005, the former Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment initiated a campaign to enhance the employment of highly educated refugees, which was reinforced under the current government. Thus, be it with much circumspection, refugees are being brought into focus as a source of highly educated labour in The Netherlands. Research with regard to highly educated refugees and the reasons why so few of them succeed on the Dutch labour market has gained social as well as economic relevance.

Refugees and asylum seekers do not come empty-handed; they bring their capital – knowledge, work and educational experience, diplomas – to the new educational field. How do they approach language acquisition and retraining? What career patterns do they follow in the host

country, in how far are educational perspectives and activities in The Netherlands (dis)continuous with those in the home countries and which variables influence these perspectives and choices? Theoretically, we are interested in the contribution of two frameworks for the interpretation of educational careers, the field theory developed by Bourdieu (1992a, 1992b, 1994), and biographical approaches advanced by authors such as Alheit (1995), Van Damme (2000), Herzberg (2006), Kupferberg (1998) and others in the wake of Giddens' (1991) notion of reflexive modernization. In how far are the careers of respondents influenced by the opportunity structure of the educational field in the host country and by their habitus, and in how far do they act as individualized, reflexive subjects calculating costs and benefits of their educational decisions against the background of their unfolding biographies?

In this article, we will report on an analysis of interviews with 25 highly educated asylum seekers and refugees in The Netherlands.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In order to study the learning trajectories of highly educated refugees and asylum seekers in The Netherlands, we have made use of some important conceptions in the work of Bourdieu (1992a, 1992b, 1994). According to Bourdieu, social reality can be seen as structured through fields. A *field*, such as education or the labour market, is constituted by a number of social agents who are related to each other in terms of (inter)dependencies with regard to their interests and the game they play in the field. Such relationships are inherently competitive, since it is through participation in fields that social agents may reproduce or change their positions in a social order that is characterized by social inequality.

Even though there is inequality of chances and outcomes in the field, it is held together by a shared understanding among the players about the usefulness of the field and the necessity of the game. This understanding, or "illusio", results from the functioning of the field. It is secured at the level of individuals and groups in the form of the habitus. A *habitus* is a long-lasting, culturally embedded cognitive structure and essentially the result of the incorporation of objective field structures by the agents (Bourdieu, 1994). Bourdieu has described the habitus as a socialized mental disposition or a "sense pratique" (a field sensibility) that makes actors accept the necessity of the game, recognize and embrace its logic

and take responsibility for its continuation. It is a storeroom of past experiences with the field that structures the agent's perception of what happens in the field, and that allows agents to act in the field and adapt to developments in its game.

Agents in the field decide how they will put their capital – financial means, social connections, knowledge, skills and accreditations - to use in order to reproduce or enlarge it in the course of the game. It is in this connection that Bourdieu (1996) speaks of “*learning strategies*”, the set of deliberations, choices and activities, which families, rather than individuals, pursue over a relatively long time span (cf. Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). In Bourdieu's view, “strategy” is not conceptualized as social action of a subject (agent) posited against an object (a field) and directed at a future state in terms of a project with explicit goals. Rather, through the formation of their habitus, agents are encapsulated in fields and their “feel” for it enables them to anticipate future developments without posing explicit goals (Bourdieu, 1994). Furthermore, families do not decide in purely rational ways, but always within the confines of the dominant logic of the field. In contrast to rational choice theory, Bourdieu conceptualizes a “field-rationality”. The game that some actors may see as serving their best interests, may well disregard those interests and be biased against them. Generally, outsiders will be hard put to access and negotiate long-established fields, certainly where such fields distribute a scarcity of chances at acquiring highly valued forms of capital. The example of asylum seekers shows that some fields may be linked in terms of legitimate access: they have to secure their juridical status in the field of settlement before they may enter the fields of education or the labour market (cf. Engbersen, and Gabriëls, 1995).

The Belgian educational scientist Van Damme (2000) has developed Bourdieu's concept of learning strategies. He stresses the element of field-rationality as the motor behind learning strategies. However, in his view individuals do calculate their investments in education in relation to possible capital gains in more conscious ways. He points out that in more recent theories of rational choice, the term “rational” includes moral, ideological and normative elements. Maximization of economic returns is not the only reason for educational participation, as “human capital theory” has it. People may also look for returns in terms of social and cultural capital for themselves, their families or the community to which they belong, and, last but not least, for a redefinition of their identities (cf. Ghorashi, 2002).

According to Van Damme (2000: 11), “learning strategies and their underlying frames of reference and social logic are passed from one generation to another. Relatively strong and resolute life-choices, often in the context of expanding or narrowing opportunities associated with upward or downward social mobility and changing corresponding ‘horizons for action’, are needed to divert people from these inherited strategies”. This refers to the issue of the stability of learning strategies. Since family strategies adhere to a field logic according to Bourdieu’s theory, they are relatively stable especially where, as in the case of education, it takes a long time before investments in the field pay off.

