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EUROPEAN JOINT MASTER IN Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY)

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# Dialogical formations of personal and Cultural self-understanding among refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal construct and negotiate their personal and cultural identities within institutional reception contexts.

The study is grounded in Dialogical Self Theory and complemented by ecological, strengths-based, anti-oppressive, and decolonial perspectives, conceptualizing identity as a dynamic and relational process shaped by both internal meaning-making and external structural conditions.

The research aims to explore how institutional environments influence identity formation, agency, and processes of belonging among refugees. To address this, an exploratory qualitative research design was employed, based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis.

The findings reveal that identity negotiation is strongly shaped by institutional constraints, including bureaucratic barriers, labour market exclusion, and imposed categorizations that often position refugees as passive beneficiaries. At the same time, participants actively resist these constraints through internal dialogical processes, reasserting agency, dignity, and future-oriented self-understandings. Identity formation emerges as a continuous negotiation between imposed identities and self-defined positions, mediated through relational experiences and social interactions.

The study concludes that refugee integration should be understood as a relational and dialogical process rather than a linear or administrative one. It highlights the need for social work practice to move beyond deficit-oriented and treatment-based approaches, emphasizing agency, participation, and human rights. The thesis contributes to the development of a critical-reflective social work framework that supports self-determination and relational belonging within structurally constrained environments.



**Keywords**: Identity Negotiation, Cultural Identity, Dialogical Self, Refugees and Asylum seekers, Structural Barriers, Agency, Relational Integration, Social Work, Human Rights

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND AND GLOBAL CONTEXT OF FORCED MIGRATION

By the end of 2024, 123.2 million people had been forcibly displaced globally, according to the most recent figures released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025). This number represents almost 1 in 67 individuals worldwide who have been compelled to leave their homes due to persecution, conflict, violence, abuses of human rights, or incidents that gravely disrupt public order: 36.9 million of these refugees, comprising 5.9 million Palestinian refugees under UNRWA's authority and 31 million under UNHCR's mandate. 73.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs), 8.4 million asylum applicants awaiting a decision, and 5.9 million other individuals in need of international protection make up the population.

According to the same source, just four nations account for slightly more than one-third of all forcibly displaced persons worldwide: Sudan (14.3 million), the Syrian Arab Republic (13.5 million), Afghanistan (10.3 million), and Ukraine (8.8 million). Additionally, only five nations account for 69 % of Refugees under UNHCR's mandate, underscoring the escalation and protracted nature of conflicts driving the current global humanitarian crisis (UNHCR, 2025).

While these figures highlight the scale and urgency of forced displacement, they also point to a less visible but equally critical dimension: the transformation of identity under conditions of displacement. Forced migration is not only a movement across borders but a process that disrupts social roles, cultural affiliations, and personal trajectories, requiring individuals to continuously reconstruct meaning and belonging within unfamiliar environments.

The identity negotiation of refugees and asylum seekers is an intricate process influenced by cultural, societal, and institutional dynamics. Dialogical Self Theory (DST) emphasizes the interplay of "I-positions" shaped by heritage and host cultures, offering a critical lens for understanding identity negotiation in migration contexts (Hermans & Gieser, 2012).
This perspective is further deepened by Hermans (2001), who conceptualizes the self as a dynamic multiplicity of "voices" positioned within social and cultural contexts. Rather than a unified entity, the self becomes a dialogical space in which different positions— such as "I as professional", "I as refugee", or "I as parent"— interact, conflict, and negotiate meaning.

Building on this, Bhatia and Ram (2001) situate the dialogical self within transnational and postcolonial realities, arguing that identity is shaped through ongoing negotiations across borders, histories, and power relations. Migration, therefore, produces not only multiple

identities but also tensions between past, present, and imagined futures, particularly under conditions of displacement and marginalization. Research highlights the intersectionality of identity, demonstrating that privilege and marginalization converge to shape individual and community experiences (Payne, 1997; Behtoui, 2019). Similar studies in Sweden identify identity as a "movable feast," influenced by cultural representation and institutional arrangements (Behtoui, 2019). A multidimensional approach to identity that respects diverse worldviews and fosters inclusion is necessary for societies that accommodate migrants and refugees (Vainikka, 2014; Varela et al., 2020).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that identity negotiation cannot be understood as an individual or static process but must be examined as a dialogical and relational phenomenon shaped by structural and institutional conditions. This becomes particularly relevant when considering specific national contexts such as Portugal.

Considering this, the identity negotiation of refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal is situated within a host society that has historically had limited experience with large-scale refugee reception (Sousa, 1999; Constantino, 2019). According to Goldberg (2021), Portugal has historically been a country of emigration until its accession to the European Union in 1986, which increased its attractiveness as a destination and marked its transition toward becoming a country of immigration (85–89).

Between December 2015 and November 2017, Portugal welcomed 1,520 people under the European Relocation Program (PER), primarily from Italy and Greece, reflecting an intensified shift toward international protection reception. While official discourse emphasizes Portugal's openness and political commitment to refugee reception, empirical research identified persistent tensions between humanitarian narratives and the practical realities of refugee integration on the ground (Constantino, 2019; Goldberg, 2021).

This tension between political discourse and lived experience establishes the broader analytical terrain of this study, where identity formation is not only negotiated internally but also shaped—and at times constrained—by institutional structures and social practices.

## 1.2 REFUGEE RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION CONTEXT IN PORTUGAL

The integration process in this context is defined as a multidimensional, long-term, and bidirectional process that involves the host country's socio-political context and the refugee's individual characteristics (Ager & Strang, 2008; Constantino & Minas, 2022). This "two-way process" necessitates mutual adaptation between the host society and the newcomer to be effective.

While Portugal is frequently described as maintaining a welcoming political discourse toward refugees, research suggests that this narrative often contrasts with the everyday

experiences of migrants and asylum seekers within institutional settings, where individuals encounter bureaucratic barriers, precarious living conditions, and institutional practices that complicate meaningful integration (Santinho, 2013; Santinho & Rebelo, 2024).

In practice, many refugees in Portugal encounter a "bureaucratic clientele" order that creates significant obstacles to self-determination (Goldberg, 2021; Vacchiano, 2018). A critical tension within identity negotiation arises from the downward professional mobility frequently experienced by refugees in the Portuguese labor market (Constantino & Minas, 2022).

These structural constraints illustrate how integration is not merely a legal or administrative process but one that profoundly shapes refugees 'opportunities to maintain dignity, agency, and meaningful participation within the host society.

