Daring to aspire: theorising aspirations in contexts of displacement and highly constrained mobility

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ABSTRACT

Binary distinctions between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants' continue to prevail in humanitarian discourse, with asylum policies heavily focusing on refugees' vulnerabilities and reduced choices. By addressing the paradox between vulnerability and agency embedded in the international protection regime, this article aims to lay the foundations for reconceptualising aspirations in contexts of displacement and highly constrained mobility. First, we analyse how the current asylum regime selectively encourages certain aspirations among refugees and delegitimises others which do not fit the image of the hopeless refugee deserving assistance. Then, we pursue three new analytical avenues in adding nuance to previous versions of the aspiration–capability framework. First, we discuss the importance of aspirations to stay in contexts of displacement and suggest that aspirations to stay and to migrate should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Second, drawing on psychological studies, we highlight that aspirations can be an emotional resource even in contexts where their realisation seems to be or certainly is unreachable. Lastly, we propose looking at the political dimensions of individual and collective aspirations to understand how displaced people can strive to induce social and political change despite the structural constraints they face.

Introduction

All forms of migration require agency and face different constraints to varying degrees. However, the understanding of the role of human agency in contexts of displacement is still limited and indeed biased within the current politicised context. Binary distinctions between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants' endure in humanitarian discourse,

with recent international agreements – such as the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees 2018 – being heavily focused on refugees' vulnerabilities and their reduced available options rather than on their agency. In many places around the world, policies and public discourses are based on the idea that refugees are 'hopeless victims' and that they should aspire to no more than simply staying alive. Current protection policies are consequently aimed at reducing the vulnerability of the displaced, but rarely allow refugees to pursue their own aspirations – one of the most evident manifestations of agency.

Yet, empirical research in the last decade has clearly illustrated the importance of acknowledging aspirations in seeking to better grasp how displaced people experience their own situations, their relationships with their surrounding environments and how they plan their own futures and those of their communities (Ali 2022; Aru 2021; Etzold and Fechter 2022; Khosravi 2010; Malkki 1996; Womersley 2020). We thus aim here to lay the theoretical foundations for talking about aspirations in contexts of displacement and highly constrained mobility. By adding nuance to the aspiration–capability framework (Carling 2002; Carling and Schewel 2018; de Haas 2003, 2014, 2021), we discuss possible ways to recognise and theorise 'refugees as aspiring subjects' as well as the structural limitations they face. We illustrate how aspirations result from the capacity to imagine better alternatives to the present. They drive individuals to improve their own life conditions as well as those of their families and communities. By exploring how refugees dare to aspire despite significant constraints, we seek not to romanticise their struggles but rather to deconstruct the political discourses and refugee policies that deny 'real refugees' the capacity to look ahead.

We aim herewith at overcoming the impasse between safeguarding the need to protect asylum seekers by highlighting the violent structural contexts which they experience and the need to account for their agency (Faist 2018; Krause and Schmidt 2020; Kohlenberger 2022; Belloni 2019). On the one hand, the way displacement is governed regionally and globally demands researchers recognise the dehumanising nature of conflicts, acute crises, violent border regimes, immigration processes and asylum policies. It is both politically and ethically viable to show that displaced people are 'simply trying to survive'. On the other hand, it is also an ethical responsibility and a sociological exigence to account for their agency, aspirations and resistance (see also Brigden 2018; Mainwaring 2019; Stierl and Dadusc 2022; Belloni 2019). Balancing between these two positions – safeguarding the basis for protecting asylum seekers and recognising the importance of accounting for their agency – may require scholars to: (i) critically engage with policies that frame certain aspirations as *legitimate* and others as *illegitimate*; (ii) add nuance to the current version of the aspiration–capability framework by considering the importance of aspirations to stay within the shifting circumstances of displaced people; and (iii) analyse the key role of aspirations as an emotional resource to cope with trauma at the individual level and to make claims at the collective one. In so doing, we strive not to analytically separate out displacement contexts from broader migration theory but rather to highlight both their specificities and what they mean for migration theory and social theory at large.

This mirrors the growing recognition among researchers that the binary distinction between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration is an artificial one, with migration instead happening along a continuum between these two poles (Schewel 2021; Erdal and

Oeppen 2018). Scholars have criticised legal definitions of 'refugees' for being too narrow (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Jacobsen and Landau 2003) or too policy-dependent (Bakewell 2008). Hence we work outside the legal definition of 'the refugee' to overcome the stereotype of displacement being a pre-determined act of movement wherein agency plays no role; doing so helps embrace the movements of those who do not fit in the conventional description of 'the refugee', too. Instead, we talk of 'highly constrained (im)mobility'. This term resonates with the definition of 'distress migration' advanced by De Haas (2021:, 27), but also differs from it in referring to the aforementioned continuum of voluntary and involuntary mobility and immobility in contexts of structural violence. Moreover, the focus on mobility (Salazar 2019) – rather than migration – allows us to analyse how geographic movement is related to social and existential forms of mobility and immobility that continuously shift over time and along migration trajectories (Tošić and Lems 2019).