In response to criticisms with regard to this position (cf. Hodkinson, and Parkes, 1997), Bourdieu (1992a) has stated that habitus is durable but not eternal. Habitus is adjusted when the conditions in which it is embedded cease to exist. The degree of stability of habitus is subject to changing economic, social and cultural conditions. For asylum seekers and refugees this would mean that settlement in the host country brings a shift in field conditions with it. Their habitus, the “feel” for relevant fields that they have developed in their home countries, may no longer correspond with actual field structures in the host country (cf. Archer et al., 2005). Legitimately accessing relevant fields and finding their way will be their first problem (Cohn et al., 2006). Once at the entrance of the fields of education and the labour market, many discover that the capital that they built up in the home countries is devalued in the host country. From Bourdieu’s theory, we would therefore predict, that a change in asylum seekers’ and refugees’ habitus would occur and that they would change their educational careers according to the restrictions and opportunities of the new field and the game played out there. Bourdieu (1992a) has remarked that this transformation may take some time since habitus consists of durable dispositions capable of surviving the social and economic conditions of their emergence. Furthermore, he stated that in times of crisis, characterized by the break up of the convergence between habitus and field structures that existed in the “normal case”, agents may be more prone to calculating costs and benefits of alternative courses of action. Integrating a life course perspective with Bourdieu’s field theory, Hodkinson and Parkes (1997) argue that as a rule habitus develops gradually and incrementally. However, decisions made at so-called “turning points” in the life course, such as the forced displacement and resettlement of refugees, often result in a dramatic change of habitus.

With regard to stability of strategy and habitus Van Damme (2000), like others who argue that the habitus concept ignores the strength of

individualisation processes (Herzberg, 2006), differs from Bourdieu. De-traditionalisation and individualisation, which have eroded the central position of the family as a social unit and stimulated the development of the elective biography, and the increasing salience of biographical discontinuities and life events, all call for the “institutionalisation of reflexivity” with regard to the life course of individuals (Giddens, 1991). This means that it is individuals who (must) use their “biographical skills” (Alheit, 1995) or their “self-referentiality” (Herzberg, 2006) in order to set out, evaluate and redress their (learning) strategies. In a world in which the directive qualities of social structures and cultural traditions are apparently waning and choice options (what to be, whom to be) are expanding, they are on their own (Schwartz, 2004). These developments would produce far more instability in learning strategies and in habitus, than Bourdieu predicts. More importantly, this instability is not so much a product of field-change in Van Damme’s view and that of other authors within the biographical approach, as it is the outcome of conscious calculation on the basis of the deployment of biographical skills.

In comparison to the biographical approach, the field theory would lead one to expect 1. less instability in educational and professional career patterns among asylum seekers and refugees, 2. a strong influence on the (in)stability of such patterns issuing from the opportunity structure of relevant fields in the host country, 3. less evidence of conscious calculation in terms of costs and benefits, and 4. less evidence of individualisation and a stronger influence of family ties.

With the above set of theoretical perspectives and different predictions with regard to the stability and the calculative nature of learning strategies, we analysed 25 interviews with highly educated asylum seekers and refugees.

## METHODS

### Sample

The absence of a publicly accessible, complete and accurate registration of the refugee and asylum seeker population, has made sampling difficult (cf. Hannah, 1999; Neumann et al., 2003; Van den Tillaart et al., 2000). Therefore, we have recruited our respondents through two universities and one institution for higher professional education, and two affiliated access-programmes for refugee students and asylum seekers.

This permitted us to select students who had first-hand experience with the Dutch educational system and a reasonable to good command of the Dutch language as a consequence of entry requirements. To minimize the impact of changing asylum and settlement regulations, we selected students who were in The Netherlands for less than 10 years. Since Dutch educational institutions as a rule do not register the ethnic backgrounds or residence status of their students, student counsellors and course coordinators of the institutions involved have helped us in contacting our respondents. One of the proposed respondents could not be traced and another refused to take part in the research. Overall, we aimed at reaching a diversity of students in terms of gender, age, and home country. Since reflexivity might be expected to increase with level of education, sampling highly educated respondents seemed to make sense in the light of the theoretical perspectives outlined in the foregoing. We have already referred to the policy relevance of the sample.

The sample consisted of 12 women and 13 men, coming from Iran (5), Africa (5: Eritrea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Chad), Iraq (5), former Soviet Union states (5: Russia, Armenia, North Ossetia, Chechnya, Abkhazia), Afghanistan (2), former Yugoslavia, Burma, and Syria. Our respondents decided to flee their home countries for different reasons. Some (10) had to fear for their lives because of their political activities or those of their family members, others escaped from war or ethnic conflict (9). Three respondents came to be reunited with their husbands or remaining family members, one had other reasons to fear for his life and two others refused to disclose the reasons of their flight. Their ages ranged from 18 to 45, and they were living in The Netherlands from one to ten years. At the time of the interviews, ten respondents held a permanent residence permit, six held a temporary residence permit, the application of seven was being processed and the application of two was rejected. Almost all of the respondents were smuggled into the Dutch territory by frontier-runners. They did not know beforehand, where they were going. The Netherlands was not a conscious choice for any of them.