From a human rights perspective, these barriers represent not only practical obstacles but potential limitations in the realization of fundamental rights, including access to work, healthcare, and social participation, which are essential for sustaining autonomy and dignity.

As a result, identity negotiation emerges not only as a personal process but as a structurally mediated experience shaped by institutional arrangements, power relations, and social expectations.

## 1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Refugees navigate these challenges through resilience strategies rooted in internal dialogue concerning their prospects. Individual factors such as motivation, purpose, responsibility, and goal-setting are important in sustaining agency and integration processes in the Portuguese context (Constantino, 2019), while empowerment theory frames these processes as a movement from states of *"inaction and fear***"** toward efficacy and action (Gutierrez, 1994). Many refugees reject the negative connotations of the *"refugee"* label, framing migration as an act of survival and "*self-reconfiguration"* (Borges, 2024; Borges, 2022).

However, dominant institutional approaches often continue to interpret refugees through a "treatment paradigm," emphasizing vulnerability, trauma, and dependency rather than recognizing refugees as active agents with knowledge, skills, and lived expertise. This framing risks positioning refugees as passive recipients of care rather than as subjects capable of shaping their own lives.

These tensions between refugees' efforts to maintain dignity, agency, and future aspirations, and the institutional structures that regulate integration, highlight a broader challenge within contemporary refugee reception systems.

Understanding how refugees negotiate identity within these conditions and how social work interventions can support processes of agency, belonging, and self-determination is therefore a critical area of inquiry for social work research and practice.

Taken together, the preceding discussion reveals a critical gap between theoretical understandings of identity as dialogical, relational, and dynamic, and institutional practices that often frame refugees through static, deficit-oriented, or administrative categories.

This misalignment raises a central question for social work:

*How can practice move beyond managing integration as an administrative process toward supporting identity formation as a dynamic, agentic, and relational phenomenon?*

Thus, the challenge is not only to improve integration outcomes but to ensure that social work practice actively safeguards human rights by enabling refugees to access entitlements, exercise agency, and participate as rights-bearing subjects rather than managed beneficiaries.

This thesis is grounded in a critical rethinking of traditional approaches to refugee integration in social work. In line with contemporary critiques, it challenges the dominant "treatment paradigm" that frames refugees primarily through vulnerability, trauma, and dependency. Instead, it adopts a strength-based and empowerment-oriented perspective that recognizes refugees as capable social actors with knowledge, skills, and lived expertise.

Furthermore, the study addresses the persistent gap between inclusive policy discourses and the structural barriers encountered in practice, including bureaucratic fragmentation, labor market exclusion, and institutional power dynamics. In doing so, it emphasizes social work's responsibility to support access to rights and to promote dignity and participation.

The thesis also integrates anti-oppressive and decolonial perspectives, emphasizing the need to challenge Eurocentric assumptions and to recognize refugees as producers of knowledge. Finally, it conceptualizes integration as a fundamentally relational process, shaped by family, peer, and community networks rather than as an individual trajectory of adaptation. Through this framework, the study positions social work as a transformative practice that supports agency, relational belonging, and self-determination.

# 2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

## 2.1 IDENTITY, MIGRATION AND BELONGING

Dialogical Self Theory (DST) offers a robust framework for understanding identity as a dynamic and dialogical process composed of multiple "I" positions that reflect cultural, personal, and social roles (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). For refugees in Portugal, DST elucidates how individuals negotiate tensions between heritage identities, such as autonomous professional or familial roles, and the normative expectations imposed by the host society. However, as emphasized within anti-oppressive social work, these internal dialogues are frequently constrained by a "hierarchy of identities" that privileges citizenship and marginalizes displaced subjects, limiting which identity positions are socially recognized (Dominelli, 2002).

Dialogical Self Theory, as originally articulated by Hermans (2001), conceptualizes identity as a "society of mind" in which multiple voices coexist and interact within the self. This framework becomes particularly relevant in migration contexts, where displacement intensifies the multiplicity of positions and the tensions between them.

Bhatia and Ram (2001) extend this framework by emphasizing that identity is not only dialogical but also historically and politically situated. For migrants and refugees, identity negotiation unfolds within transnational spaces shaped by colonial histories, global inequalities, and ongoing power asymmetries.

To extend this framework, a decolonial perspective -particularly the Obuntu / Ubuntu framework-re-orients identity away from Western individualism towards relationality, interdependence, and "being with others" (Tusasiirwe, 2024). Empirical research on nomadic and multidirectional migration reinforces this position by demonstrating that identity reconstruction does not unfold through linear or stage-based integration trajectories. Instead, migrants continuously reposition themselves across shifting, social and institutional contexts, producing fluid "I" positions that remain responsive to place, recognition, and power relations rather than converging toward a fixed endpoint (Gamsakhurdia, 2026, pp. 208-210).

Similarly, studies on transnational and intergenerational practices show that identity negotiation is not solely an individual psychological task but a co-constructed process through ongoing family ties, cultural practices, and intergenerational dialogue across borders. These dialogical processes sustain multiple, coexisting identity voices and reinforce belonging as a collective and negotiated achievement rather than a singular status granted by the host society (Skandrani et al., 2012, pp. 9-11). Within this relational frame, hybrid identities emerge that integrate elements of both ancestry and host contexts,

supporting Varela et al.'s (2020) argument that integration is best understood as a plural and multidimensional process rather than assimilation.

Research in return, belonging, and the dialogical self underscores that belonging itself remains ambivalent and conditional. Migrants frequently experience attachment as partial and tension-laden, shaped by competing internal voices tied to memory, place, and recognition. This sustained dialogical tension supports the concept of "qualified belonging", where affiliation is continually renegotiated rather than resolved (Kusari, 2025, pp. 12-14).

Taken together, these perspectives form a coherent theoretical synthesis in DST, anti-oppressive practice, and decolonial frameworks.

This relational understanding of identity formation can be further strengthened through the perspective of Relational Social Work (RSW), as developed by Fabio Folgheraiter. RSW conceptualizes social work not as an intervention directed at individuals, but as a process emerging within networks of relationships, in which well-being is co-produced through interactions among multiple social actors (Folgheraiter, 2017a; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017b, 2023). Within this framework, the "social" is understood as a situated network of people engaged in shared concerns, rather than as an abstract societal structure, and identity formation is inseparable from these relational dynamics (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2023). This perspective aligns closely with Dialogical Self Theory by extending the dialogical process beyond the internal sphere of the self toward the external relational field in which identities are negotiated, recognized, and transformed. In this sense, refugee identity can be understood not only as internally dialogical but also as co-constructed within relational networks shaped by interaction, recognition, and shared action.