We thus analyse the aspirations of those who have been displaced internally or internationally due to violent conflict, persecution, natural or man-made disasters and expulsive migration regimes. Their immobile counterparts are considered, too – that it to say, those who stay home. We include those who have migrated and who do not have the option to re-embed themselves in a given place for a variety of reasons, ones mostly related to the current structure of asylum, visa and migration regimes. This includes those who are 'stuck' – or who feel so from a socio-economic, political and existential point of view – as scholars have commonly referred to them in the last decade (Brekke and Brochmann 2015; Wyss 2019). It also encompasses those who are forced to keep moving between states while their socio-economic and legal marginality persists (Hatziprokopiou et al. 2021). Certain kinds of forced mobility – eviction, deportation, expulsion, enslavement – no doubt form part of the spectrum of highly constrained mobility, but we exclude them from our analysis as the space for agency is almost zero in these cases.

We define 'agency' per Emirbayer and Mische as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past but also oriented toward the future and toward the present' (1998, 963). Agency hence consists of a triad: first, the capacity to selectively reactivate past patterns of thought and action ('iterational element'). Second, the capacity to imagine possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures and events may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' own hopes, fears and desires ('projective element'). Third, the capacity to make practical and normative judgments from among alternative possible trajectories of action by contextualising past habits and future projects ('practical-evaluative element') (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). The last two components hereof are directly connected to our own discussion of aspirations. Agency, as we conceive it, emerges from the individual capacity to both imagine alternative futures ('aspirations') (Appadurai 2004) and to act in the present – thus to realise aspirations in a specific structural context ('capabilities'). As Borselli and van Meijl (2021) argue, the 'act' of aspiring itself can be seen as an expression of agency. In fact, we suggest that 'daring to aspire' to stay or to migrate, including return, can be an individual coping strategy or even a political act of collective resistance.

The article is structured as follows: first, we demonstrate how, in asylum policy and refugee politics, aspirations are, at best, overlooked in merely seeing displaced people as passive victims. Then, second, we add refinement to previous versions of the

aspiration–capability framework by: (i) considering the importance and role of aspirations to stay in contexts of displacement and highly constrained mobility – meaning not only the desire to stay home, but also to re-emplace oneself in a new environment; (ii) recognising that aspirations to stay can co-exist alongside ones also to migrate, influencing how mobility is experienced by the displaced themselves; and (iii) critically analysing the relationship between aspirations and capabilities. In the third section, we draw from the Psychology literature in explaining how aspirations and concomitant imaginations can serve as an emotional resource in contexts where their realisation seems – and often is – unreachable due to acute structural constraints. Subsequently, fourth, we propose looking at the collective dimensions to grasp how daring to aspire despite adverse contexts may lead to political mobilisation and influence capabilities to both stay and migrate. By highlighting the importance of the psychological and political dimensions of aspirations in contexts of highly constrained mobility, we ultimately argue that being the agent of one's own life on a sociological level should not bar a person from the right to international protection on the legal one. We illustrate these conceptual arguments by drawing on theoretical insights from Migration Studies, psychological research on trauma, scholarship on political movements and by building on empirical work (including our own) conducted among various groups of displaced people around the world.

1. The absence of aspirations in refugee regimes and attempts to manage aspirations

Aspirations are, at best, overlooked by policy-oriented research on forced migration, where the analysis often remains at the state level and displaced people are mostly seen as passive victims. However, the image of the 'agency-less' refugee is a very recent construct, rather than an omnipresent and inherent aspect of the international asylum regime. Designed in the aftermath of World War 2, that regime was thought to provide protection to those individuals fleeing persecution by heading to the 'free world' (Gatrell 2011). Albeit indirectly, the 1951 Convention recognises the individual's right to aspire to live in a free and better world and prevents governments from sending refugees back to countries where they face persecution.

The Geneva Convention, and the international asylum regime constructed around it, have their limitations, though. First, the current asylum system protects the displaced on an individual basis – meaning it cannot account for the diverse, complex and acute circumstances which have produced current forms of mass displacement from Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Venezuela and recently Ukraine among other places. Second, while the international regime was established to provide temporary solutions to short-lived crises, the overwhelming majority of those concerned live in protracted displacement as either internally displaced people or in a nearby region in the developing world with no access to durable solutions. In the absence of extensive opportunities for resettlement and other forms of refugee migration, protracted displacement has become the norm (Milner 2014). Hence, the international asylum regime and national asylum laws are mostly immobilising (Hyndman and Giles 2016). On the one hand, national policies in practice exclude the possibility for displaced people to acquire study and work visas, as they cannot fulfil the expectations of embassies that

they will go back to their country on expiry of the legal permission to stay. On the other, the international asylum regime reproduces a context in which the possibility of the displaced to pursue their own goals is limited and strategies to move on are largely undermined given that secondary mobility is politically undesirable. We can find traces of these logics in all the recent cooperation agreements signed by the EU with bordering states such as Turkey, Morocco and as well as with states in the wider region such as Ethiopia and Niger (Pastore and Roman 2020; Gammeltoft-Hansen 2011).

