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# Chapter 7

## Resistance Is Useless! (And So Are Resilience and Reworking): Migrants in the Finnish Labour Market



Quivine Ndomo and Nathan Lillie

### 7.1 Introduction

Integration theory regards host countries as novel environments into which migrants immerse themselves and adapt to a new culture and labour market. In Finland, integration is discussed in terms of labour market success (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). Finding work tends to occur in the ‘secondary’ labour market as migrants have difficulty accessing the more secure jobs of the ‘primary’ labour market. In other words, they face a segmented labour market. Segmented labour markets are split into non-competing segments sustained by institutional barriers (Leontaridi, 1998). Doeringer and Piore (1971) argue that labour markets tend to dualise into two separate and virtually independent primary and secondary sectors, in which different labour market structures prevail. This segmentation ‘allows’ the labour market to treat its participants with an uneven hand, according different opportunities to otherwise comparable people and thus entrenching exclusive labour market practices that impact marginal groups first (Ryan, 1981). The Finnish labour market, as far as Finnish natives are concerned, is characterised by a relatively low level of dualisation and precarity, largely due to wage compression and a high level of collective agreement coverage. This equality and security, however, does not apply to the same extent to specific sectors, firms, and positions where migrants tend to find work (Danaj et al., 2018).

Occupational discrimination is common in Finland (Liebkind et al., 2016), despite overall wage compression in lower status positions due to their being unionised and well regulated. Empirical evidence shows that occupational integration of migrants in Finland is hierarchised by nationality, resulting in the

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disproportionate concentration of migrants in the less desirable secondary sector of the labour market, especially in less skilled jobs (Ahmad, 2015; Heikkilä, 2005). This is true even of highly skilled immigrants to Finland, who often end up working in unskilled or low skilled jobs despite their qualifications (Heikkilä, 2005; Jaakkola, 2000). This segmentation is based on ethnicity and national origin, which structures who is perceived as an appropriate candidate for a skilled job (Chang, 2014). Dual labour market theorists further predict that social reproduction within class systems enforces relative immobility between the two sectors (Doeringer & Piore, 1971, 180). Integration for migrants and refugees in Finland is for many a dual challenge – initially of entering the labour market at all and then crossing over from one occupation to an occupation more appropriate for that individual’s capabilities and aspirations.

Roughly 458,000 foreign language speakers<sup>1</sup> lived in Finland at the end of 2021, about 8 per cent of Finland’s population (OSF, 2022). The migrant and refugee population in Finland consists of third-country nationals from all around the globe. The largest migrant groups come from Russia, Ukraine, and India. Other countries in the top 20 include Iraq, Vietnam, Somalia, Syria, and Nigeria. Asylum seekers differ slightly, with Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and Russia as the top five origin countries up to 2021 (Finnish Immigration Services, 2022). In 2022, most asylum seekers and temporary protection applicants are Ukrainian citizens. Including Ukrainian migrations in 2022, the largest age group for both arriving migrants and refugees is 18–34 years, followed by 35–64 (ibid.). These are prime labour market activity years, cementing the prominence of work and labour market training as an integration pathway for both groups in Finland. Recent migrations from Ukraine has the potential to alter the gender dynamics of the migrant population in Finland, which might in turn affect the migrant division of labour, and is therefore a phenomenon to watch in future research.

In Finland there is a strong government-supported integration policy. Overall, integration services are well-funded and perceived as being of high quality (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). Civil society organisations also offer integration services (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2021). The assumption behind integration is to change the migrant’s profile and skills to better fit Finnish society and the local labour market; in general, when the migrant’s career ambitions and perceived needs of Finnish society conflict, it is the migrant who must compromise. The structure of segmentation pushes migrants toward the secondary labour market, while integration policies encourage reskilling into low- or mid-skilled occupations that hire migrants; for many migrants this thwarts their ambitions. Consequently, migrant agency, as an innate ability to survive (resilience), reconfigure (reworking), or seek redress (resistance) in oppressive situations is crucial to migrant integration, playing different roles with consequences in different integration contexts (Berntsen, 2016; Katz, 2004). This adaptation has a personal price for the migrant however: survival at

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<sup>1</sup>In Finland, this is a good proxy for foreign-born.

the cost of limiting personal ambitions. This chapter looks at how labour market structures force migrants to refocus and limit career goals.

Drawing on Katz's (2004) disaggregated conceptualisation of agency as resilience, reworking, and resistance, this chapter explores how agency manifests in the labour market integration of migrants and refugees to illuminate the counterintuitive role that migrant agency can play in reinforcing exclusive integration practices in the Finnish labour market. We do not mean to imply that migrant agency is necessarily a negative force in migrant integration; it is of course essential to adapting to a new context. We do, however, want to point out that in some cases, structural factors ensure migrants are caught in a rigged game that they cannot win. In such cases, emphasis on agency shifts attention away from fixing the structural factors that prevent migrants from succeeding.

We use the concept of disaggregated agency to highlight the nuanced responses of a biographically diverse group of migrants to integration challenges. We analyse biographical narratives of 11 migrants, four of whom are refugees, living in Finland, who are employed or actively seeking employment. Our interviewees engage most in resilience and reworking, with very rare instances of individual indirect acts of resistance consistent with prior studies (Berntsen, 2016; Katz, 2004). We also find that the availability or non-availability of integration support affects the forms of migrant agency used, with implications for integration programme planning. Finally, linking agency and unequal labour market power relations, the chapter shows how migrants' overreliance on resilience and reworking – and rarity of resistance – favours the continuation of discriminative labour market practices such as statistical discrimination, labour exploitation, and labour market segmentation.

## 7.2 Theoretical Background: Unpacking Labour Market Integration in Finland and Migrant Agency

Meta-analysis of literature on migrant labour market integration in Finland identifies key integration barriers as structural and cultural discrimination; local language incompetence; and poor coordination of integration policies (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019, 251; Petry & Sommaribas, 2018; Martin & Prokkola, 2017; OECD, 2017). Migrant job seekers in Finland face a market segmented by skill requirements and discrimination (Ahmad, 2015, 2020; Valtonen, 2001). In attempting to integrate and find work, the emphasis of policy and of migrant individual agency is on resolving the first issue – skill requirements – while neglecting the second – discrimination. Our analysis of the biographies suggests that the two are intertwined; 'skills and qualifications' present an incontestably legitimate and necessary way to sort job applicants. However, sometimes the amorphous and subjective nature of skill acquisition and recognition, as well as roles for which certain people are deemed suitable and others not, ensure that skill recognition in practice is not free of discrimination (Esses et al., 2014).