Currently, the largest national groups among refugees in The Netherlands come from former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, the former Soviet Union and Somalia. In our sample African respondents are somewhat over-represented and former Yugoslavian respondents are under-represented. It is estimated that the total number of refugees in 2005 was 133.000. Of these between 20 to 30 per cent are highly educated (Gruijter, 2005). Ours is not a random sample. Reliable figures with

regard to participation of refugees and asylum seekers in higher education in The Netherlands are missing. From research, we know, however, that the overall participation of refugees of age 15 and over in Dutch educational institutions is 30 per cent (Klaver et al., 2005), and that from 45 to 65 per cent of different refugee groups have witnessed devaluation or non-recognition of their diplomas in the course of official assessment procedures (Maagdenberg, 2004). The inference is that the sample consisted of individuals who may well be more than averagely resourceful and persistent. Our respondents were relatively young with an average age of 26.5. This is probably due to the fact that the education of students older than thirty years is not eligible for public funding. The respondents differ from the general population of asylum seekers and refugees in The Netherlands in that they do not (as yet) share in the breakdown pattern characterized by structural unemployment and underutilization of competences. They have been able to successfully withstand considerable pressures issuing from Dutch social and welfare services to get paid work in stead of education, as well as discouraging advice from both fellow-newcomers and Dutch institutions. Given entry level requirements in higher education, their language proficiency is probably above average.

### **Data collection**

Our research is based on actor perspectives of the asylum seekers and refugees (Korac, 2003; Miller et al., 2002; Neumann et al., 2003). Since we wanted to reconstruct learning strategies from the point of view of the respondents, we have made use of qualitative methods. We developed and tested a semi-structured interview-format consisting of 32 questions distributed over six themes: background information (country of origin, length of stay in The Netherlands, residence status, family situation, age), transition from home to host country (occupation in home country, family backgrounds, flight reasons and story, change of goals and self-image), learning trajectories (retraining and language courses, performance, appreciation, perceived differences between education in home and host countries, educational motivations), social support (institutional and personal networks), settlement in The Netherlands (feelings of belonging, satisfaction with language command and with general performance) and future perspectives (expectations about learning and work, future country of settlement). The interviews lasted from one and one-half to two hours, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were used for coding and analysis.

The analysis was done in several steps outlined in the methodology of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This involved coding sections of each transcript under variables. These were derived from the narratives of the respondents at the one hand, and from the conceptual framework outlined on the other hand. After coding the interviews, we have identified similarities and differences with regard to variables across interviews and looked for explanations. Here our analysis was focused by the (different) predictions detailed in our theoretical perspective which should be borne out by the interview material. In the present analysis, we focus on the central variables in the expectations derived from the theoretical perspectives outlined in the above. With regard to “(in)stability of learning strategy” we will pay attention to changes in the respondents’ academic and professional specialization between home and host countries, as well as in their goals and ambitions. “Calculation” is a second variable: in how far do respondents give evidence of reasoning in terms of costs and benefits of participation in educational activities? We will also look at the influence of the family as a social unit in the career choices that the respondents make. A deeper understanding of the social construction of learning strategies of asylum seekers and refugees was our aim, as well as laying a basis for a more productive interface between such strategies and existing fields and institutional players. Given the limitations with regard to the sample, our analysis is directed at exploring rather than testing theoretical predictions.

## RESULTS

Learning strategies of asylum seekers and refugees settling in The Netherlands are generally directed at three main concerns: Getting to know the new host country, its language and its institutions, (re)building professional skills in order to earn one’s living, and, finally, re-assessing one’s identity in the light of an often unsettling transition (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003; Korac, 2003; Timotijevic and Breakwell, 2000). Most of our respondents were engaged in all of these activities. In the following analysis, we will focus on learning and retraining.

### **Habitus: Patterns of (dis)continuity in learning strategies**

Our respondents have different educational backgrounds. At the time of their flight, eleven were engaged in or had just finished secondary education, while the others had backgrounds in higher education. Some of the latter had already started working, some had just finished their studies,

and most had broken off their studies. In their home countries science studies (5), law (3) and medicine (3) were the most frequent subjects while one respondent studied social sciences. In The Netherlands law (7), social sciences (5) and medicine (5) are the main subjects. In some cases, educational careers of respondents had already been aborted or transformed before they fled to The Netherlands. A Burmese female (20) fled to Bangladesh and attended an English secondary school for some years before coming to The Netherlands. An Afghani female (18) was taught at home by her father, a university professor, and her mother, a teacher at the secondary school, when the Taliban banned women from public education. Due to conditions of violence and war, or as a result of an earlier flight to other countries these respondents faced more than one transition or field change in their lives (cf. Gruijter, 2005; Hannah, 1999). In most cases, however, the time of flight coincided with the (forced) ending of studies or careers.