Current asylum policies thus seem to be built on a contradiction. The overall consensus is that displaced people are entitled to humanitarian assistance on the basis of being vulnerable victims. Malkki (1996), for example, shows how this victimised image of the refugee helps humanitarian work function. Khosravi (2010) illustrates how the ideas of 'refugee-ness' and 'victimhood' have to be performed by those seeking protection to demonstrate their deservingness. Yet, at the same time, refugees are expected to swiftly adapt to their changing conditions and become self-sufficient – as long as their actions remain within humanitarian boundaries (Krause and Schmidt 2020). This is illustrated by an increasing literature on resilience (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018) and migrant entrepreneurship (Carpio and Wagner 2015).

Similar tensions between assumptions of vulnerability and agency also manifest in resettlement procedures (Welfens and Bonjour 2021; Welfens 2022). Displaced people are expected to be resilient and self-sufficient by actively responding to humanitarian interventions in their current place of residency once they have been awarded refugee status. Aspirations to improve one's life are, thus, encouraged – but only by if people stay put or migration is not autonomously realised (Nyers 2015). Displaced people are, then, expected to respond positively to humanitarian interventions but not aspire to move on. In other words, it is desirable for displaced people to have *life aspirations* to becoming self-sufficient and no longer dependent on protection – but these aspirations have to be realised where they currently reside. Having migration aspirations is somehow seen as mostly illegitimate, as actively combatted by policies seeking to counter secondary movements, conclude third-country cooperation agreements and to establish externalisation mechanisms. Migration aspirations are only acceptable for a small minority of displaced people deemed eligible for resettlement – less than 1 per cent of the displaced population worldwide (UNHCR 2019) – who must perform 'victimhood' (Welfens 2022) and demonstrate that they are both indeed too vulnerable to pursue their own life goals in their current location yet also able to adapt to a new one.

Policy interventions juxtapose these rather paradoxical expectations of immobility and resilience. They are often designed based on the assumption that offering incentives for local integration will keep refugees in the first host country. This is, in fact, contradictory to migration theory which postulates that increasing capabilities boost aspirations to move on (de Haas 2021, 17). Most popular development interventions, in the form of cash-assistance programmes, aim at curbing aspirations to onward migration (Kipp and Koch 2018). Yet, receiving financial aid does not automatically lead to aspirations to stay put but depends on the local contexts and on the refugee group (Kuschminder and Rajabzadeh 2022). Development interventions might instead have a positive impact on aspirations to move on when migration is seen as a way out of precarious and uncertain conditions (Üstübici, Kirişçioğlu, and Elçi 2021). Contrariwise, other refugees – regardless of receiving financial aid – might manage to adapt to local conditions

and aspire to stay rather than risking what they have achieved thus far by moving on (Üstübici and Elçi 2022).

It is important to point out here that aspirations to stay do not exclude ones to be mobile, too. Empowered refugees who wish to stay in in their host country can also aspire to travel as tourists, businesspeople or professionals (Üstübici and Elçi 2022; Stock 2022). The freedom to move and cross borders as 'normal people' rather than as 'refugees' is part of their aspiration to stay or re-emplace themselves. This discussion of existing policy highlights the controversial co-existence of vulnerability and resilience in a framework where life aspirations and migration aspirations are artificially separated. In contrast to how policy often neglects and negates refugees' aspirations, those concerned often resist passive, victim-based framings of 'refugee-ness' either by rejecting the 'refugee' label and stereotyped images of 'refugee-ness' or by challenging violent border regimes (Habash 2021; Franck 2022; Khosravi 2010; Ali 2022). The next sections argue that it is crucially important to look at displaced people's life aspirations in conjunction with how and where they imagine their individual and collective futures.

2. Revising the aspiration–capability framework

2.1. Life aspirations and aspirations to move and to stay in contexts of displacement

The aspiration to migrate generally refers to the belief that migration is preferable to non-migration (Carling 2002, 2014; Carling and Collins 2018; Carling and Schewel 2018; Czaika and Vothknecht 2014; de Haas 2014). Since the early works on migration aspirations in the 2000s, scholars stated that migration aspirations play an acute – and different – role in migration from conflict areas versus in other migratory contexts (Carling 2002; Lubkemann 2008). People in contexts of war, violence, persecution, disaster or development projects might, in fact, have stronger migration aspirations than other migrants. At the same time, fewer people in conflict situations and adverse circumstances actually manage to migrate, resulting in conditions of involuntary immobility for many (Lubkemann 2008). In the last two decades, migration scholars have increasingly noted the importance of understanding not only why people move but also why they stay, too (Schewel 2019).