High skill requirements for jobs in Finland's primary sector (Heikkilä, 2005) – coupled with a Finnish Nordic labour market model that excludes the possibility of low-wage/low-productivity work through the generous social safety net, high union density, and centralised collective wage bargaining – sustain high and stable wage levels (Ho & Shirono, 2015, 17–25). The primary labour market consists of well-regulated jobs with a career perspective. Special internal labour market rules follow the human resource requirements of the dominant firms in the primary job market instead of open market mechanisms. Access to these primary market jobs is regulated by gatekeepers with a high level of discretion about whom to hire, which among other things, makes hiring discrimination possible (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). Finnish labour market institutions tend to level out wage differences between the primary and secondary sectors and ensure that the secondary sector is relatively smaller than in other countries; nonetheless, migrants tend to be pushed toward secondary sector jobs. The role of discrimination in sorting workers by ethnicity in the Finnish job market is well documented. Two recent studies based on fictitious responses to real job applications using Finnish and non-Finnish names to determine whether an interview would be offered to applicants with identical qualifications found that employers preferred candidates with Finnish surnames, while ethnic candidates were further ranked according to perceived cultural closeness (Ahmad, 2020; Koskela, 2019).

Active labour market policies play a strong supportive role in migrants' labour market integration, but also restricts and channels migrants in sorting their available options. In Finland, the state delivers labour market integration services through local and municipal employment offices (TE-offices). Official integration services are provided free of charge to migrants registered as unemployed job seekers within 3 years of arrival in Finland. The official integration programme is a package of services that includes an initial assessment, individual integration plan, Finnish and Swedish language courses, and labour market skills training. Integration training runs for up to 3 or 5 years (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). Asylum seekers and migrants with a temporary residential status such as students and seasonal workers do not have access to official integration services even when most eventually join the labour market (Ndomo, 2020; Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019; Maury, 2017). Nonetheless, despite the top-down policy assumption that migrants are subjects to '*be integrated*', our analysis suggests that the central actor is the migrant, who strategises around labour market opportunities presented by the labour market and by state integration services.

Generally, agency is the capability to exert some degree of control over the conditions and circumstances of one's life, exploit available opportunities, and open new possibilities (Barnes, 2000; Sewell, 1992). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have argued that a nuanced take on agency focusing on its discrete components allows for a better understanding of agency-structure interplay, coining the term disaggregated agency. In their seminal work Emirbayer and Mische (1998) focus on the temporal embeddedness of agency, disaggregating three temporal orientations: the iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative (*ibid.*, 971). However, in this chapter we apply Cindi Katz's framework of 'disaggregated agency', which is

based on a three-step typology of material social responses to perceived oppressive and unequal power relations (Katz, 2004). In Katz, the three broad forms of social action – resilience, reworking, and resistance – are treated as different manifestations of human agency. Katz’s theory of disaggregated agency links concrete social practices to varying degrees of consciousness of prevailing life conditions. Thus, every agentic response derives from the actor’s level of awareness of their life conditions and the power relations that shape their life. These range from limited consciousness for resilience, on one hand, and oppositional counterhegemonic consciousness for resistance, on the other, while reworking falls in the middle (*ibid.*, 250).

This framework underscores the possibility for differential responses by individuals exposed to similar structural contexts of hegemonic power relations e.g. migrants in a host country labour market. Katz’s theory also spotlights the diverse outcomes of agentic social action, which include survival (resilience), reconfiguration (reworking), and subversion (resistance) (2004, 242). Katz defines resilience as a determination to survive within oppressive conditions, enforced through a myriad of tactics on a daily basis. Datta et al. (2007) identify resilience tactics among migrants, such as working two jobs in low wage occupations in the UK. Reworking practices are strategies for reconfiguring the self and rerouting resources to favour one’s position and make living conditions more comfortable, albeit within the confines of oppressive power relations. Lastly, resistance describes strongly oppositional practices whose goal is to re-imagine and reconstruct unequal and oppressive power relations (Katz, 2004).

We assert that while agency is analytically useful, there is a danger in the normative tendency of migration research to celebrate ‘granting’ agency to migrant workers. Agency does not, in itself, contest or remove unequal power relations and can, as our analysis shows, just as well serve to reinforce them. Classical migration theories focus on rationality in decision-making as an exercise of agency (Massey, 1999). Neoclassical labour migration theories expand this view by including the collective role of the family in the decision-making process (Abrego, 2014), while critical migration theories develop the idea of ‘constrained agency’ mediated by social networks and structure (Hellman, 2008). The idea that agency also allows resilience, and resistance in the face of unequal, oppressive, and contingent labour market relations further helps us understand migrants’ coping strategies and survival tactics – understood though as acts of ‘*resistance*’ (see; Datta et al., 2007; Rydzik & Anitha, 2020). Finally, there is the idea of collective resistance that offers the possibility to change economic and social relations and redefine migrants’ structural position in the labour market through collective action (Paret & Gleeson, 2016). Agency is in itself value-neutral; Katz’s resilience, reworking, and resistance are as likely to buttress, mediate, or mitigate systems of unequal power relations as to challenge them (Berntsen, 2016). We regard migrant agency as both an enabler and a barrier to the labour market integration processes of biographically-diverse migrant groups to the growing field of research on migrant agency and migrant integration.

## 7.3 Methodology

### 7.3.1 Data and Methods

The chapter is based on 11 biographical narrative accounts of four refugees and seven other migrants who arrived in Finland between 2010 and 2015 and were still living in Finland at the time of the interview. All participants are actively involved with the Finnish labour market as employed workers, unemployed job seekers, or vocational trainees with intermittent short-term employment. The interviews were conducted between January and May 2020 and as a result, our data does not reflect COVID related impacts on migrant labour. The study was part of a larger multidimensional empirical research project on the integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum applicants in European labour markets implemented between January 2018 and July 2021. The project includes six separate but interrelated qualitative research studies, involving key migration stakeholders in Finland. All six studies have focused on the labour market integration of migrants, refugees, and asylum applicants in Finland. Each study approaches the topic from a different standpoint, namely: labour market structure, legal, policy, civil society, social partners, and migrants' perspective. The analysis and findings of this chapter are grounded in this larger body of data and multi-sectoral analysis of migrant labour market integration in Finland.