Looking for continuity and discontinuity in the educational careers of the respondents, we have distinguished different patterns in the data. In the *continuity pattern* respondents choose the same academic subjects in The Netherlands as they did in their homelands, irrespective of the loss of status (lower educational level) that this entailed for some of them. For instance, an Iranian female (24) studied pharmacy at university level and continued in dermatology at the level of higher vocational education in The Netherlands hoping to re-enter university pharmacy eventually. An Iraqi male (32) who was an artist and publicist in his home country, running a silk-screen printing business to secure a basic income, worked as an artist and a freelance journalist in The Netherlands. His part-time study in sociology was originally meant to improve his language proficiency, but was gradually geared towards a career in journalism. He reasoned:

You can hardly live off art alone, at least, I could not until now....I have always had a job. But I want to continue in journalism, how shall I say, that's where I want to have a job.

Even though this respondent decided that his knowledge of silk-screen printing technology was too outdated for the Dutch market to constitute a source of income, this complicated mixture of paid and non-paying activities had survived the transition. An Iraqi male (35) was held within the continuity pattern as a result of the advice of a funding body for refugee studies (UAF, the University Assistance Fund) and the insufficiency of his language proficiency at this time.

Q. "Did you have a special goal in mind with your law study in Iraq?"

R. "Yes, to become a barrister, but actually I gave that up. Life is short. I preferred to become a journalist and write about juridical and political issues."

Q. "Was that the reason to study journalism in the Netherlands?"

R. "Because of the language I did not intend to become a journalist here and to pursue my interest. You should be proficient in the language.... For the language I went through training courses. After that I became a client of UAF. They advised me to take up the study of law. But journalism keeps attracting me and I have a good motivation to do that study in Amsterdam in the future. But now I have started law study through the UAF."

This example illustrates, that for some the transition to The Netherlands means that they can transform informal and often repressed intellectual interests and activities into formal educational careers. Here we find a *transformation pattern* expressing a specific type of continuity. A refugee from Turkey may serve as an example. He was politically active in a forbidden organization and studied management for lack of choice until his flight. In The Netherlands, he took up the study of sociology motivated by his interest in politics.

In the *discontinuity pattern* respondents change the subject of their study in The Netherlands. Some could now choose from a wider array of subjects that was not available to them or could not be freely chosen from in their homelands. A choice for a law study of some of the respondents is not only motivated by the flight and asylum experiences. It did not seem a sensible option in their home countries where social institutions including the juridical system were seen as corrupt and "having friends" was more important than having a law degree. The same can be said for a choice of social sciences in a country where no freedom of speech and association exists. Once in the host country, such choices did make sense to the interviewees. For some, the Dutch labour market made a reorientation necessary. An example is an Iranian male who specialized in mining studies and switched to dentistry for lack of employment opportunities in his original subject in The Netherlands. An Iraqi respondent who studied physics to prove to her ambitious father and mother that it could be done by a female, against all traditional gender distributions in the academic field in Iraq, changed eventually to law in The Netherlands. The UAF advised her to pick up her physics studies, but her brother intervened.

For my brother lives here too, and he said, "You didn't want it, the physics study, you never liked it. How can you study for four more

years here, what will you do afterwards? You're just going to spoil your life this way". I thought that he was right, and then I thought, let it go, I don't want it.

The *crystallization pattern* pertains specifically to young students for whom the choice for higher education presented itself for the first time after they had arrived in the host country. Most of these students finished secondary education in The Netherlands.

The majority of refugees in The Netherlands are confronted with restrictions and regulations with regard to education and work which make unemployment or unschooled work a more likely outcome than further education. However, this dominant *breakdown pattern* is not represented among our respondents. This may be due to the fact that we composed our sample from students already enrolled in higher education institutions or access programmes. Significantly, many of the respondents started their educational activities during their stay in the reception camps, juridical and financial restrictions or injunctions notwithstanding.

With regard to the hypotheses of Bourdieu and Van Damme data on the formal continuity and discontinuity patterns in the sample are most relevant. Eleven students can be classified into the crystallization pattern, eight fall in the category of formal continuity and six in the discontinuity pattern. Respondents following the crystallization pattern are predominantly female, while, for obvious reasons, their age is lower than the sample average. Respondents following the continuity and discontinuity patterns converge in being predominantly male and older than the sample average. They do not differ in terms of residence status or ethnic or national backgrounds. While the majority of highly educated refugees in The Netherlands outside the sample is not capable of accessing relevant fields, hence making up the dominant breakdown pattern (Maagdenberg, 2004), the respondents in our sample have succeeded and show, at first sight, a surprising degree of continuity in their choice of specific academic subjects. At a more general level, almost all respondents are determined to participate in higher education.