However, aspirations to stay[1] still tend to be left under-theorised in contexts of displacement. Why would anyone want to remain as bombs fall around them? Who would consider staying put despite pervasive violence and a lack of freedom? Although these questions seem rhetorical, we argue that they are of greater concern than is generally believed. Moreover, similar questions need to be asked with regards to those already displaced: Why do some people stay put despite having the possibility to move? Why do others choose to move on? Why would anyone consider a return? Evidently, even in extreme contexts of war, persecution and violence people still have a choice – and thus agency, albeit limited.

Existing research shows that the desire to stay is crucial in contexts of displacement and highly constrained mobility. Despite the many challenges, individuals may actively choose to stay for a variety of reasons (Schon 2020). People may want to remain in a war zone to be able to engage in militias or in civil society groups opposing the

regime, while others wish to show herewith their loyalty to the national project (Salehyan 2007; Bohnet, Cottier, and Hug 2018; Müller-Funk forthcoming). Some decide to stay o take care of older family members who are unable or unwilling to travel (Williams 2013; Arar and FitzGerald 2022; Müller-Funk forthcoming). However, the desire to stay can often not be neatly separated out from the conviction that leaving is better than staying.

We build here on Carling's (2002) initial conceptualisation of the aspiration–capability model and enrich it by drawing on insights from displacement contexts. Carling theorised the following types to exist: persons who are immobile because they wish to stay put (voluntary immobility); persons who aspire to move, but lack the ability to do so (involuntary immobility); and migrants who wish to and can move (voluntary migration). This original scheme, however, did not include those who move despite their desire to stay – the involuntarily mobile. The underlying assumption here was that you need to be willing for movement to occur – or in other words, you need to have the aspiration to it. However, things are more complicated than that.

Both categories, stay and migration aspirations, are not necessarily mutually exclusive but can be co-present in individuals' choices. Scholarship has up to now considered individuals to somehow have a monolithic orientation towards either migration or staying put. However, in reality, ambivalence may prevail (cf. Boccagni and Kivisto 2019). People may dream of leaving their country to pursue better opportunities elsewhere yet simultaneously also have a strong desire to remain close to their families and in a cultural and social environment which is more familiar to them. Displaced people may wish to re-establish a more stable existence in a particular spot, while also keeping alive the possibility of moving back home or to other countries to visit family members or doing business (Moret 2016). As evidenced by the studies on home and home-making processes in migration, having the options to stay and to leave are both constitutive of the feeling of being at home, defined as a place which feels safe, familiar and where one is in control (Boccagni 2016). For these subjects, home cannot be taken for granted and thus physical, legal and existential stability as well as mobility need to be actively pursued. The desire to stay is, therefore, not at odds with dreams of moving, and migration is not necessarily the result of strong related aspirations (or a 'function' of them, as sometimes claimed).

Besides aspirations, a sense of duty, family and community expectations, as well as other moral imperatives play a crucial role in the decision to migrate or to stay (e.g. Simoni and Voirol 2021; Baldassar 2015). High aspirations to leave and high aspirations to stay put can be considered as the poles of a continuum of preferences which may lead subjects to actively pursue a strategy or rather to passively accept the constraints in which they are living. The interplay between aspirations to stay and to move endures over time and across fragmented displacement trajectories, especially when displaced people decide to re-emplace themselves rather than keep moving (Belloni and Massa 2022).

This transcends previous theoretical arguments identifying either an intrinsic yearning for mobility, where migration is seen as freedom (an end in itself), or a desire to pursue specific life-enhancing projects related to economic objectives, where migration is perceived as an investment (Carling 2014; de Haas 2021). From the point of view of the displaced, migration does not always represent freedom but potentially a lack of it too, as evident vis-à-vis those fleeing violence or in the patterns of ongoing mobility among illegalised migrant populations in Europe who seek to re-emplace themselves

(see section 5 below). Migration is often not perceived as an investment but as a loss, a waste – at least initially – compared to the foregone possibility to stay either in the place of origin or to emplace oneself in the current location. Yet, for others, leaving can also represent a way to realise life aspirations which have been interrupted or rendered unrealisable due to hostile environments (Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022).