Seven of the interviewees were men and four were women. Interview respondents were of Ghanaian, Nigerian, Russian, Somali, Syrian, and Indian nationalities, satisfactorily covering the main third-country national migrant groups living in Finland. The youngest had migrated to Finland at the age of 17 and the oldest at 50. All participants had at least secondary education, and seven held university-level degrees. Respondents were recruited in Helsinki, the Finnish capital, and Jyväskylä, a small city in central Finland, through selective sampling and snowball techniques. Participant recruitment, interviews, and data storage and management followed the ethical guidelines of the University of Jyväskylä, and the ethical board of the SIRIUS project. QDA Miner qualitative data analysis software was used to organise, code, and thematically categorise data. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants.

The biographical research approach (BRA) as a form of social enquiry foregrounds social action and the role of human agency in social life, thus allowing a reading into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, and the inner and outer worlds (Merrill & West, 2009, 17). In this research, BRA allowed combining 'agency' and 'biography' as key theoretical and analytical constructs in the study of human lives. The main interest of the interviews were the critical events (*turning points*) in the migrant's life course that influenced current decisions made (*epiphanies*) regarding work and labour market integration in general (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We thematically analysed critical life-changing events tied to labour market entry and work life using the three dimensions of agency. This research is grounded in a theoretical frame that uses a combination of the

**Table 7.1** Profiles of interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Country of origin	Year of migration
Ahmad	36	Male	Syria	2015
Elvis	40	Male	Ghana	2013
Fred	35	Male	India	2013
Gordon	30	Male	Nigeria	2014
Ismail	22	Male	Somali	2015
Jeff	37	Male	Ghana	2014
Judith	56	Female	Russia	2014
Kadar	28	Male	Somali	2015
Marina	35	Female	Russia	2010
Melina	45	Female	Russia	2015
Rahaf	28	Female	Syria	2015

biographical interpretive concepts of life-changing events (turning points), embedded life lessons (epiphanies), and disaggregated agency as interpretive lenses.

In the dialogical process of research, a researcher is positioned by their biography, and that position can enable or inhibit the research through power dynamics (England, 1994, 248). Our research design carefully considered both positionality and power relations especially in data collection and reflexivity in analysis. Therefore, a team of five conducted the research: the authors and three research assistants of migrant backgrounds, recruited from a higher education integration programme (INTEGRA) at the University of Jyväskylä. This combination of ‘experienced knowledge’ and ‘expert knowledge’ was seen as useful especially for interpretation and for intersubjective interaction in data collection (Denzin, 1998, 325) (Table 7.1).

### 7.3.2 *Integration Actors in Focus*

Besides participants’ biographical narratives, this research is grounded in a large body of empirical data that includes other central actors shaping the integration process as resources that cut across the micro, meso, and macro dimensions of migrant integration. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on a narrow set of actors including the individual migrants, immediate family, friends and ethnic community members, educational and training institutions, and state-level policies or integration support mechanisms. Availability, access, and utility of these resources differ across participants.

At the micro level, personal resilience applies to all 11 participants. However, participants rely on family, friends, and ethnic community members differentially based on whether that resource exists at all and whether that resource is present in Finland or absent. Where participants do not refer to family, friends, or ethnic communities as a resource, the category is excluded. At the meso level, we focus on education and training institutions due to their central role in integration of



migrants in Finland, including provision of labour market-targeted skills and a link between migrants and employers or the labour market at large. Participants experience this resource differently based largely on structural variations such as type of institution, access to institution, and specific institutional migrant integration practices. As at the interview time, four participants attended research universities and another four attend vocational training institutes. Vocational training institutes provide more industry-targeted skills as well as links to labour market as compared to research universities. Lastly, at the macro level, we focus on the state-sponsored integration programme and nationwide skill profiling through allocation of resources for these programmes. Table 7.2 summarises the contribution of policies, educational programmes, and personal relationships to each participant's integration experience.

### **7.3.3 *Structure of the Paper***

The rest of the chapter is structured as follows. The next section presents a three-part data analysis, illuminating how migrant agency manifests in the labour market integration processes of 11 migrants (including four refugees). The analysis explores key life events and lessons that shape participants' insertion in the Finnish labour market within the first 10 years. Analysis is divided into three phases, each using one dimension of agency as the analytical lens. Phase 1 addresses seeking and finding the first job using resilience as the analytical lens. Phase 2 looks at attempts towards work and career mobility through the analytical lens of reworking. Phase 3 explores participants' future career plans through the analytical lens of resistance. The final section presents a summary of research findings and ends the chapter with concluding remarks.

## **7.4 Migrants in the Finnish Job Market**

The time of initial entry into a host country labour market typically coincides with multiple inescapable changes in the lives of migrants. Changes in legal status, family composition, social networks, and other changes in the life course affect migrants' labour market integration experience and trajectory directly or indirectly. Further, migrants must also contend with the effects of the new labour market structures on their job search and career progression. In Finland, this includes contending with labour market segmentation practices that steer migrants toward secondary market jobs, while discouraging and obstructing primary market job ambitions (cf. Ahmad, 2015). For instance, eight of 11 participants initially entered the Finnish labour market through low status occupations as drivers, postal workers, and caterers. Considering participants' biographical diversity, we ask how participants cope with unequal and oppressive labour market practices and how such practices impact