By fostering dialogical self-awareness and recognition of relational identity, practitioners can move beyond a deficit-oriented, stage-based model and instead support fluid, context-dependent processes of belonging that affirm refugees' agency and multiplicity (Sakamoto, 2007; Verkuyten et al., 2019).

This internal, dialogical negotiation cannot be understood in isolation from the structural and institutional environments in which it unfolds.
Together, these perspectives reinforce the need to understand refugee identity as simultaneously internal, relational, and structurally embedded.

## 2.2 ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON IDENTITY

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides the necessary framework for understanding how external systems shape identity. The sociopolitical climate in Portugal is shaped by bureaucratic obstacles and institutional practices that frequently operate

through a treatment-oriented paradigm emphasizing vulnerability, dependency, and administrative management, which may affect refugees' self-perception and sense of belonging (Costa et al., 2019; Vacchiano, 2018; Goldberg, 2021; Constantino & Minas, 2022). Applying a *multifocal vision* (Lee, 2001) allows social workers to see both the "forest and the trees," linking individual struggles to macro-level policies (Meneses, 2020, p. 406).

This vision is a critical "inner skill" that empowerment-oriented practitioners use to view the interplay between people and their environments (Lee, 2001, p. 59). In the Portuguese context, this lens reveals how identity formation is pressured by assimilation, a process in which a refugee's identity becomes "tied to mainstream culture" at the cost of their cultural heritage (Meneses, 2020, p. 94). Furthermore, Meneses (2020) suggests that individuals often become "beholden" to external systems, creating a state of power dependence in which "external forces may make demands that limit the abilities" of refugees to exercise self-determination (p. 128).

This ecological pressure is particularly salient in Portugal, where bureaucratic fragmentation and decentralized social action shape refugees' everyday encounters with institutions.

A critical ecological approach recognizes that governmental policies and institutional structures may hinder refugees' identity formation and participation, requiring social workers to advocate for more inclusive and anti-discriminatory forms of integration.

This perspective is enriched by an anti-racist and anti-oppressive guide to practice, which demands that practitioners utilize praxis—a continuous cycle of "action, reflection on the action,[and] return to action"-to address the "societal pollutions" of systemic exclusion (Lee, 2001, p. xi; Meneses, 2020, p. 406). Because decision-making vehicles are frequently "controlled by the 'haves'," social workers must adopt a conflict theory lens to recognize that oppression stems from systemic "isms" such as racism and classism (Meneses, 2020, p.129).

By acting as clinician-activists, social workers do not merely provide support; "they 'externalize the sources of oppression, 'helping refugees view bureaucratic delays as external power blocks rather than personal failings" (Lee, 2001, p.46). Ultimately, this approach fosters the "unleashing of human potentialities" necessary to challenge discrimination and build a "beloved community" where justice and integration are realized (Meneses, 2020, p. 406; Lee, 2001, p.2).

## 2.3 STRENGTHS-BASED AND EMPOWERMENT APPROACHES

A central challenge within contemporary refugee reception concerns the tension between transnational migration processes and nation-state welfare structures, which frequently rely on standardized forms of intervention that may overlook refugees' diverse histories,

identities, and cross-border experiences (Schwarzer et al., 2016). In the Portuguese context, these tensions are reflected in institutional fragmentation, bureaucratic mediation, and integration practices that may insufficiently account for refugees' transnational trajectories and lived experiences (Goldberg, 2021; Constantino & Minas, 2022; Costa et al., 2019).

Within this context, a strengths-based perspective becomes critical as it directly challenges the treatment-oriented paradigm that frames refugees primarily through deficit, vulnerability, or dependency. Instead, it recognizes refugees as experts in their own lives, possessing knowledge, skills, and resilience that are often overlooked within institutional systems.

Within this perspective, human rights are not abstract legal guarantees but lived practices that must be enacted through access, participation, and recognition. Empowerment, therefore, involves supporting refugees in claiming their rights and exercising autonomy within institutional contexts.

To close this gap, Lee (2001) suggests an empowerment strategy that places a strong emphasis on "building the beloved community." Social workers must thus actively combat the "three-dimensional" character of oppression—personal, interpersonal, and political—that arises when inclusive laws collide with "institutional ignorance" for refugees in Portugal (Lee, 2001; Costa et al., 2019).

This multifaceted perspective is consistent with claims by Dominelli (2002) and Karim (2023), who emphasize that power is essentially synchronous and complicated. Dominelli (2002) contends that power is a contested space where people can be both "oppressing and oppressed" (p. 16), whereas Karim (2023) asserts that power affects people in "limiting and productive ways at the same time."

Lee (2001) promotes an empowerment strategy that goes beyond conventional aid to create a beloved community in which refugees actively participate in their own emancipation, thereby closing these systemic gaps. This approach necessitates a fundamental change in the practitioner's "web of beliefs," from a deficit model to an agency-based one.

This necessitates a shift toward Saleebey's Strength Perspective (2006), which holds that every person has innate resources, resilience, and the potential to thrive despite their trauma (Edwards & Parkinson, 2023). A strengths-based strategy serves as a counter-narrative to the "treatment" paradigm in Portuguese social action. Saleebey's principles require us to regard refugees as "experts in their own lives", with assets that the administrative system frequently ignores, rather than as "cases to be managed" (Edwards & Parkinson, 2023).

By replacing the antiquated treatment paradigm of the 1990s with a social action process that encourages participation, an empowerment approach represents a necessary shift in the practitioner's web of beliefs (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994; Adams, 2003). Increasing political or interpersonal power is intended to enable people to act better in their

circumstances (Gutierrez, 1994). This calls for the creation of a "power to act" (*pouvoir d'agir*) that combines the mobilization of refugees with the accessibility of tangible structural resources (Bossé, 2003).

The practitioner recognizes the emotional agency and resilience exhibited by refugees by choosing to perceive them through these integrated lenses (Borges, 2024). The "institutional ignorance" mentioned by Costa et al. (2019) is challenged through this ethical repositioning. In the end, utilizing the Duhem-Quine thesis to support this theoretical decision guarantees that social work practice in Portugal promotes identity and self-determination rather than inadvertently sustaining helplessness through assimilation (Karlson & Jönsson, 2020; Karim, 2023; Stanford, 2023).