Following Carling (2014), we define such aspirations as being tied to people's perceptions of the 'good life', but we want to emphasise that the latter (i) can relate to a wide variety of understandings of what a good life might be and (ii) can be situated on different levels. On that of the individual, they might be related to one's education, profession and prestige (social mobility), to the desire to live with or emotionally/financially support those we love. On the meso level, they refer to the wishes of families, communities and networks to thrive. On the collective level, they can encompass ideas about one's culture and religion, of justice, of political legitimacy and ultimately about the kind of society we would like to live in. Linked to our definition of agency, we consider such aspirations to be based on the capacity of social actors to reactivate past patterns, imagine possible futures and to make practical and normative judgments regarding different possible trajectories here. This includes the capacity to imagine the future realisation of one's aspirations at home or elsewhere.

2.2. … and what about capabilities?

How are aspirations related to capabilities? Findings have been quite contradictory, and relate to the never-ending discussion about the role of agency and structure in social theory (e.g. Giddens 1979; Fuchs 2001). First, existing research has highlighted that life aspirations – and migration ones, too – are related to the capacity to realise them. Life aspirations are highly influenced by individual perceptions of socio-economic opportunities near and far (Carling and Collins 2018; Collins 2018; De Haas 2021). Moreover, aspirations and capabilities are mutually interdependent (Czaika and Vothknecht 2014): life aspirations can stimulate behaviour leading to an improvement of capabilities, and, at the same time, aspirations are the consequence of inherited and/or socially acquired capabilities such as financial resources, professional skills or educational achievements. Carling (2014) highlighted that a realistic evaluation of one's possibilities to migrate may influence related aspirations: people, who imagine their chances of realising their migration aspirations to be low, will develop lower migration aspirations than those, who imagine them to be realisable.

In other words, as Appadurai (2004:, 68–69) argues, it is the capacity itself to aspire that is unevenly distributed in society. The wealthier tend to have more exposure and means to explore alternative futures, while the less affluent are not in a position to practice their capabilities and tend to have more limited horizons to aspire. Poverty, suffering and violence can profoundly affect one's capabilities here. So can displacement.[2]

Yet, it has also shown been that people dare to aspire even under conditions of great adversity: regardless of individuals being born, growing up in and living in contexts which seem to structurally restrict their capacity to aspire to a better future, such dreams seem to be resilient to acute related obstacles. The existing migration literature is, in fact, replete with empirical evidence that individuals keep aspiring no matter the opportunity structures they live within (more below). Many refugees keep hoping that

they will be resettled to developed countries, against all odds (Amnesty International 2015). Others cultivate for generations the desire to return to the homeland (Al-Hardan 2012) or to overcome enforced borders even after many failed attempts (Alpes 2014; Kiriscioglu and Ustubici 2023; Belloni 2016).

These inconsistencies largely emanate from how the term 'capability' has been loaded with multiple different meanings. The aspiration–capability framework conceptualises migration as the outcome of a person's 'aspirations and capabilities to migrate [within a certain society]' (de Haas 2021, 2). Building on Sen's work (1999a, 1999b), the concept of 'capability' captures the 'resources, opportunities, and constraints that determine whether and how migration aspirations may be realized' (Schewel 2021, 4). Accordingly, personal capabilities are conflated with structural constraints, referring to the macro-level obstacles and opportunities set by various migration regulations – the so-called 'immigration interface' (Carling and Schewel 2018, 947). The use of the term 'capability' encompasses herewith personal traits (e.g. age, gender), individual capitals (social, financial, cultural) as well as the chance to mobilise resources under specific contexts and structural factors (e.g. national policies, economic situation).

This lack of semantic clarity has thus made the concept confusing and theoretically hard to apply. This is why here we propose to restrict the meaning of 'capability' to the personal capacity to act in the present – thus to realise aspirations in a specific structural context. In this sense, aspirations are not separated from capabilities – being able to imagine a better future at home or elsewhere is part of a fundamental capability to act on the present. This personal capacity is certainly linked to economic, social and cultural capital, but also depend on emotional resources such as hope as well as on risk perceptions. In other words, the capability to act results from the meta-capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004), which has both sociocultural and psychological dimensions to it. Psychology studies on the role of aspirations have almost systematically been neglected by Migration Studies here though, despite being crucial, as we argue in the next section, since they demonstrate that people's capacity to aspire is not annihilated even in extremely adverse structural environments.

Building on our argument that aspirations to migrate and to stay need to be given equal consideration, we also want to stress that our conceptualisation of 'capability' refers to the personal capacity to realise both one's aspirations to migrate (including return) and to stay in, as noted, a specific structural context. This points to the importance not only of the structural dimensions of the 'immigration interface' but also of what we call the 'stay interface' and 'return interface'. Contexts of displacement are often witness to massive economic downturns, especially when experienced over longer periods of time. Such deterioration radically changes people's capability to stay in their home country. In contexts of displacement, the latter is also conditioned by macro-level factors such as security, political freedom, long-term prospects for employment as well as access to health and education ('stay interface'). The capability to return must also be considered, as many people initially often leave with the desire to come back at a later point, which often proves impossible due to the structural context (UNHCR 2019; Düvell 2022; Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022). The 'return interface' includes obstacles to safe return such as impeded access to private property, rights-stripping (including citizenship), fines upon return and a lack of political freedom – but also hindrances to a sustainable livelihood upon return as well as the inability to reclaim former property (Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022).