**Table 7.2** Typology of actors and factors

Research participants	Personal/friends/family (micro)	Educational/ raining institutions (meso)	State policies/support (macro)
Ahmad	Personal resilience (+)/friends (+).	Targeted skill training (+) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (+)
Elvis	Personal resilience (+)/friends (-)/wife & children (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Fred	Personal resilience(+)/friends (-)/wife & child (+)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Gordon	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (-)/ friends (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (+)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Ismail	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (-)/ friends (-)	Targeted skill training (+) Link to job market (+)	Official integration Programme (+)
Jeff	Personal resilience (+)/friends (-)/wife (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (-). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Judith	Personal resilience (+)/friends (+)/husband (-)		Official integration Programme (+). Skill profiling mechanism (+)
Kadar	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (-)/ friends (+)	Targeted skill training (+) Link to job market (+)	Official integration Programme (+)
Marina	Personal resilience (+)/husband & children (-)		Official integration Programme (+). Skill profiling mechanism (+)
Melina	Personal resilience (+)/husband (-)	Targeted skill training (-) Link to job market (-)	Official integration Programme (+). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)
Rahaf	Personal resilience (+)/close ethnic community (+)/friends (+)/husband & children (+)		Official integration Programme (+). Lack of skills profiling mechanism (-)

their labour market insertion. Drawing on Katz (2004), we explore the variety of material social practices participants draw on to cope with entering and working in an unequal, segmented labour market whilst adjusting to other changes related to migration.

### **7.4.1 Phase 1: Resilience – Finding and Keeping the First Job**

The first job is crucial to a migrant's labour market integration trajectory, especially in a segmented labour market. Early research has shown that finding a first job presents a bigger challenge for women and non-EU migrants in EU labour markets compared to maintaining a job (Ouali & Rea, 1999). Participants experienced seeking and executing the first job in Finland very differently, mainly because of biographical differences and also individual legal status and the consequential access or lack of access to official integration services. Our analysis does not show that the integration outcomes of those who participated in the official integration programme was better than those who did not. However, the official integration programs clearly patterned participants' degree of reliance on resilience tactics and reworking strategies as explored in this phase and Phase 2 of the data analysis. Age differences, civil status, level of education, legal status, prior work experience, and career advancement influenced participants' experience with the first job in Finland. Nonetheless, the first jobs of both participant groups relied on official integration services, while those integrating individually were disproportionately concentrated in archetypical migrant work in elementary occupations and the service industry. Specifically, eight of 11 participants secured their first job in Finland in elementary occupations including driving and delivering goods, distributing newspapers, and assisting in food preparation. Further, for a majority of eight participants, the first job engendered downward career and social mobility, exacerbated by labour market segmentation practices. An emergent pattern of response by the group of eight to the first job was to '*accept and rationalise*', while individual participants adopted more nuanced coping tactics such as instrumental rationalisation and dual-frame referencing.

***Instrumental Rationalisation: Accepting 'the Bad First Job'*** For eight participants, the first job in Finland was degrading, challenging, and unsustainable. It also served as the first turning point event of participants' labour market integration journey, which began with job seeking. Based on their first job, participants immediately learnt a key lesson about migrant labour market integration in Finland: that there are specific jobs migrants can access and they must accept that. As a result, participants constructed the reality of '*the bad first job*' as the inevitable first step towards realising their migration objective. Participants employed diverse instrumental reasons to aid acceptance of '*the bad first job*'. We classify them into two categories: one, practical (economic) reasons; and, two, strategic reasons tied to individual migration and integration agenda. On practical economic reasons, participants without access to welfare support (for instance, international students) explained that the first job was only a way to make ends meet. Others with access to welfare support accepted jobs for reasons such as compliance with the individual integration plan, which is enforced partly by the unemployment office and is therefore tied to welfare support administration.

I did a mini job – I don't know what to call it – distributing adverts and newspapers. That was my first job in Finland. . . I needed money. It's always money, right? I needed money for upkeep and survival, for food and stuff like that. So, I needed a job and that was the easiest job you could find at that time. *Gordon (migrant)*

Participants accepted the 'the bad first job' as a means to an end and a 'normal' step in the integration process. However, we argue that the inevitability of these jobs was partly socially constructed by participants who sometimes specifically sought these types of jobs or accepted them as a manoeuvre tactic in response to experienced labour market integration challenges. Acceptance of 'the bad first job' is seen as 'epiphanic' because the decision is preceded by concrete lived experiences through which participants understood the operations of the Finnish labour market, as well as their realistic integration potential within Finland. Accepting 'the bad first job' is a compromise resulting from weighting alternative realities, guided by the logic of instrumental rationalisation. Still, instrumental rationalisation processes vary among participants according to biographical characteristics such as legal status and age. Following the instrumental rationalisation logic, we argue that accepting the first job is a tactic that affords participants the resources of money, time, networks, and awareness/consciousness. When combined these resources can enable participants to cognitively validate and accept their present experiences in a bad job and also provide a springboard for some to move from the first job into a different, preferably better, job. The following excerpt tracks the initial agentic social response process of a single participant in the context of migrant labour market insertion.

*Start:* 'Coming to Finland, I knew that I had good capabilities, a good CV and my international certifications – PMP and CISA which was quite a force. I also read from *'this is Finland'* and other websites that many companies in Finland operate in English as well and many people in Finland spoke English. So, I was quite confident that I could continue practicing in Finland as I did in Ghana. So, I got my tools and came to Finland expecting to continue from where I stopped in Ghana'.

*Turning point:* 'I went around visiting companies looking for contracts and could not find a job. Because most of the companies mentioned the language limitation as the reason for not employing me, I decided to stop trying to find employment and instead find a professional development unit (PDU) to join to keep my certifications valid. So, I contacted my university, and they did not have any project to involve me in. I also contacted some IT companies LINKI and NAVA and explained that I was just looking for a chance to keep using my CISA'.

*Epiphany:* 'Then after walking around for a while without finding the work I wanted, also not getting a PDU, I decided to take any work available. Trying to take care of my family with small kids and trying to avoid depleting my savings, I decided to take on any job I could get here. I started distributing papers. Whilst doing this, I was also thinking about trying to develop as good a transcript and as good skill as possible so that by chance I finish my masters and the Finnish companies see my school performance and the skills I have developed, they could reconsider and give me something to do'. *Elvis (migrant)*

***Dual Frame of Reference: Accepting 'the Bad First Job'*** As has been seen elsewhere (Waldinger & Lichter, 2003; Piore, 1979), some of our participants employed a dual frame of reference as a rationalisation technique. They compared wages, working conditions, precarity, and formal institutional labour relations and their implementation in Finland to those in their country of origin. Several

participants made general references to work in Finland and at the country of origin in their narratives; however, only two evaluated work in Finland as generally better than work at the country of origin with regard to ‘the bad first job’. Our findings show that age and past work experience influenced who applied the dual frame of reference and not the relative socio-economic status of the compared countries, underscoring the emphasis of the biographical approach on agency’s role in social action. Of all participants, eight are from Global South countries, yet only two notably young participants without established careers prior to migration employed the dual frame of reference tactically to accept ‘the bad first job’.