## 2.4 ANTI-OPPRESSIVE SOCIAL WORK AND POWER INFORMED PRACTICE

According to the Duhem-Quine thesis, observations are always interpreted within a background "web of beliefs" (Stanford, 2023). Consequently, legal frameworks alone do not determine integration outcomes; practitioners' theoretical assumptions significantly shape how refugee needs are interpreted.

In view of the theoretical grounding, a refugee's "identity" in Portugal is "theory-laden," meaning that it is interpreted through the observer's conceptual lens rather than as an entirely objective or static fact (Stanford, 2023). From this perspective, social work practice is influenced not only by institutional procedures but also by the interpretative assumptions through which practitioners understand refugee experiences.

A social worker operating within a traditional "treatment paradigm," centered primarily on diagnosis, vulnerability, and deficit, may therefore perceive refugees mainly through trauma and passivity (Adams, 2003). In contrast, Power-Informed Practice (PiP) enables a more reflexive understanding of how power simultaneously constrains and enables action within refugee reception contexts. Karim (2023) argues that power should not be understood as simply "good" or "bad," but as operating in both limiting and productive ways at the same time. By applying the PiP framework, social workers can identify power at the individual, professional, and structural levels, thereby recognizing refugees' "power to" act and exercise agency rather than viewing them solely as passive recipients of support (Karim, 2023).

This shift reflects Quine's holism thesis, which suggests that beliefs are revised collectively through experience rather than through isolated observations alone (Stanford, 2023). Applied to refugee reception, this perspective highlights the importance of critically examining the broader institutional assumptions that shape how integration processes are interpreted and implemented.

The national “humanistic” reception system in Portugal frequently emphasizes inclusion and protection; however, when integration difficulties emerge, explanations may shift towards refugees’ perceived lack of adaptability rather than toward the structural barriers embedded within institutional systems, including bureaucratic fragmentation and disjointed support structures (Goldberg, 2021; Costa et al., 2019). A critical anti-oppressive perspective, therefore, requires practitioners to question how institutional assumptions may unintentionally reproduce exclusion or dependency.

This critique is reinforced by Dominelli (2002), who argues that social work can function as an “oppressive caring profession” when it operates as a “unifying force within the nation-state” seeking to produce a “homogenous whole” (p. 10). Without an anti-oppressive lens, practitioners risk “reproducing relations of dominance” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 14) through a “hierarchy of identities” that privileges citizenship and normative belonging over the displaced identities (p. 39).

From this perspective, anti-oppressive social work involves more than service provision; it requires critical consciousness regarding how institutional power shapes recognition, participation, and belonging. Through consciousness-raising practices (Lee, 2001), social workers can help refugees link personal struggles to broader political and structural conditions rather than internalize exclusion as a personal failure. In doing so, practitioners may help challenge hierarchical relations of recognition and foster more collaborative and participatory forms of support grounded in dignity, agency, and relational belonging.

In this sense, anti-oppressive practice is inherently a human rights practice, as it seeks to challenge structural inequalities that prevent refugees from fully accessing their rights and participating as equal members of society.

## 2.5 DECOLONIAL THEORY AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

This section advances theoretical synthesis by positioning decolonial theory as a critical lens for re-examining the politics of knowledge, identity, and recognition in refugee practice.

While ecological approaches reveal how systems constrain identity, decolonial theory interrogates the knowledge frameworks through which these systems interpret refugees in the first place.

Decolonial Theory is particularly relevant in work with refugees because it challenges dominant social work norms such as "professional distance" and claims of "neutrality," which often reflect Eurocentric assumptions rather than genuine ethical practice. Within an Obuntu/Ubuntu framework**,** social workers are not positioned as detached experts but as fellow human beings whose humanity is relationally connected to that of refugees.

Practices that rely on distancing or labeling—such as defining refugees primarily through categories of risk, deficiency, or pathology—can reproduce colonial forms of *othering* and obscure refugees' lived experiences and survival strategies.

Decolonial and ubuntu-informed approaches instead emphasize shared humanity and relational engagement, recognizing refugees first as human beings rather than as problems to be managed (Tusasiirwe, 2024). Suzuki (2025) explains that coloniality persists through global systems of domination rooted in colonial histories, while decoloniality calls for active efforts to disrupt these systems and create new non-colonial ways of understanding and shaping the world.

Importantly, decolonial Scholarship demonstrates that claims of professional neutrality operate as epistemic technologies that depoliticize refugee subjectivities while preserving colonial hierarchies of knowledge production, positioning refugees as objects of intervention rather than as epistemic agents (Suzuki, 2025, pp. 2546-2548; Ylä-Kotola, 2023, pp. 16-18).

Padilla (2025) argues that although decolonial perspectives can be applied in many contexts, they become particularly significant in migration studies when individuals from former colonized societies migrate to the former colonial metropole. In these settings, processes of "displaced colonization" emerge, through which migrants are repositioned as racialized and subordinate subjects and are subjected to renewed forms of othering. Decoloniality, in this sense, involves the critical capacity to examine, reinterpret, and question dominant forms of knowledge, recognizing that decolonization is neither immediate nor linear but unfolds through multiple stages.

This epistemic ordering is reproduced within European integration regimes, where inclusion is conditional upon compliance with dominant cultural norms, reinforcing what colonial scholars identify as politics of conditional humanity rather than substantive belonging (Padilla, 2025, pp. 6-8; Suzuki, 2025, pp. 2550-2552). This critique is echoed by Murphy and Vieten (2025), who argue that dominant paradigms of refugee integration in Europe often reproduce exclusionary assumptions and therefore require decolonial, participatory approaches that recognize refugees as political and social actors rather than passive objects of inclusion.

Padilla illustrates this process through the case of Brazilian migrants, who often come to identify as "Brazilian" only after leaving their country of origin, having previously understood themselves through regional identities. Migration exposes internal hierarchies of race and belonging: White Brazilians may experience discrimination for the first time, whereas Afro-Brazilians and those of indigenous or mixed ancestry often encounter familiar patterns of racialization, albeit within a new national context.

Because colonialism was inherently gendered, the sexualization historically imposed on Afro-Brazilian women extends to Brazilian women more broadly in the migratory context, particularly in Portugal as a former colonial center. As a result, decolonizing migration studies requires an intersectional approach that addresses the entanglement of gender, race/ethnicity, and migration, while simultaneously challenging both colonial legacies in countries of origin and colonial paradigms reproduced in host societies (Padilla, 2025).

From a decolonial perspective, this process reveals that humanitarian and integration discourses often "humanize" refugees only insofar as they remain legible within Eurocentric moral frameworks, producing what Suzuki (2025) terms inclusion into a racialized and hierarchical category of humanity rather than full recognition as political subjects (pp. 2552–2554).