While we understand capabilities thus as person-specific resources to overcome immigration, stay, and return interfaces, Section 4 discusses how aspirations can be lifted to a collective level through a joint struggle to change capabilities collectively. In the next two sections, by focusing on the psychological and political dimensions of aspirations, we explain first why aspirations can persevere in structural contexts where their realisation seems or is unreachable and second how aspirations may change collective capabilities in such contexts.

3. Aspirations as coping strategies

Focusing on prospective life aspirations and imaginations of how to realise them can serve as a psychological coping strategy to deal with the radical social change and traumatic experiences refugees often go through in violent and highly adverse contexts. Having aspirations and imaginations for the future are in such instances often part of a cognitive reframing process migrants engage in to deal with adversities (cf. Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016; Salazar 2020). Understanding them is thus important to grasp how displaced people continue to have agency even in conditions of extreme deprivation – 'daring' to have aspirations in such hostile contexts is in itself an act of defiance, then. Psychology research can provide important insights here.

Much of the Psychology literature on aspirations shows that the relative value individuals place on various life goals is associated with psychosocial well-being (Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996; Visser and Pozzebon 2013). Cognitive processes, in the form of one's interpretations and perceptions of oneself and one's situation, have enabled individuals to cope with traumatic events – including here attitudes toward internal resources (such as taking a positive approach), identifying strengths, reinforcing the determination to cope and the self-perception of being a survivor rather than a victim. According to cognitive theory of depression (Beck et al. 1987), hopelessness aggravates depression, whereas a hopeful outlook on the future promotes emotional well-being and provides individuals with the necessary structure to continue in life. Frankl's (1992) famous account of his own experience as a psychiatrist in the concentration camp Auschwitz, for example, argued that – even in the most extreme conditions of structural violence and state-led genocide, where the space for agency was minimal – faith in the future was crucial for some prisoners' survival and the restoring of their inner strength was related to succeeding in identifying a future goal and meaning/purpose to be later fulfilled.

Recent psychological studies have begun to examine the coping mechanisms of refugees, as well as the factors that buffer against stress and help promote positive adaptation. Most refugees have fled situations of war or famine in which they experienced structural violence, radical social change, loss and significant trauma, having been exposed also to violent border regimes throughout their displacement trajectories. Findings suggest that among post-conflict populations worldwide, depression and PTSD are widespread. The latter is mostly related to reported torture, cumulative exposure to potentially traumatic events (PTEs), time since conflict and assessed level of political terror. Depression, meanwhile, is mostly related to PTEs, time since conflict, reported torture and residency status (Steel 2009; see also, Chung et al. 2018; Mollica 1993). PTSD is now increasingly conceptualised not simply as being a condition triggered by life-threatening PTEs but one

shaped by adverse structural conditions of ongoing threat or insecurity, too (Steel 2009, 547).

In such contexts, positive cognition focusing on hope and imaginations of the future can, more generally, help refugees overcome their psychological problems (Goodman 2004; Puvimanasinghe et al. 2014; Salazar 2020). Womersley (2020) argues that while trauma related to experiences of forced migration may impede imagination, imagination itself is an essential component in healing from trauma. In her study among refugee victims of torture in Athens, she shows that constantly evolving imaginations about over-coming the immigration interface are a powerful driver of migration. Relatedly, a sys-tematic literature review about the coping mechanisms of East African refugees (Gladden 2012) cited religion, social support and cognitive reframing as crucial. Simi-larly, Khawaja et al.'s (2008) research among Sudanese refugees resettled in Australia showed how a number of strategies are used to cope once the immigration interface has been overcome and the stay interface looms large: namely, religion, social support networks, reframing and focusing on the future. Similarly, one recent study by Okenwa-Emegwa (2019) shows that most Syrian refugees resettled to Sweden held mod-erate to high levels of positive future expectations.

Empirical research thus shows that the capacity to aspire survives despite the limited agency in adverse contexts and the risks involved to realise aspirations. Most displaced people are unable to move back to their countries, cannot find long-term prospects in their ones of residence and are without access to the legal means to relocate elsewhere. Where capabilities are strongly impeded, focusing on future life aspirations may therefore be simply a way to keep going irrespective of whether they are ultimately realisable or not.

Besides individual processes of focusing on one's own self, aspirations can also be part of a shared political claim. In the Syrian case, for instance, imagining a future return to a different political system is not only a way to deal psychologically with a difficult present in a new host country but also to imagine an alternative political future (Müller-Funk and Fransen 2022). A shared political claim can also be connected to perceptions that border and asylum regimes are unfair and trap displaced people in an eternal present of sheer survival without longer-term prospects (Üstübici forthcoming). As such, staying and migration, including return, bear strong political claims for social transformation and change. This brings us to the last step of our argument.