For instance, Kadar works in the Finnish restaurant sector, where his own experience, as well as prior research, document informal market practices and segmentation, especially in reference to migrant workers. Kadar’s dual frame rationalisation is notably general.

Working in [Somalia] Africa is different, there; your employer pays you what he wants. Sometimes you work for about 18 hours and are paid only 150 dollars a month. Working in Finland is different; it is good to work here. They pay good salaries. If everything is okay, working here is really good. *Kadar (refugee)*

#### **7.4.2 Phase 2: Reworking for Career and Work Mobility**

Consciousness of our daily condition and the underlying power relations develops over time and variably among people (Katz, 2004). Individuals facing similar problems can develop varying degrees of consciousness and engage in varying responses as well. Levels of consciousness, which can range from limited recognition of oppressive power relations to critical oppositional consciousness, determine individuals’ practical responses. Reworking as an agentic social act among our research participants is epiphanic since the awareness that a particular condition limits integration derives from experience, as does knowledge of suitable strategies to manoeuvre such barriers. The need to rework is learnt from experience. After searching, finding, and doing their first jobs, participants understood the Finnish labour market to a degree, especially the barriers and enablers to integration. Here, differences in understanding can be attributed partly to the involvement of the employment office in the integration processes of some participants.

‘The bad first job’ experience cultivated a critical consciousness among participants and motivated them to adjust their (power) position as workers in Finland. Reworking involves making one’s life liveable with reasonable comfort despite oppressive and unequal underlying power relations. As such, reworking strategies often involve reforming one’s own capacities to leverage prevailing conditions rather than changing the ‘system’. Participants’ growing and urgent need to escape difficult and unsustainable jobs and downward mobility marked a key turning point. In response, they designed and executed strategies to improve their status as prospective employees for various fields of expertise. Influenced by biographical

differences, participants employed reworking strategies in three focal areas: reskilling, skill repackaging, and skill showcasing. Our analysis finds that participants engaged in reworking to reclaim control of their migration and integration trajectories after a perceived threat during the initial labour market insertion. In their reworking strategies, a dichotomy emerges between the practices of the group receiving official integration assistance and the group receiving no assistance, with the former focusing more on reworking for horizontal mobility, while the latter sought upward cross-sector mobility.

***Reskilling: Targeted Education and Education*** Skill training is a key reworking strategy for upward career mobility among our participants. This finding is consistent with migration policy discourses that highlight the significance of skills in labour market integration in Finland (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019) and corroborates Heikkilä's (2005) account of the highly educated Finnish workforce. However, concrete differences emerge in the ways that participants with access to official integration services and those who are individually integrating engage in reskilling. Individually-integrating participants operate freely within and across fields of expertise to reinforce their skillsets, constrained only by legal status limitations and individual capabilities. On the other hand, the TE office guides the skill training choices of those participating in the official integration programme. For young refugees undergoing secondary and higher education in Finland such as Rahaf, language barriers limit career, vocational training, and tertiary education options further as Rahaf explains below.

The labour office must work out an integrated settlement plan for the immigrant from the moment they enter Finland to include language proficiency level, study area etc. As at now, they have a plan, but it is too simple. If a person wants to work in their profession, they have no place because they [TE office] decide the opportunities that a migrant can access. Even the Finnish language courses we attend cannot qualify the immigrant to enter the university or to complete their dream courses. *Rahaf (refugee)*

Participants engaged robust reworking strategies through skill training to manoeuvre the barriers between the primary and secondary Finnish labour markets. One such strategy is training specifically in high-demand skills. Using this method, a migrant first studies the labour market skill demands and the hiring patterns of specific industries, then trains in the identified skills. Such training is often supplementary to previous studies – or entirely different from initial field of expertise. According to two of our participants, training is pursued outside conventional academic institutions because of a perceived mismatch between academic institutions' curricula vis à vis labour market skill needs. Skill training organised by companies match industrial demands, and are better, shorter, and less bureaucratic.

Jeff is the poster child of this reworking strategy. Failure to secure a job in his area of expertise in Finland based on experience and training in Ghana and a master's degree in IT from Finland marked a turning point. An epiphany followed. Finnish academia is at odds with Finnish industry and academic institutions do not produce the skills employers demand, resulting in poor employment outcomes. Thus, to move from a newspaper delivery job to a data engineer job, Jeff designed his own

integration strategy, which spanned 2 years and was self-funded and thus implemented alongside menial jobs for material support. He modelled his skill training around Finnish IT companies' skill portfolios and hiring trends. When relevant courses were not available in Finland, he pursued international professional certification programmes online at his own cost. Today, after more than 5 years, Jeff finally made the transition to a primary labour market job as a data engineer for an IT company in Finland. However, the success and the 'ease' of Jeff's implementation of this reworking model is misleading as it glosses over issues central to its success, such as continuous learning opportunities specific to Finland.

...at the end of the day, it all depends on your personal preparation for the job. Preparing yourself for the technology that whichever company you are targeting uses at the time. So, the thing is that probably while still studying you have to start preparing yourself for the processes that the companies go through, the things that they produce, instead of depending on school because the sad thing is that you get your tuition from school, but they don't teach practical things that the companies' need. . .There is a huge gap between what is taught in the university and what the companies are actually practicing'. Jeff (migrant)

Paradoxically, while migrants such as Jeff who do not receive official integration assistance may manage significant leaps across sectors, refugees like Kadar, a young Somali, are limited by the official integration programme and can apply only moderate strategies for horizontal work mobility. The integration practices and systems of the TE office and secondary educational and vocational institutions in Finland restrain Kadar's integration pathways (cf. Bontenbal & Lillie, 2019). He follows an integration plan, which is based on an assessment of his academic abilities, language, and labour market skill needs. As part of the integration plan, Kadar completed a six-month internship as a food preparation assistant at a restaurant and has worked at the same restaurant for another year. At work, Kadar faces discrimination and worker exploitation, marking a turning point in his integration journey. However, Kadar's room for reskilling manoeuvre differs from Jeff's. Kadar must rework within the scope of his individual integration plan, developed at the beginning of his integration. Already placed in the restaurant sector by his integration plan, his goal is to transition from working in immigrant-owned restaurants with poor working conditions to Finnish-owned restaurants, which require professional qualification obtained in Finland as he explains below. Thus training to be a chef, Kadar's strategy is to be able to work in a restaurant of his own choosing, not limited by his formal qualifications and the associated politics of recognition.