Consequently, decolonial refugee practice requires not only relational engagement but also epistemic justice, recognizing refugees as producers of situated knowledge whose lived experiences actively reshape social work theory and practice (Ylä-Kotola, 2023, pp. 17-19; Suzuki, 2025, pp. 2554-2556).

This emphasis on epistemic justice aligns directly with a human rights approach, as it extends the notion of rights beyond legal protection to include the recognition of refugees as knowledge producers whose voices and experiences must inform practice and policy.

## 2.6 RESILIENCE AND HYBRID IDENTITIES

Within this decolonized and relational framework, resilience is understood not as individual adaptation but as an agentic and socially embedded process. Resilience is central to refugees' navigation of displacement. The Strengths-Based Approach (Saleebey, 2006) emphasizes individuals' capacity to integrate heritage and host cultures into an empowered sense of self. This resilience is often rooted in the Obuntu/Ubuntu principle of relationality, where identity is reconstructed through community support and shared meaning (Tusasiirwe, 2024).

Decolonizing resilience means moving away from the idea of "bouncing back" to a pre-existing state toward an active "reconfiguration" of the self (Borges, 2024). Lee's vision (2001) of building a beloved community aligns with these strengths, promoting an environment in which refugees are participants in their own emancipation. By focusing on these innate resources and disrupting the "colonizer-colonized" dynamic between workers and clients, social workers can support culturally relevant interventions that foster long-term self-determination.

Scientific holism suggests that our understanding of reality does not rely on isolated facts but on an interconnected web of beliefs in which every part depends on the whole (Stanford, 2023). Therefore, in the Portuguese context, viewing refugee identity or integration through a single lens is scientifically insufficient, because any observation of a refugee's

"success" is fundamentally underdetermined by data alone; it is instead filtered through practitioners' existing theoretical assumptions.

By centering on refugees' personal and cultural understandings, we gain deeper insight into their paths towards self-determination. For social workers, these narratives act as a vital tool for professional self-assessment, prompting them to reshape their perceptions and adapt their interventions to meet the needs of those in Portugal.

By integrating the dialogical self-theory, Ecological Systems, and Strengths-Based Approach, social work constructs a more robust "web" that accounts for the constant interplay between internal identity and external sociopolitical barriers. Bolstering this with anti-oppressive practice, multifocal vision (Lee, 2001), and decolonial frameworks like Obuntu/Ubuntu (Tusasiirwe, 2024) is vital because it shifts the center of this web away from Eurocentric individualism and "institutional ignorance" (Costa et al., 2019). This holistic alignment ensures that the refugee experience is not fragmented into "discrete utterances" or bureaucratic files but is understood as a dynamic reality in which reclaiming "power to act" becomes central to scientifically and ethically grounded practice.

Taken together, the literature reveals a central tension that constitutes the core problem addressed in this study: while refugees' identity formation is dialogical, relational, and dynamically negotiated across contexts, institutional reception and social work practices in Portugal frequently operate through depoliticized, deficit-oriented, and Eurocentric knowledge frameworks. This misalignment constrains refugees' agency, obscures their existing capacities, and reproduces hierarchical relations of recognition that privilege citizenship and normative belonging over lived experience.

As a result, refugees are often required to adapt to institutional expectations that fail to reflect the complexity of their identities, leading to fragmented support, suspended life projects, and conditional forms of belonging. Addressing this gap requires a critical re-examination of how identity, power, and knowledge are conceptualized and enacted within social work practice.

Taken together, the theoretical framework establishes that refugee identity formation is a dialogical process situated within ecological systems and shaped by power, knowledge, and relational contexts. This theoretical alignment provides the foundation for examining how these dynamics unfold within Portugal's specific institutional environment.

# 3. REFUGEES, MIGRATION, AND THE PORTUGUESE CONTEXT

## 3.1 INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, this chapter situates identity negotiation within the institutional and socio-political context of Portugal, examining how structural conditions shape refugees' lived experiences and opportunities for belonging. Contemporary refugee reception systems operate within a global context characterized by unprecedented levels of forced displacement, which shapes national asylum policies and institutional responses across Europe (UNHCR, 2025; IOM, 2024). Within this global landscape, Portugal has developed distinct reception policies despite not being historically a primary destination for large refugee flows (Sousa, 1999). Compared with other European countries, Portugal has historically received relatively few asylum seekers, averaging approximately 400 applications per year, reinforcing its position as a peripheral destination within European asylum dynamics (Sousa & Costa, 2018).

Portugal has historically been characterized by significant patterns of emigration, with successive migration structures since the nineteenth century directing Portuguese migrants toward Europe, the Americas, and former colonial territories, shaping the country's broader position within international migration systems (Pereira & Azevedo, 2019). Today, this emigration tradition remains evident, with an estimated 5 million Portuguese citizens living abroad, particularly in France, Brazil, Switzerland, and Germany (Leiria & Martins, 2022).

Unlike northern European countries with long-standing asylum traditions, Portugal's engagement with refugee reception is relatively recent, emerging from post-1974 socio-political transformations and the return of populations from former colonies (Sousa, 1999). Early refugee flows were closely connected to Portugal's decolonization process, as many asylum applicants during the late 1970s and early 1980s originated from former Portuguese colonies such as Angola and Mozambique (Sousa & Costa, 2018).

Portugal's high ranking on indices such as MIPEX has reinforced its international reputation for relatively inclusive integration legislation and policies (Costa et al., 2019). Portugal has developed a comprehensive institutional framework for immigrant integration through successive policy initiatives since the 1990s, including national integration plans, inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, and specialized immigrant support centers designed to facilitate access to public services and social participation (Oliveira et al., 2022).

Over time, national asylum legislation increasingly reflected the process of European integration, as Portuguese policies were progressively harmonized with the evolving Common European Asylum System and related EU directives (Sousa & Costa, 2018). In

response to broader European developments, the 2015 refugee crisis further highlighted the need for coordinated reception mechanisms across EU member states. It prompted Portugal to participate actively in relocation programs to redistribute asylum seekers arriving in Southern Europe (Magano et al., 2023).