4. Political mobilisation and the collective dimensions of aspirations

Aspirations have mostly been defined as 'matters of individual cognition and emotion' (Carling and Collins 2018, 911) in the literature, having rarely been investigated per their collective dimensions and vis-à-vis their potential for social and political transform-ation. Yet, in conflict settings, (im)mobility is often considered a political act: leaving the country can be perceived as opposition to the incumbent regime, as can moving between territories which are controlled by different, opposing factions. The same holds true for return to rebel- or regime-held regions. In fact, it even applies to immobility: staying in a rebel-controlled area can be seen as an act of resistance (Fröhlich and Müller-Funk 2023).

When analysing the scholarship, we find little reflection on how ideas of justice and pol-itical values (life aspirations at the collective level) can influence subjects' capacity to aspire and subsequently act with others to create alternatives for themselves and others at home

or abroad. Research has mostly focused here on the mechanisms and repertoires of migrant mobilisation, internal organisation and of coalition-building (Chimienti 2011; Tyler and Marciniak 2013; McNevin 2013) rather than on the transfer of individual aspirations to the collective level. In other words, most studies on mobilisation do not use the analytical lens of aspirations, even though we contend that there is much potential in connecting reasons for mobilisation to people's aspirations to migrate, stay and/or return.

In particular, we conceive political mobilisation in contexts of displacement and highly constrained mobility to often be an attempt to change the immigration, stay and return interfaces. Here, it may be interesting to explore (i) how such mobilisation reflects collective aspirations with regards to social justice and (ii) how aspirations can potentially lead to social and political change by mobilising subjects. In line with the preceding discussion, we provide here some instances where life aspirations can crystallise into political mobilisation around the rights to stay, leave and return. Our offered examples are not exhaustive, but rather point to some potentially fruitful research questions linking the capacity of refugees to aspire in spite of adversity to their political mobilisation in the contemporary context of violent border enforcement and stratified membership rights in different countries.

Aspirations to stay concern those in displacement contexts who move despite having a desire to remain, as well as those who want to (re)build a home away from home. We think here of those irregularised migrants within Europe (e.g. Dublin cases, the deportable) who are kept on the move by the current asylum, visa and migration regimes despite their wish to re-emplace themselves somewhere (Fontanari 2018; Tazzioli and Garelli 2020). These are mostly people who find themselves confronted with the immigration but also stay interface: exclusion from the political community, the risk of deportation, hostile discourses and low prospects of being regularised constrain these migrants' capability to make political claims. In most cases, staying invisible might be the most suitable strategy for migrants with precarious legal status to minimise the risk of deportation. However, at times, despite the high risks involved, aspirations to stay are vocalised as demands for legal recognition (Topak 2017; Üstübici 2016; Tyler and Marciniak 2013) and for the improvement of one's living conditions (Ataç 2016) – overall, then, as a plea for redrawing the contours of membership in society (Nyers 2015).

Aspirations to move and overcome the immigration interface have been the engine of protest among those stranded in areas which they perceive to be 'transit' ones. Collective aspirations to move on can be expressed in resistance to the politics of migration control (Rygiel 2011; Basok and Candiz 2020) and in the form of organised protests demanding resettlement (Ikizoglu Erensu 2016). Collective return aspirations can, finally, similarly be a function of collective political aspirations to overcome the return interface. For example, Palestinian refugees have been key actors in the mobilisation for the 'right of return' and indeed in helping establish its very meaning (Al-Hardan 2012; AlHusseini and Bocco 2010). The Palestinian Right of Return Movement emerged among diaspora refugee communities following the Oslo Accords of 1993 and the perceived threat to this right. Through community oral history and village commemorations, Palestinian activists largely born in Syria aim, for example, to keep the memory of pre-1948 Palestine alive as a way to strive for a future return (Al-Hardan 2012).

The above instances point to the political dimensions of aspirations to stay and to move, and the importance of exploring their exact role in mobilisation. In bridging

the literature on aspirations and political mobilisation, migration scholars could investigate (i) how and under what conditions individual aspirations to stay and to move feed into collective mobilisations and (ii) how collective mobilisation provides an emotional resource and the increased capability to face hostile and violent structures. While some authors have warned about over-emphasising the transformative potential of migrant and diaspora mobilisation (cf. van Hear and Cohen 2017), having the possibility to actively (re-)engage politically still remains a crucial ingredient in individual empowerment and mental well-being.