I have worked in many foreigner-owned restaurants and in pizza delivery services. They still call me for more work, but I am tired of working long hours with little payments. I have worked for long hours, which Kela cannot know because it is hidden in opening and closing time. I have worked 12 or 13 hours to earn an insignificant amount of salary. You get very tired; you cannot do anything; you cannot manage to go to school the next morning. But in Finnish firm you are required to work for 8 hours. Now I am waiting to finish my school, then I find a good job with a good salary. *Kadar (refugee)*

***Skill Repackaging: Certification/Authorisation*** As a reworking strategy, certification focuses on redirecting and rebranding the resources that an individual already has in line with the normative expectations of the host country labour market. It

includes following formal procedures to acquire recognised qualification in the host country in a specific field of practice. It also includes authorising foreign qualifications. Certification/authorisation provides a way to work around statistical discrimination in recruitment. In Finland, certification procedures that involve taking tests in the Finnish language present an obstacle for migrants seeking to have qualifications officialised in specific fields. Of all 11 participants, two directly engaged in the certification process, while a third considered undertaking the process. Judith completed the recognition process of her teaching qualifications obtained in Russia and should be able to use the qualifications for future job-seeking. Like Judith, Marina attempted to authorise her foreign professional qualification for use in Finland. Foreigners qualified as doctors outside the EU/EEA must authorise their foreign qualifications through a procedure outlined by the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira). Conditions for licensing include a combination of internship, clinical practice, Finnish language proficiency, and a licensing exam in Finnish.

After completing and passing the Finnish language course of the TE office, Marina began work practice at a local hospital as the first step towards her licensing. Insufficient discipline-specific Finnish proficiency, coupled with family responsibilities, led to a catastrophic internship experience and inability to take the licensing exam. Unlike Judith, Marina did not succeed in becoming a licenced and practicing doctor in Finland.

It was too difficult to combine work, study, and home. The children were quite small, three- and seven-year-olds. I tried to concentrate on the exam so that after passing it I could have my diploma confirmed but didn't feel confident. *Marina (migrant)*

Although her first reworking attempt – to have her foreign certificates recognised – was unsuccessful, Marina pursued an additional reworking strategy successfully. Trained in a high-demand skill in Finland, Marina is one of three participants who did not undergo ‘the first bad job’ experience in the secondary sector. The failed internship experience became the turning point in her integration journey. Her experience taught her that she simply could not practice as a doctor in Finland. Therefore, considering the magnitude of the language and commitment demands of the medical licensing procedure, Marina pursued an alternative reworking path: re-skilling (epiphany). A career demotion to a practical nursing position allowed her to practice in her field of interest with significantly lower language demands and simultaneously manage her family responsibilities. The strategy of self-demotion allows Marina to redirect her resources as a healthcare professional, with manageable conditions both at work and at home.

I decided to work as a nurse, as I cannot imagine how one can work as a doctor not knowing the language on a good level, not even good, on an excellent level. A patient can lose his trust if his doctor's speech is a kind of illogical. Then I was too afraid when working in hospital to miss some important information and make a mistake. It happened a few times that I thought I understood something well, but I didn't, as a result I gave wrong information and all such cases made me nervous and non-confident, so I decided to try myself in the sphere of caring. *Marina (migrant)*



***Skill Showcasing*** The bulk of the reworking strategies of participants seeking to change or modify fields of expertise (such as Marina) and those seeking to acquire professional qualifications for the first time (such as Kadar) consist of learning, training, or authorisation exams – or all. However, three participants seeking only the chance to continue practicing in their professional fields of expertise based on prior education and work experience used reworking strategies to showcase their skills and capabilities. Finnish employers, like employers around the globe, use internships and short fixed-term employment contracts to access, evaluate, and recruit skilled workers. However, migrants’ access to such opportunities in Finland is limited. The epiphany of the need to creatively show Finnish employers their skills and capabilities derived from the three participants’ futile experiences of seeking a first job in their fields of expertise.

To gain initial access to Finnish employers in their respective fields, Elvis, Fred, and Gordon sought to improve the visibility of their skills and capabilities as experts to Finnish employers. Central to their strategies was negotiation, where the migrant takes on an onerous, and sometimes financially costly, initiative to ensure that potential employers see their skills, unobstructed by structural or cultural barriers. In 2014, a leading IT consultancy in Finland declined to hire Elvis as an intern because of poor Finnish language skills. A few months later, the company offered him the same opportunity on different terms: do the same work, without pay, as a master’s thesis project in English. Seeing an opportunity to demonstrate his capabilities to a potential future employer, Elvis accepted the job.

Fred was frustrated with his precarious employment consisting of a series of two-month contracts and sought employment security when he signed up for a hackathon in his field of expertise. It presented an opportunity to show his skills to target employers or investors. Although he won the hackathon, Fred was unable to reach an employment or sale agreement with an interested company in a process that was complicated by legal status limitations and potentially exploitative unequal power relations of industry negotiations, patents, and copyrights. Lastly, Gordon, a Nigerian international student in Finland, developed a portfolio of freelance online work completed for clients based in Western countries such as the US, referencing that in job applications and at interviews to showcase his skills and abilities.