### **Habitus: (Dis)continuity in goal formulations**

Continuity and discontinuity can be shown in the educational activities of the students, but it can also be demonstrated in the goals that they formulate, at the request of the interviewers, in relation to such

activities. Here the data show that seven respondents did not have study related goal definitions before their flight, mostly as a result of their young age. Thirteen respondents maintained their goals, sometimes accepting a (slightly) different or lower level educational trajectory in the host country. For the majority of these students, the focus on and valuation of a specific discipline and sometimes a profession is in evidence. An Armenian male (24) started his law studies in his home country knowing that he would not be able to realize his legal ambitions in the context of pervasive corruption.

Q. “So you want to continue to study law here as well. But was it your goal to become a barrister or did you have other goals?”

R. “No, in fact my education was my primary goal....There I also wanted to study law, but after graduation I would not have been able to apply law as I should like to. Everything is done with money there, lawyers work differently. You can really defend people here, but there it’s different....If you want to defend someone, many people place themselves above you and say, ‘If you do this, you will really have problems....’”

Q. “So no freedom in this respect? So what did you want to do with your law study, when you knew that you would not be able to work as a barrister?”

R. “I wanted to just study law, like defending people, I have always liked to study law, here as well.”

Q. “And has your goal changed?”

R. “My goal? No, it has not changed, it has become real. In Armenia I could not, but here I can really use my law studies to defend and help people.”

This interview fragment illustrates that goals are maintained and are perceived to have come within the horizon of action in the host country. It also points at the troubled relationship between educational choice and paid professional activity in many of the home countries of our respondents. Thinking about such choices and their outcomes in terms of instrumental strategies and goal achievement is further thwarted by the fact that in a considerable number of cases the choice of a study was made by the family or practically determined by third parties. Thus, education becomes a goal in itself or an activity fitting within status and power strategies of family, village, party, or state.

The importance of graduating from a university or from a high ranking institution has to do with an increased social status of the village and the family. The family is proud when a son goes in the right direction.

Relationships there are different. They are really warm relationships. Not like here in The Netherlands. (Male, Iraq, 35)

Five respondents changed the formulation of their goals in The Netherlands. Sometimes this had to do with economic necessities (earning an income to sustain the family), but it is also due to the disappearance of prevailing restrictions in choice in the home countries.

Ten respondents define goals in terms of supporting or improving living conditions in their home countries or of fellow asylum seekers and refugees. Four of these students have chosen study subjects (for example immigration law, interpreter studies) or developed voluntary activities in congruence with such goals.

My choice for law was, I suppose, influenced by all these asylum application procedures. I think I began to ask myself questions like, “How can it be that someone who has lived here for ten years is being expelled?” (Female, Ossetia, 22)

Six of these “engaged students” were already politically active in their home countries, a common finding in the research literature (cf. Joly, 2002). For many respondents, learning and education figured as crucial ways to keep them from “becoming insane”, as they called it (cf. Bland, 2004). It explains their resolve in starting self-study and dodging official restrictions on learning, and their frequent mention of “concentration” as a critical study condition.

We conclude that there is even more stability in the goals of the students than there is in the educational activities that they undertake. Miller et al. (2002) conclude that refugees lose the goals and the “life projects” towards which they have worked and are in need of developing new life projects. This does not apply to our sample. The question whether this finding is due to limitations of our sample or would also hold for the general population of refugees in The Netherlands deserves further study. We have mapped the possibility of sample effects in the sample section. Additional explanations for the stability of learning strategies and goal formulations of the respondents will be dealt with in the conclusion section.

### **Calculated choices?**

Reconstructing actor perspectives of asylum seekers and refugees through interviews is a methodology at risk of preferring discourses of

self-conscious and individualized motives, analyses, choices and actions. During the interviews, we have indeed been asking what motivated educational activities of the respondents. The decision to do so is justified by the fact that theoretically speaking one could expect the habitus of the interviewees not to be adapted to relevant field structures in The Netherlands. They were facing a “crisis situation” that could transform their habitus in ways that according to Bourdieu (1992a) would leave more room for “rational calculation” than the normal case of gradual socialization. In the analysis of the transcripts the question is in how far respondents do in fact give evidence of reasoning in terms of costs and benefits of participation in educational activities. Answering this question is complicated by the fact that due to the methodology used, the evidence may well be biased toward individualized rational choice and against habitus that “goes without saying” (cf. Gorard et al., 2001). It is also complicated by the fact that our sample is divergent in the sense that most refugees in The Netherlands, irrespective of their level of schooling, become unemployed or accept low-skilled jobs. If anything, our sample may be over-representing strong-willed and cunning refugees. Indeed, four interviews show some strong examples of calculative discourse.