5. Some concluding remarks, and ways ahead

Aspirations have been at the heart of Migration Studies in the last two decades (cf Bakewell 2010), but their role and function in contexts of displacement have been neglected by current policies while remaining under-theorised in the academic debate, too. Against this backdrop, our article has illustrated the importance of analysing aspirations in contexts of constrained mobility. This is where the verb 'daring' in our main title acquires a twofold meaning: refugees dare to aspire regardless of political representations that flatten them into 'the hopeless victim'; refugees dare to aspire to a better future in spite of the structural difficulties often faced.

Three main observations emerged: First, we demonstrated the need to overcome common (unrealistic) policy assumptions around such aspirations, as they have practical implications for people's lives and for the efficacy of related policies. The international protection system defines refugees' yearning for self-reliance in economic terms and return as legitimate – even in the most unfavourable conditions. Yet, it practically negates the legitimacy of life aspirations that go beyond the mere survival and aspirations pertaining to secondary mobility. Second, current policies as well as theoretical elaborations are based on the idea that aspirations to stay are not so important in displacement contexts, and that, furthermore, the desires to stay and to migrate are mutually exclusive. Adding nuance to the aspiration–capability framework, we argued that aspirations to stay are integral to displacement trajectories and people's shifting circumstances. Moreover, aspirations to stay, migrate and return can co-exist: Displaced people and other migrants may be ambivalent about staying or going, that is to say they may not be determined to choose one over the other for different reasons. Also, people may want to pursue both aspirations at the same time by re-emplacing themselves in a setting where they can find protection, security and familiarity, while still having the possibility to cross borders and move freely. Third, the interplay between aspirations and capabilities is complex. We posited that 'capability' should be limited in meaning to the personal capacity to act in the present, in a specific structural context. This capacity is both the result of social, cultural, economic and political factors, but can also be coupled with aspirations – as a vital resource. Aspirations are both a coping mechanism at the individual level and grounds for mobilisation at the collective one.

Without underestimating trauma, or either pathologising or romanticising refugees, we drew attention to the role of individual and collective aspirations for one's mental well-being. Drawing on psychological studies, we showed how focusing on possible alternative individual and collective futures allows people to retain hope while waiting or despite a (structural) present that condemns them. This can help shed light on why

people living in extremely adverse conditions persevere in their aspirations despite significant obstacles or hostile structural environments. It can also illuminate why and when people's aspirations to stay and to move remain unexpressed, or turn into collective mobilisations for the improvement of rights. These political mobilisations can influence capabilities to stay and to migrate, but also provide an emotional resource to help endure often hostile and violent structures. We ultimately argued herewith that harbouring aspirations does not negate the right to international protection. Life aspirations – and choosing to stay, migrate or return – also take shape during the course of fleeing adverse circumstances. Scholarly debates on aspirations and agency should, in consequence, be clearly decoupled from the political and legal obligations to provide protection to those in need.

This article encourages, then, further theorisation of aspirations in contexts of displacement and highly constrained mobility. Accordingly, scholars could study the nexus between emotions, aspirations, and imaginations in protracted displacement over time more extensively, in particular the question of how aspirations and concomitant imaginations are influenced by hope and depression if their realisation continues to prove elusive. Researchers could also look into how the individual and collective dimensions of aspirations converge/diverge in instances of migrant mobilisation. We acknowledge that our discussion also demands the studying of aspirations via an intersectional lens: for instance, how gender and age, among other axes of intersectionality, play into stay, migrate and return and life aspirations and the way they shift in people's geographic and indeed life trajectories.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Notes

1. We use the notion of 'aspiration to stay' instead of 'aspiration to immobility' as in our view nobody really wishes to be 'immobile'. Immobility is normally perceived as being the result of containment or deprivation. Individuals may aspire to remain where they were born, where they grew up or where they moved to at some point in their life, but this does not exclude the possibility of being mobile. The desire to stay put can also be explored as seeking to recreate a sense of home (Boccagni 2016; Brun and Fábos 2015; Boccagni, Murcia, and Belloni 2020), as interpreted not only from a migration perspective but also from a socio-economic and existential one, too.

2. We acknowledge that aspirations in contexts of displacement partly differ from Appadurai's (2004) own related theorisations in that of urban poverty. First, not all displaced people and migrants come from low socio-economic backgrounds. Second, they often do not operate within one nationally bound cultural system but across several. As refugees and migrants move across geographic, political and cultural borders, they are exposed to multiple possible futures due to their immersion in transnational networks or simply by virtue of the fact that they witness other ways of life in living side by side with locals or interacting with national and international authorities. Third, displaced people are often faced with radical social and political change, which might alter life aspirations drastically but also make their realisation even harder. Fourth and finally, contexts of displacement often reduce people's capabilities to move as employment possibilities are lost. This leads to increasing impoverishment, with belongings destroyed and resources used up when fleeing across borders. Previous social networks, which

can potentially facilitate migration, often crumble – and change – as large segments of the population are internally and externally displaced (Tobin, Momani and Al Yakoub 2022).

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