At the operational level, refugee reception has involved coordination among multiple state institutions, including the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF), the High Commission for Migration (ACM), social security services, and employment agencies, often working alongside local authorities and civil society organizations to implement relocation and integration programs (Magano et al., 2023). The Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR), established in 1991, is a central component of Portugal's NGO-led reception system, promoting humane reception through dedicated facilities and legal support (CPR, n.d.). Reception structures have historically relied on cooperation between state institutions and civil society organizations, with NGOs such as CPR playing a central role in providing legal assistance and reception support to asylum seekers (Sousa & Costa, 2018). In recent years, CPR has also facilitated the reception and integration of several thousand refugees through programs that include language training, legal support, and socio-cultural activities aimed at facilitating integration into Portuguese society (Leiria & Martins, 2022).

Recent institutional reforms have significantly reshaped the governance structure of migration management in Portugal. As described by de Sousa (2024), in October 2023, the Portuguese government abolished the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF). It transferred its administrative responsibilities for immigration and asylum procedures to the newly created Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA). At the same time, the High Commission for Migration (ACM) was dissolved, and its integration and anti-discrimination responsibilities were incorporated into the new agency. These reforms aimed to separate migration management from internal security functions and to reposition immigration administration within a civilian institutional framework.

Despite these institutional developments, integration must be understood as a complex, long-term, bi-directional process shaped by both individual and structural factors (Constantino, 2019). Evidence highlights a persistent gap between legislative intent and lived experience. Professionals responsible for policy implementation frequently exhibit "institutional ignorance", resulting in fragmented support that undermines refugee self-determination (Costa et al., 2019; Vacchiano, 2018).

In line with this, refugees' difficulties–such as delays in documentation, limited access to services, or labor market exclusion–must not be interpreted as individual shortcomings but as outcomes of structural constraints embedded within institutional systems. Recognizing this distinction is essential for avoiding the reproduction of deficit-oriented interpretations of refugee experiences.

Furthermore, many institutions involved in refugee reception initially lacked experience working with refugees, which created challenges in the early stages of program

implementation and required them to adapt practices through learning and collaboration (Magano et al., 2023).

Ethnographic research on refugee reception practices in Portugal further illustrates how these dynamics unfold in practice. Challinor (2024) demonstrates that fragmented institutional coordination and administrative procedures often generate uncertainty and instability during the early stages of refugee settlement, shaping refugees' interactions with reception systems and influencing their subsequent integration trajectories.

These institutional arrangements, therefore, constitute the structural environment within which refugees and asylum seekers navigate their everyday lives in Portugal. Despite relatively inclusive legislative frameworks, refugees frequently encounter significant structural barriers during the integration process, particularly in relation to labor market access, bureaucratic procedures, and social participation.

These findings demonstrate that social work practice is not merely a mechanism of support but a site where power, identity, and institutional logics intersect. This insight forms the basis for the analytical framework developed in the following chapter.

## 3.2 STRUCTURAL BARRIERS: LABOUR MARKET AND BUREAUCRACY

Despite the relatively inclusive institutional framework described in the previous section, refugees frequently encounter structural barriers that shape their opportunities for participation and social mobility within Portuguese society (Constantino & Minas, 2022). These barriers are particularly evident in labor market access, language acquisition, social attitudes toward migration, and bureaucratic processes governing asylum and integration pathways.

Many arrivals from countries such as Syria possess higher education and professional qualifications that are frequently unrecognized or devalued, forcing them into precarious, low-skilled sectors (OECD, 2019; Goldberg, 2021). As Constantino and Minas (2022) observe, "*the integration process is often associated with downward professional mobility and loss of social status*" (p. 3793), highlighting the structural difficulties refugees encounter when attempting to translate their previous qualifications into meaningful employment within host societies. This situation creates tensions between refugees' heritage identities–as educated, autonomous professionals–and their newly imposed roles as "passive victims" or "aid beneficiaries" within host institutions (Constantino, 2019; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Goldberg, 2021). As noted by Borges (2022), this transition often forces a confrontation between personal agency and the restrictive "victim" labels imposed by the state.

Ethnographic research provides concrete illustrations of how these dynamics unfold in institutional encounters. Santinho and Rebelo (2024) describe the case of a Cameroonian asylum seeker with extensive professional experience as a choreographer, performer, and teacher who presented her artistic portfolio to the Portuguese Employment Office (IEFP). Despite her qualifications and international experience, employment authorities advised her that such professional pathways were "not available" in Portugal and instead suggested that she pursue work in a cleaning agency. When she refused, her response was interpreted as a lack of willingness to comply with expectations placed upon asylum seekers. This interaction illustrates how institutional practices may disregard refugees' prior experience and redirect them toward low-skilled employment, reinforcing cycles of precarious living and limiting opportunities for meaningful professional integration (Santinho & Rebelo, 2024).

Such encounters demonstrate how institutional processes can actively shape refugees' professional identities, reinforcing the transition from recognized professionals to administratively managed beneficiaries.

Beyond labor market barriers, limited access to effective language instruction also constitutes a major obstacle to integration. Language is widely recognized as foundational to navigating social participation, employment opportunities, and identity formation within the host society (Constantino & Minas, 2022; Goldberg, 2021; Sousa et al., 2021). When language acquisition opportunities are insufficient or delayed, refugees may struggle to access employment, public services, and social networks, reinforcing processes of marginalization (Quierós et al., 2025b; Santinho & Rebelo, 2024; Goldberg, 2021; Souza et al., 2021).

Broader attitudes towards immigration also shape structural barriers. Machado et al. (2010) indicate that immigrants frequently experience discrimination across multiple domains of social life, particularly in employment and labor relations, but also in housing, credit access, and opportunities for upward mobility. Comparative studies further suggest that attitudes in Portugal towards immigration tend to be more restrictive than in other European countries, rooted in perceptions of immigration as a cultural, economic, and security threat (Machado et al., 2010).

This tension is often interpreted through the concept of 'Luso- tropicalist paradox' identified by Vala, Lopes, and Lima (2008), which suggests that narratives of Portuguese cultural openness may coexist with more subtle forms of prejudice. Anthropological research further indicates that contemporary forms of discrimination may increasingly be articulated through cultural rather than explicitly racial categories. As Santinho (2016) notes, "*o conceito de 'cultura' tem sido utilizado como uma característica estática que frequentemente legitima as diferenças... [e] substitui frequentemente na atualidade o conceito de raça*" (p. 92). In this sense, references to cultural difference may function as socially acceptable ways of reproducing hierarchical distinctions between migrants and host populations.