Refugees who learn the language and refrain from working the first years perform much better than those who start working immediately. Some people may have 12 or 14 diplomas, say in informatics. But they don't add up to much, since, first, your diploma has a lesser value, and, second, you have missed so much in terms of study and experience. You can only access low positions that way, jobs without career perspective. Unless you start studying later on, you will stay the same. So yes, it is always my advice to start studying the language straight away. Since once you have the diploma and have a good command of the language, you'll be able to compete. (Male, Iraq, 32)

My first option is to continue my studies (European law) illegally, but the crucial question is whether the university can give me an official diploma as an illegal alien. Option two is to let myself be sent back to Russia, apply for the Lithuanian nationality, just like my father, and finish my studies in The Netherlands as an international exchange student. The disadvantages are the risks of being conscripted in the Russian army, the financial costs, the loss of fluency in the Dutch language and the delay in my study. (Male, Russia, 26)

Two students from Russia figured as the main “calculating subjects”, by choosing academic subjects that would, in their view, prove valuable wherever the decision in their asylum procedures would bring them.

However, the majority of the interviews do not manifest the above type of calculative reasoning, backgrounds in higher education notwithstanding. There is no question asked whether the benefits of higher education are worth all the effort that the respondents put in it so eagerly. The devaluation of their educational achievements and their professional experience in the host country is generally accepted in a light-hearted way. It is hardly taken as a ground for argument or bargaining, nor for changing career plans. It is clear from the narratives of the interviewees, that they face profound uncertainty with regard to their legal status and their future situation. Only ten respondents held permanent residence permits. At the same time, they are keenly aware of their lack of control over their situation. Asked how he saw his future, a 22 year old male from Chechnya answered, "I really do not have an answer to that question. If all goes well with my application procedure...."

The respondents mention the pressure of Dutch institutions, voluntary workers and fellow asylum seekers in the reception camps to lower their ambitions, to accept or to be "realistic" about their predicament, and to let go. For most inhabitants of reception camps, there is no relevant field in sight for years on end. While they are shut off from society, their habitus with regard to work and education gradually erodes. However, our respondents have persevered, found ways to master the language and accessed higher education informally and illegally, if it could not be done otherwise. Almost all of them demonstrate a strong belief in education. Investing in it is inherently valuable. Any other activity is being subordinated to it, even if it would bring quick gains.

We wanted to learn Dutch as fast as possible. We just want to go on with our studies and get an education. I think it is an obligation for me...no in fact not an obligation, but I have to...I have to, that's my conviction...I have to be highly educated. That's what counts in my life, education. (Male, Armenia, 24)

Many respondents (13) have backgrounds in higher education in their home countries, they have fathers (14), and sometimes mothers (6), who were highly qualified professionals themselves. Almost all of the parents made the importance of education and their expectations in this field very clear to their children.

On a general level, this valuation of higher education is continued in the transition to the host country, notwithstanding the fact that accessing the educational field could not be undertaken legitimately for the initial

years. It manifests itself in the narratives of the respondents as a more or less autonomous will-power, a series of initiatives and activities directed at something obvious to those involved. In a number of cases, this orientation was also in existence in the home country, even when possibilities of realizing their ambitions were absent or disappearing in the face of war, political repression, or corruption. In fact, as we have argued, for many respondents linking personal goals in terms of paid work or meaningful social activity to study in instrumental ways is discouraged in home countries, where study choice is not a personal affair and graduation often does mean very little in terms of access to markets and professions.

### Individuals and families

In the above section, the role of families was mentioned briefly. Of the respondents eighteen were separated from their parents, who had remained in the home country, were resettled elsewhere, had disappeared or had died. Parents living in The Netherlands were mentioned as the most important advisors with regard to educational decisions. Many referred to their parents in motivating their choice for (re-)entering higher education and their specific choice of academic subject. The influence of physically absent but mentally present parents was evident irrespective of whether respondents continued or changed their academic subjects. Often the respondents expressed feelings of guilt and moral obligations toward their parents.

R. "At this moment, my studies are the most important thing in my life."

Q. "Can you explain why you mention your studies and not your husband, for instance?"

R. "Yes, my husband too. But my parents would like me to study very much. And I want to do something to give them some peace. My mother says that she can sit a bit easier when she knows that I am safe here and that I study. If not, she cannot be at ease. Therefore I want to finish my studies for her." (Female, Iran, 24)

Fathers featured as role models more often than mothers. This took on different forms. Some refugees wanted to make a (frustrated) educational or professional dream of a parent come true.

