

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*Research*  
**How Work Helps Refugees Thrive**  
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## RESEARCH

“What COVID-19 did was threaten places of social inclusion, and not just in health-care organizations,” Langley says. “Thinking about where our society’s spaces of social inclusion are, and how they are and can be maintained, is really important for the maintenance of a democratic society.” ■

April L. Wright, Alan D. Meyer, Trish Reay, and Jonathan Staggs, “Maintaining Places of Social Inclusion: Ebola and the Emergency Department,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* vol. 66, no. 1, 2021, pp. 42-85.

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## How Work Helps Refugees Thrive

BY DANIELA BLEI

**S**tarting with an executive order in February, President Joe Biden has pledged to rebuild the 41-year-old US Refugee Admissions Program after the Trump administration gutted it. With increasing numbers of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States, advocates will likely focus once again on facilitating their integration and well-being. The challenges of adapting to a new culture, language, and way of life are often exacerbated in a society that stigmatizes and discriminates against refugees for purportedly taking away jobs and funding from citizens.

A new study by John Schaubroeck and Ann C. Peng, both professors of management at the University of Missouri’s Robert J. Trulaske, Sr. College of Business; Dong Pei, a doctoral candidate in the same

department; and Ozgur Demirtas of Kayseri University in Turkey, examines what it takes for refugees to thrive in their host societies. Drawing on survey data collected from 389 Syrian refugees at work sites in an unnamed country “at the nexus of the Asian and European continents” and translated from English into Arabic and back into English to ensure accuracy, the authors looked at social identity in the workplace and its profound psychological effects on the process of transitioning into a host country’s society.

“Workplaces are some of the most important sites of socialization,” Betina Szkudlarek, a professor of management at the University of Sydney Business School, says. “For marginalized communities such as refugees, work could be the first place where they feel they belong again.”

The authors uncovered a key factor associated with successful refugee adaptation: high levels of organizational identification, or “overlap between one’s personal identity and one’s social identity as a member of an organization,” which includes productive relationships with coworkers, most of them host country nationals. When refugees experienced a strong sense of belonging at work, their organization became “a platform of positive beliefs and emotions,” serving as a bridge between “their identity as a refugee to that of a host society member,” the study explains.

Alongside higher levels of organizational identification, “perceived insider status,” or

the perception of being treated as an insider, promoted greater initiative at work and increased engagement in activities and institutions outside work, such as schools, sports, and mosques—what the researchers call “community embeddedness.” The authors used supervisor reports to track whether an individual took personal initiative to go beyond the job’s minimum expectations and measured organizational identification and perceived insider status in questionnaires administered over a two-month period.

In research literature on refugee resettlement, scholars and advocates have established the many ways in which simply having a job helps create opportunities and mitigate challenges during the process of adapting to a host country society. “In our case,” John Schaubroeck says, “we’re drawing on a separate literature about organizational identification to show that if you form a high-quality relationship with the organization in which you work, there are psychological implications.” Schaubroeck and his coauthors cite research on transitional identities that shows how prisoners in the United States had better outcomes after becoming employed with a business or organization before their release. “The extent to which these individuals had a high-quality relationship, which is reflected in their organizational identification, made their confidence in reentering society much higher,” Schaubroeck says.

Highlighting the importance of the organization’s “diversity

climate,” which refers to attitudes and beliefs about whether employees of all social categories, including refugees, are treated fairly and with respect and are not discriminated against, the study makes clear that the work of building a high-quality relationship with an organization hardly belongs only to refugees. It depends on an inclusive workplace.

“We expected that insider status is quite strongly associated with organizational identification but that the relationship would be much weaker if the diversity climate is not favorable,” Schaubroeck says. Levels of stigmatization in the broader host country society also affect the salience of one’s identity as a refugee, the authors found, and “the extent to which they proactively contribute to the organization and establish connections to the community.”

Their research shows how personal affirmations at work carry over into home life in ways that can facilitate refugee adaptation. Greater social involvement with host country nationals, through work initiative and community embeddedness, is a clear sign of success. “The fact that organizational identification can translate into refugees’ engagement with their wider community stresses how important inclusive workplaces are, not only for employee well-being or the bottom line, but for our societies more broadly,” Szkudlarek says. ■

John M. Schaubroeck, Ozgur Demirtas, Ann Chunyan Peng, and Dong Pei. “I Am Affirmed, but Are ‘We’? Social Identity Processes Influencing Refugees’ Work Initiative and Community Embeddedness,” *Academy of Management Journal*, February 21, 2021.