More broadly, research on refugee integration highlights that attitudes toward minority groups in European societies may fluctuate according to broader socio-economic contexts, with periods of crisis often associated with the resurgence of intolerant and xenophobic attitudes toward minority cultures (Pereira et al., 2019). Empirical research in social psychology similarly demonstrates that adherence to Luso tropicalist beliefs about Portuguese multicultural harmony does not necessarily reduce prejudice and may co-exist with negative attitudes towards immigrant groups in contemporary Portuguese society (Valentim & Heleno, 2018).

Ethnographic research further illustrates how such tensions between discourses of cultural openness and everyday practices of exclusion may manifest within institutional environments. Drawing on interviews with health professionals working with migrants and refugees, Santinho (2016) observes that even professionals who express openness to cultural diversity may nevertheless reproduce stereotypes about African migrants:

> *"Em certos casos, mesmo quando psiquiatras e médicos referem a sua abertura à diversidade cultural, prendem-se nas redes criadas por alguns estereótipos que vêm os imigrantes africanos como 'preguiçosos' ou 'irresponsáveis'. Existe uma discriminação implícita nestes ou noutros comentários, que incluem por vezes a reprodução de estereótipos baseados na ideia de que os refugiados não entendem a linguagem médica porque pertencem a outras culturas ou a raças diferentes da nossa."* (Santinho 2016, p. 112)

In this context, Santinho (2016) argues that such assumptions reflect a distorted understanding of cultural difference that may contribute to the marginalization of migrants and refugees within institutional settings. As she notes, these attitudes may lead migrants and refugees to disengage from public services such as the national health system when their experiences or suffering are not adequately recognized (p. 112). Consequently, while everyday relations are often characterized by peaceful coexistence (Machado et al., 2010), empirical evidence confirms that stereotypes remain significantly more negative toward individuals of African origin (Vala et al., 2008).

Finally, the temporal structure of asylum reception systems also constitutes a significant barrier. Prolonged administrative procedures and bureaucratic delays, historically associated with the SEF (Immigration and border service), often place refugees' life projects on hold (Jacobsen et al, 2021; Borges, 2024). This experience of suspended time generates an ongoing internal negotiation between dignity and aspiration on the one hand, and institutional environments that may reduce individuals to administrative categories or bureaucratic procedures (Bossé, 2003; Constantino, 2019; Vacchiano, 2005).

These structural conditions not only affect refugees' economic opportunities or administrative trajectories, but they also shape identity negotiation within the host society. As refugees navigate labor-market exclusion, bureaucratic uncertainty, and shifting social

perceptions, they must continually reinterpret their professional identities, social roles, and aspirations within a new institutional environment. In this sense, structural barriers interact with personal meaning-making processes, influencing how refugees position themselves between previously established identities and the new social categories imposed within host societies (Borges, 2024; Kivisto & Faist, 2010).

## 3.3 SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH REFUGEES IN PORTUGAL

Within the institutional framework described in the previous sections. Social work practices constitute a central mechanism for operationalizing refugee reception and integration policies in Portugal. These practices emerge at the intersection of governmental institutions, civil society organizations, and local communities, shaping the forms of support available to refugees during the integration process. Research on migration governance highlights that refugee integration policies are frequently implemented through multi-level institutional arrangements involving national governments, local authorities, and civil society actors, who collaborate to address the complex needs of displaced populations (Scholten & Penninx, 2016; Scholten et al., 2017). In this context, social workers play a key role in mediating between institutional structures and the everyday needs of refugees, providing practical assistance, advocacy, and psychological support within reception systems (Costa et al., 2019; Magano et al., 2023). The role of social workers as intermediaries between institutional frameworks and refugee communities has also been emphasized in broader integration scholarship, which highlights their importance in facilitating access to resources, strengthening social connections, and supporting participation in host societies (Ager & Strang, 2008; Dominelli, 2010 b).

This mediating role reflects broader transformations in the profession, as social workers increasingly operate as intermediaries between institutional systems and vulnerable populations while advocating for social inclusion and access to social rights (Marques, 2022).

More broadly, research on social work practice in Portugal highlights that the profession operates within institutional environments shaped by broader socioeconomic conditions and policy frameworks that influence the availability of resources and the organization of social protection systems (Casquilho-Martins, 2021). Scholars examining the evolution of the profession similarly note that contemporary social work in Portugal has increasingly been required to respond to complex social problems emerging from economic restructuring, welfare transformation, and growing social inequalities (Marques, 2022). At the same time, research indicates that refugee integration remains a relatively recent field of professional intervention in Portugal, requiring practitioners and institutions to gradually adapt their practices to new social realities and policy frameworks (Costa et al., 2019).
Social work interventions with refugees in Portugal are commonly characterized by multidisciplinary approaches that address the complex, interconnected challenges faced by displaced populations. According to Costa et al. (2019), practitioners frequently adopt pragmatic and flexible strategies that combine social, psychological, and practical forms

of support. These interventions often involve collaboration between social workers, psychologists, legal advisors, language instructors, and employment specialists to facilitate refugees' access to housing, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Such multidisciplinary coordination reflects the recognition that refugee integration involves multiple domains of social life and therefore requires coordinated responses across professional sectors (Costa et al., 2019). This point is reinforced by broader analyses of social work practice, which emphasize that professionals increasingly confront complex and overlapping forms of social vulnerability requiring coordinated interventions across institutional and professional boundaries (Marques, 2022). At the same time, professionals involved in refugee support frequently note that these practices have developed progressively through experience, as many institutions initially lacked specialized knowledge and methodological frameworks for working with forcibly displaced populations (Costa et al., 2019).

Within these intervention frameworks, community engagement constitutes an important dimension of social work practice. Integration programs frequently emphasize the role of local communities and grassroots initiatives in supporting refugee inclusion and fostering social participation. Social workers often act not only as service providers but also as advocates who promote agency and encourage active participation in community life (Costa et al., 2019; Magano et al., 2023). Through these practices, professionals seek to strengthen refugees' sense of belonging within host societies while simultaneously facilitating connections between refugees and local institutions, associations, and community networks. In many cases, practitioners also perceive their role as extending beyond the delivery of services to include advocacy to defend refugee rights and address structural barriers to integration (Costa et al., 2019). In this regard, social workers act as human rights practitioners, ensuring that refugees can access services, claim entitlements, and navigate institutional systems in ways that uphold dignity and equality.

This advocacy dimension reflects the broader commitment of social work as a profession to promoting social justice and protecting fundamental social rights, particularly when working with populations experiencing structural vulnerability and exclusion (Casquilho-Martins, 2021). These ethical commitments are widely recognized as central principles guiding social work practice, emphasizing human dignity, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable populations as core professional values (Marques, 2022).