Q. "You said you want to study law. Was that what you wanted in Syria already?"

R. "Yes, my father has studied law himself for three years."

Q. "Did he finish his studies?"

R. "No, unfortunately not. After three years he married and got children, of course, and then jobs here and there. He has tried though. With family and children it was very hard. But he wants me to finish my studies very much." (Female, Syria, 28)

Others wanted to conform to the ambitions that parents held for them. For almost all, this meant to reach for the highest possible education. Two respondents mentioned their scruples in deviating from their parents wishes in their specific choice of subject. An Iraqi female (38), who originally studied physics, chose to study law after much pondering. An Afghani male (26) had followed the wishes of his parents and studied medicine with a view to acquiring a high social status. Once in The Netherlands, he changed to criminology. The inspiration was his father, who was a police inspector in Kabul. The case of a Congolese refugee (22) was different. Her father was a physician, her mother a nurse in her home country, her first choice was medicine. However since she was not selected in the random access procedure in The Netherlands, she studied economics and wanted to specialize in health economics.

Overall, the narratives of the respondents manifest the existence of close emotional ties to often absent or even deceased parents, who strongly influence life choices of asylum seekers and refugees (cf. Alheit, 2003). Only in seven interviews, parents were not mentioned at all as (important) agents in major decisions with regard to education and work. These respondents were somewhat older than the sample average, their parents had relative low levels of schooling and six of them were males.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

With regard to the *first* hypothesis, our analysis of the data has revealed that both in their general habitus, their learning strategies pertaining to the choice of academic subjects and their goal formulations, the majority of the asylum seekers and refugees in the sample show an unexpected stability. Their general habitus with regard to the significance of higher education as a "horizon for action" (Hodkinson and Parkes, 1997) for their lives has remained stable through the transition, irrespective of the discouraging nature of their information about the Dutch educational field (cf. Cohn et al., 2006). The respondents are apparently capable of reading the possibilities of a career in higher education into the new field structures. With regard to the *second* hypothesis, we found evidence that

field structures, in the sense of both labour market restrictions and opportunities in the host country, indeed facilitated discontinuities in academic careers. It was also established that where social security and labour market institutions put pressure on our respondents to prefer paid work over education, educational institutions tended to stimulate them to build on their initial academic choice as much as possible. Concerning the *third* hypothesis, we found that, notwithstanding our probing for motives and goals (Gorard et al., 2001), there was not much evidence of calculative discourse in the narratives of the respondents, neither with regard to the prospects of higher education as compared to work, nor with regard to choices between specific academic subjects. These results appear to contradict the predictions of Van Damme and others, who foresaw an increase in individual biographical reflexivity and much more instability in (educational) choices in the life course. It also deviates from the theory of Hodgkinson and Parkes (1997) that decisions made at “turning points” in the life course result in drastic change in habitus. Only a minority of the respondents changed their academic subject, in most cases as a result of differences in access to and in the provision of academic subjects or in the market value of professions between home and host country, or in other words in response to field changes. What is more, the transition did not cast a shadow of a doubt over the inherent value of higher education for someone’s life. With regard to the *fourth* hypothesis, the results show that for the respondents, the family has retained its formative role in the game of retraining. Individualisation in the sense of the fragmentation of families may have taken dramatic physical forms in the case of asylum seekers and refugees, mentally the respondents operated at least as much as family members as perhaps in their homelands.

The data suggest some additional explanations for the stability in the educational habitus of the respondents. In the face of restricted access to the educational field in The Netherlands, this habitus was “powered” by a set of conditions. First of all, and in accordance with Bourdieu, the influence of parental ties and expectations, and, more generally, felt obligations towards those left behind was significant according to the narratives of the respondents (cf. Zhou, 1997), especially females among them and those with highly educated parents. Second, in many cases the respondents have not learned to think of study choice and professional careers in terms of strategies leading to personal goals in their home countries, since either their study choice was determined by third parties or impersonal arrangements, or graduation did not warrant access to relevant markets or positions. Higher education becomes the honourable

thing to do within the determinate social context. Third, the combined impact of forced inertia and isolation of the reception camp and the memories of traumatic events that haunt many asylum seekers and refugees seems considerable. According to many authors, these conditions induce victimization and medicalization (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003; Timotijevic and Breakwell, 2000). For many asylum seekers it is easy to become entrapped in the field of asylum applications and reception camps spending most of their capital in endless juridical battles. However, trauma is also known to stimulate a quest for consistency, to hold on to what one knows, and to regain control over one's life (cf. Omeri, et al., 2004). Seen from this perspective, the respondents do use their skills but not so much in order to become "entrepreneurs of self" (Herzberg, 2006) or out of acts of "biographicity" imagining and enacting "unlived lives" (Alheit, 1995), but in order to survive. In this context, it must be stressed that, before their flight, many of the interviewees had a tough training in adaptation to uncertain circumstances, improvisation and perseverance, not only when it comes to education. This capital is used to make reproduction of the educational habitus possible. Crossley (2003) rightly points out that in crisis situations habitus is not replaced by reflexivity and calculation so much as it is transformed by the re-emergence of habits from past experiences. Fourth, knowing that a decision with regard to their legal status usually takes a very long time makes calculation with regard to pros and cons of career choices seem somewhat futile to most respondents. They are unsure about their future. For many, thinking about professional careers seems a step too far. The choice of an academic subject seems more important to them. Academic career choices and a general educational habitus are also reinforced by negative experiences of respondents who have tried their luck at the Dutch labour market. Fifth, given the fact that most of the respondents have already invested in a specific educational career and do not feel qualified to estimate the risks involved in a career change in the host country, they are inclined to continue their educational pattern (cf. Kupferberg, 1998). In many cases, they are advised to do so by Dutch educational institutions. Sixth, the physicians among the respondents demonstrate a great persistence on taking up their profession as soon as possible. The strength of their professional identity is important here. For them being a physician is not just a job, it is an inseparable part of their identity and their existence (Cohn et al., 2006).