Before my current job, I had worked as freelance software developer online, with clients from the US. So that was the work experience which I used to get jobs, even though I had no real physical workplace experience. I did the freelance work on the side during the time I did the newspaper delivery work because... I wasn’t satisfied with where I was then, so I kept looking and searching for work. *Gordon (migrant)*

By accepting unpaid work for a target employer, developing a prototype in the presence of potential employers at a hackathon, and building a portfolio through freelance work online, participants directly and indirectly attempted to reconfigure their labour market conditions by showcasing their skills and capabilities to overcome statistical discrimination. However, there is also a strong potential for such strategies to result in exploitation by employers who find they can get job seekers to do useful work without having to pay them for it. This underscores the self-

reinforcing nature of precariousness and vulnerability among migrants in the labour market and the potential of migrant agency to reinforce unequal and exploitative labour relations in an environment where the employer has a strong power advantage.

Determining the success of reworking among our research participants is challenging especially because the common reworking strategy involves reskilling, which spans long and variable periods among individuals. Participants may also alter and revise reworking strategies mid-process, making it difficult to demarcate the beginning and end of reworking or tangibly evaluate such processes. However, below, we analyse Elvis's encounter with reworking further, as it illustrates plausible progression from reworking to resistance on the grounds of re-imagining and reconstructing one's migration trajectory through outmigration.

### ***7.4.3 Phase 3: Resistance – Where Do Migrants Draw the Line?***

Our interviewees' stories emphasise the need to endure and adapt, but for some comes a revelation that the sacrifices they make do not necessarily lead anywhere they want to go; a first bad job is one thing, but a lifetime of them another. Realisation of the structural factors inhibiting labour market success arrives slowly because of the normative seductiveness of the ideology of adaptation and resilience. One interviewee used the parable of the toad in boiling water to explain how the system itself undermines resistance since by the time the migrant realises the situation, it is too late, as all his or her energy has gone into adapting and being resilient.

Once upon a time lived a toad with a special yet tricky ability to adapt to life threatening change. When in danger, the toad could transform its outer skin into a hard shell for protection while buying time for escape. However, to use the special ability effectively, the toad needed full understanding of the situation and incisive decision-making. One hot afternoon, the toad leapt into a pond to cool off; except the pond was not a pond, but a pot half filled with water for someone's afternoon tea. The pot was put on fire and soon the toad noticed that the pond was heating up. Aware of its special ability, the toad decided to wait it out while assessing the situation, hoping that the pond would cool down again soon. However, the toad's special ability is only an emergency survival mechanism that is unsustainable for long periods. To turn its skin into a hard shell and sustain it that way, the toad uses up a lot of its energy, and if it sustains the mechanism for a long time, it eventually runs out of energy, becomes unable to jump out of the pond into safety, or sustain the hard-shell protection. After about seven minutes, the toad started feeling the heat from the water meaning that it could no longer sustain the hard shell. Paradoxically, the moment the toad realised that the only solution was to jump out of the pond, was also the time it did not have any energy left in it. In the end, the toad died inside the pot. But what killed the toad? *Elvis (migrant)*

The toad parable makes clear why resistance is the rarest of the three material social practices of agency (Katz, 2004, 251); our findings also reflect this. For the purpose

of this analysis, we define resistance narrowly as strategic acts of individual migrants aimed at reconstructing or re-imagining the migrant's world, potential, and possibilities. Our definition waters down the counterhegemonic and strong oppositional elements of conventional resistance as practiced in industrial relations to reflect the limitations within which participants operate, without entirely excluding their potential for resistance. To understand how certain acts by migrants and refugees qualify as resistance, we begin by demarcating the additional boundaries within which migrants operate in the labour market and how those configure their potential for acts of resistance.

Industrial relations overemphasise the role of unions and organised class-based resistance to migrants (Penninx & Roosblad, 2000). Union membership and the protection it offers through workplace regulation are important to migrants' ability to resist exploitive conditions, but collective organised resistance of migrants *as migrant workers* is completely absent from our data – and almost unknown in the Finnish context. Finnish unions, which are almost entirely staffed and run by Finns, dominate the space of organised workplace resistance, channelling it in a class- or profession-based way, as defined by their Finnish staff and members (Baglioni et al., 2020). In any case, most of our interviewees' grievances were about not getting the jobs they wanted in the first place. Unions recognise the problem that migrants are often under-employed, but structurally do not see themselves as positioned to address this issue (Baglioni et al., 2020). A cleaner's trade union, for example, can represent a migrant cleaner to receive his fair salary as a cleaner, but has no standing to fight for his fair chance to be hired as a computer programmer. In the Finnish context, unlike in many countries, the former problem is less acute for most migrants (admittedly this is because of the omnipresent union organisation), while the latter problem is experienced to a greater or lesser degree by every one of our interviewees.

Nine participants were either unemployed or in short-term precarious employment in sectors outside their areas of expertise, which also undermined the extent of their organisation through trade unions. Similar to Berntsen (2016), we find that individual migrants can, and do, engage in resistance, albeit rarely and in muted variations. Drawing on the evolution of Elvis's reworking trajectory and Rahaf's oppositional stance on acculturation, we illustrate how migrants mount individual opposition against hegemonic labour market recruitment and employer practices.

***Outmigration or Staying: Acting on Own Terms?*** Focused on leveraging his professional capabilities, skills, and potential as an expert in information systems, Elvis constantly searched for employment that matched his qualifications with limited success. In 2014, Elvis had a major epiphanic turning point experience that would later shape his critical stance on migrant labour market integration in Finland and his decision to seek outward migration. Elvis recognised the internship opportunity mentioned earlier as an unequal and exploitive powerplay by the company, but thinking he could reroute circumstances in his favour, nonetheless accepted the offer and completed the assignment. Five years later, however, Elvis's employment trajectory still falls short of his expectations, triggering the following revelation: the Finnish labour market operates on an underlying structure of unequal exclusive

power relations between Finnish employers and institutions, on the one hand, and ethnic migrants, on the other. Thus, in others' footsteps, Elvis has decided to join a growing group of highly skilled migrants leaving Finland because of lack of professional opportunities. Prior research shows a growing trend of European brain drain through outmigration by highly educated persons (Panagiotakopoulos, 2020). Although migrating out of a host country may not directly change the existing unequal labour market power relations, it represents the strongest oppositional statement a migrant can make against the backdrop of a 'staying' tendency. Further, reference to acts of previous actors implies the element of 'a movement' and its accumulative potential to influence direct and large-scale change in the future.

I want to complete my PhD this year and move on. My first choice would be to have a post doc position outside Finland in an English-speaking country since, first, I think the language and, two, the perception about migrants, or I think – my ability to deliver or be in a skilled job e.g., at a manager level or a mid-management position won't happen here. So, I would rather look for places where I have seen black people in managerial positions in consultancies. Because then I know that I could have a levelled ground to be what I want to be. Another reason why I want to move away from Finland is that I have seen friends with families, with children here. Children born to migrants here do not get to live to be what they want to be. It's either you do nursing or some vocation, which you do not even get to practice. So, as a father, I would not want to limit the options available to my kids. *Elvis (migrant)*

Rahaf's case of resistance against acculturation is similarly subtle, showing only the potential to affect the object of resistance indirectly at a future time. At present, Rahaf is undergoing the official integration programme's language training prior to vocational training, while previously she worked briefly as an Arabic teacher. Although her labour market experience is scarce, she gleans from the integration experiences of her husband and peers in skill training and employment that her future labour market integration prospects are dubious. She understands that refugees in Finland tend to work in the secondary sector as cleaners and chefs and train in limited vocational skill areas, guided by integration officials into specific occupations. Further, public discourse, and past studies (Ahmad, 2015, 2020) have shown that ethnicity influences migrant recruitment and employability in Finland, where potential employers negatively evaluate significantly distant cultural groups such as Rahaf's. Although conscious of this reality, Rahaf strongly rejects the suggestion to change her name to a Finnish-sounding one to improve her employability.

Many people advised us to change our names or some of our culture because our names are strange and that makes employers to not accept us. But no, we will not change and it's not only us...Is it reasonable to change my name in order to get a job when in my country I had a job that was better than good?...We may live here all our lives and the fact that our children will be raised here, we want to teach them a little from our culture, and during their living here, they will certainly learn from the Finnish culture. *Rahaf (refugee)*

Our analysis classifies this practice of social reproduction as resistance because it indirectly challenges a system that encourages discriminative employer practices based on ethnicity. Her stance indirectly opposes discrimination in the Finnish labour market. Although individually implemented, it has the potential for collective

impact. Both the anticipated and declared acts of the two participants show that although limited by their contingent existence, narrow set of rights, and precarious labour market position, migrants can and do engage in acts of resistance – albeit indirect, accumulative, and only as variations of normatively-defined resistance. As the parable about the toad makes clear, the reason why epiphanies resulting in resistance occur rarely, and after long experience, is the myth of possibilities for advancement held out by the idea of labour market integration through adaptability and resilience.

## 7.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter aimed at one goal; to problematise theorisation of the role of human agency in migration and migrant integration processes. To do this, the chapter focused on a specific case, unpacking how agency manifests in the labour market integration of 11 migrants (including four refugees) currently living in Finland and actively engaging the Finnish labour market as employed workers or unemployed job seekers. Theoretically, the chapter drew on a theory of agency as social action and used a dual framework combining agency and biography as drivers of integration as social action. The analysis used both thematic analysis and narrative analysis to look for alternative and counter narratives of agency and migrant integration. The analysis classified participants' integration into three phases – resilience, reworking, and resistance – based on both the dominant material social practice employed and the temporal phase of the integration process.

The key argument made, based on analysis, is that migrant agency can play a counterintuitive role in reinforcing exclusive integration practices in the Finnish labour market. Our analysis supports this argument by showing scenarios where overreliance on agency allows a shift of attention away from the structural factors that prevent migrants from succeeding in the labour market. For instance, we show that migrants draw most on restorative material social practices of resilience and not oppositional and disruptive acts of resistance. All participants engaged in acts of resilience such as accepting '*the bad first job*'; most reworked their circumstances through reskilling, for example, and at least two engaged in indirect, individual acts of resistance. This disaggregation of agentic social action allows us to show the link between agency and unequal power relations and make clear the implicit limitations of agency in challenging structurally-rooted barriers to labour integration. Reflecting on the nature of migrant agency, and on how agency allows migrants to adapt to the labour market of Finland, the chapter shows the dangers of reifying agency. Overemphasis obscures shortcomings of Finnish labour market practices and official integration services by assigning migrants responsibility for their own integration, which they only have limited ability to influence. Furthermore, in exercising their resilience and reworking strategies, migrants reinforce their own exclusion and precarity by indirectly reinforcing discriminatory labour market practices and structures.

A key sub-finding concerns how structure can mediate the function of migrant agency in the integration process. The chapter finds that the availability or non-availability of integration support affects the level of agency drawn on – for example, resilience, reworking, or resistance – and breaks down the implications for integration programme planning. The material social responses of the group participating in the official integration programme were bounded by its practices and discourses, making those acts final rather than instrumental. Conversely, non-participants who engaged instrumentally (in terms of means rather than ends) and freely, were limited only by individual capabilities. The latter group's strategies diverged from official integration discourse, for instance on reskilling and the importance of Finnish language skills. The dichotomy underscores three things: first, the significance of biography in migrant integration; second, the need to (re)-evaluate the match between migrants' integration objectives and official integration programmes; and third, the need to align the integration opportunities and paths of both groups.

Migrant 'agency' is increasingly put forward to emphasise the migrants' own role in shaping their own mobility and integration process. This helps us understand their ability to find their way through the dangers and barriers put in their way and avoid seeing them solely as passive victims of forces beyond their control. On the other hand, there is a danger in celebrating the presumed (and observed) migrant characteristics of adapting to and tolerating difficult conditions. We argue that as in the parable of the toad and the boiling water, the 'heating water' sector is where you will find most employed third-country nationals or where most will have their first job. The 'safe exterior of the pot' represents the other sector where natives tend to be employed and to which migrants aspire to escape. The danger is that they become used to the hot water. Accepting the need to be adaptive and tolerate difficult and unfair conditions is perhaps the only viable strategy for individual migrants, but this comes at a high cost to the individual migrant. Accepting a 'bad first job' is often a necessary and useful step in labour market integration, but even with this experience, the barriers segregating the Finnish labour market are high, and there is a danger of getting used to poor conditions of the secondary market – i.e., to stay in the heating water too long.

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