The above conclusions may lead one to infer that Bourdieu's theory, and more specifically his concepts of habitus and learning strategy, with

their connotations of stability over time and incremental change, has turned out to be the more useful frame of reference for interpretation of the data. According to the research literature (cf. Kalsbeek and Bleichrodt, 2004; Klaver et al., 2005; Ree and Afework, 2002; Warmerdam and Van den Tillaart, 2002), Bourdieu's field theory seems to offer a valid explanation for the dominant breakdown pattern in the careers of the mass of asylum seekers and refugees outside the sample as well. These findings seem to fit with Bourdieu's conception, and underline the lack of adaptation of the habitus, cultural and social capital of refugees on the one hand, and the exigencies and opportunity structures of relevant fields in the host country.

However, the continuity of habitus in the case of the majority of the respondents does not fit well with Bourdieu's prediction of discontinuity in learning strategy as a result of change in the structure and functioning of fields between home and host country. We have offered a short overview of additional explanations that could account for this unexpected persistence of habitus and constitute a further development of Bourdieu's theory. Furthermore, "rational calculation" that Bourdieu would allow for in "crisis situations" was not found in the data. The analysis has focused the attention on an important blank spot in Bourdieu's theory (cf. Crossley, 2003): What exactly happens to (the stability of) habitus in times of crisis, what is stronger, the stability of habitus which has developed over time or the forces exerted by a change in field structures and how long do processes of habitus change take? As we have seen, Bourdieu is not very specific about this type of crisis situations. One could argue that the sampling method used excludes the possibility of drawing definitive conclusions. However, it is our opinion that these questions cannot be answered by resorting to random sampling of asylum seekers and refugees, if at all possible in actual practice. Research should delve deeper into the complex relations between transition, habitus, field structures and career choices, and it should follow the development of asylum seekers and refugees from the moment they enter the host country.

For the sake of clarity, we concentrated our research on the transition from one educational field to another. This presupposes that habitus shifts develop between home and host country. However, our interviews indicated that some of the respondents witnessed more than one such transition in their life histories before coming to The Netherlands. Future research should allow for multiple shifts at transition points before and after the actual flight. More importantly, such transitions

need not be made exclusively between educational fields, for instance when education stops to be accessible in the home country. Most refugees outside the sample do not appear to make a transition between educational fields. They move from education in the home country to the juridical field of asylum application and reception in the host country, more often than not to end up in the field of social security. Most of our respondents used their capital in the reception centres in order to access higher education as soon as possible, even if this meant breaking the rules. It may well be that the trajectories through different (types of) fields in home and host countries, the transitions made, and the ways in which these trajectories are “habitually” lived, contribute to the current watershed between those who succeed in the new home country, and those who don’t. Future research should focus on multiple transitions and different trajectories through fields in home and host countries. Only in this way, we can hope to unravel the dynamics of continuity and change in the habitus and careers of asylum seekers and refugees. And only in this way can we hope to improve resettlement practices and the field structures that hinder their integration in the host society.

In more practical ways, our research points at the dangers of long asylum procedures and isolating reception practices, and at restrictions on education and work experience for asylum seekers during this period. Such procedures and restrictions educate for helplessness and unemployment by prolonging insecurity and dependence and by absorbing the capital of asylum seekers in juridical battles. It also points at the existence of strong educational ambitions, and at the stability of a general educational habitus, and of specific educational career choices and goals among highly educated asylum seekers and refugees. All of these may serve as strongly embedded, biographically meaningful starting points for career counselling, educational investment and educational careers of those involved. Our research shows that many representatives of Dutch institutions and voluntary organizations, either in order to reduce investments in the careers of highly educated refugees as far as possible or out of protective and paternalistic attitudes, advise them to temper their ambitions, to break with their past, avoid what may be difficult and go for what comes quick and easy. If The Netherlands wish to benefit from the capital of highly educated refugees, it should take their ambitions serious and make an end to its institutionalized approach of those involved as an undifferentiated category of social and financial risk, as a burden to the welfare state.

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