Despite the existence of structured integration programs, research indicates that social work interventions continue to face significant challenges in effectively supporting refugee integration. While several best practices have been identified in the Portuguese reception programs, Constantino and Minas (2022) note that there remains substantial room for improvement in their implementation and effectiveness. Scholars emphasize the need to strengthen program coordination, improve access to resources, and enhance the long-term sustainability of integration measures to address the evolving needs of refugee populations better (Constantino & Minas, 2022).

Empirical research further highlights that although Portugal demonstrated strong political commitment to refugee reception during the European relocation programs, institutional systems often struggled to adapt to the practical demands of supporting newly arrived populations. Professionals interviewed by Costa et al. (2019) frequently described institutional services as complex and bureaucratic, noting that existing structures were not always adequately prepared to respond to the increasing number and diversity of asylum seekers. Similar observations have been reported in comparative research on refugee integration policies across Europe, which highlights that bureaucratic procedures, fragmented institutional coordination, and limited resources may hinder the effective implementation of integration programs at the local level (Spencer & Delvino, 2019; Scholten et al., 2017).

These institutional constraints often generate tensions between policy frameworks and the realities encountered in everyday professional practice. As Costa et al. (2019) observe, practitioners working directly with refugees frequently encounter situations in which existing policies and institutional procedures do not fully correspond to refugees' needs. In such contexts, professionals must rely on pragmatic strategies and flexible problem-solving approaches to navigate administrative limitations and provide meaningful support. This gap between policy design and frontline implementation may also contribute to practitioners' frustration, particularly when institutional constraints limit their ability to respond effectively to refugees' social and psychological needs (Costa et al., 2019).

The practical consequences of these constraints become particularly visible in refugees' everyday encounters with public services. Drawing on fieldwork conducted among refugees relocated to Portugal, Vacchiano (2018) describes the case of Yasir, a young Iraqi man relocated from Greece in 2017, whose attempts to obtain medical care reveal the practical challenges of navigating bureaucratic procedures with limited institutional support. Suffering from a persistent toothache, Yasir repeatedly sought assistance through emergency health services but was advised to arrange treatment through the local health center, a process that required both linguistic competence and familiarity with administrative procedures. Several months after his arrival, however, Yasir had still not been enrolled in a Portuguese language course, and his contact with the hosting institution remained sporadic, leaving him largely on his own with everyday bureaucratic tasks.

After unsuccessful attempts to secure treatment within the public health system, he eventually turned to a low-cost university dental clinic, where complications during the procedure worsened his condition. The only remaining option was private treatment costing several hundred euros, an amount far beyond his monthly allowance. Beyond the physical pain, Yasir described a profound sense of humiliation associated with his situation of poverty and isolation, reflecting the discrepancy between the expectations of protection associated with relocation and the everyday difficulties encountered in accessing basic services (Vacchiano, 2018, p. 106).

Recent research by Casquilho-Martins et al. (2025) corroborates these difficulties by showing that administrative procedures and documentation requirements may also restrict migrants' and refugees' access to essential healthcare services in Portugal. Interviews with professionals working with migrant populations reveal that legal and bureaucratic requirements frequently delay treatment and discourage individuals from seeking care. As one interviewee explains:

> "*If you're [a migrant] from a third country, you must wait 90 days to organize your documents, and you're afraid of the immigration services all the time. Without documents, there's no medication. Other [migrants] have documents, but no health number, because there are no appointments for residence permits"* (Casquilho-Martins et al., 2025, p. 228).

Beyond these administrative obstacles, the literature also indicates that institutional encounters may become sites where exclusion is reproduced through professional attitudes and everyday interactions. Drawing on qualitative interviews with asylum-seeking women, Borges (2025) demonstrates that interactions with institutional professionals may be characterized by neglect, hostility, and cultural insensitivity, which reinforce feelings of abandonment and vulnerability among refugees. Participants in the study frequently described their relationships with reception institutions as distant or unsupportive, reporting that professionals often failed to provide adequate assistance or meaningful engagement during the integration process (Borges, 2025, pp. 7-8). In some cases, asylum seekers perceived professionals to hold negative assumptions about their motivations for seeking protection, contributing to experiences of discrimination and social exclusion within institutional settings. As one participant explained, professionals "*often confuse us with economic migrants and think we are here to steal their jobs*" (Borges, 2025, p. 9).

These patterns are echoed in Casquilho-Martins et al. (2025), whose findings further suggest that exclusion may be reinforced by insufficient training, weak continuity of care, and uneven coordination between healthcare and social intervention. Interviews conducted with migrant communities' report instances of discriminatory treatment, insufficient training among staff, and difficulties in ensuring continuity of care within healthcare institutions. One interviewee's note:

> *"There is a shortage of doctors for appointments, including urgent-day appointments, so people have to go to the hospital. Even when accompanying a family, the staff have no training and refuse to give information and guarantee a response to rights, particularly for refugees. Then there are mental health and physical emergencies, chronic illnesses, but they can't follow up on them*" (Casquilho-Martins et al., 2025, p. 229).

Another respondent emphasized that unequal treatment may occur in everyday institutional interactions, stating that "*the service is different with the poor and poorly literate, even when they are victims, there is inhumane service*" (Casquilho-Martins et al., 2025, p. 229).

These accounts also point to broader institutional gaps in coordination between healthcare services and social intervention. Interviewees reported limited involvement of social workers within primary healthcare settings, noting that health centers do not always actively engage with complex social cases involving migrants and refugees. In addition, some professionals indicated that discriminatory attitudes may occasionally occur in frontline interactions with migrant users, including at reception desks within healthcare institutions (Casquilho-Martins et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings reinforce the patterns identified by Borges (2025), suggesting that barriers to service access may arise not only from formal administrative procedures but also from everyday institutional practices, limited professional training, and insufficient integration between healthcare and social support services.

These dynamics are also reflected in broader research on refugee women's experiences within host country institutions, which emphasizes that interactions with institutional actors are not limited to administrative procedure but also encompass emotional, relational, and gendered dimensions that shape refugees' perceptions of belonging and trust. In this sense, institutional structures and the everyday practices of professionals may determine whether refugees experience support or exclusion within reception systems, influencing how fairness, empathy, and respect are perceived in institutional encounters (Borges, 2024). Furthermore, research on refugee women's narratives highlights how displacement experiences are often shaped by overlapping forms of structural, symbolic, and gender-based violence occurring across countries of origin, migration journeys, and host societies. These dynamics may reinforce vulnerability in reception contexts, particularly when institutional responses fail to adequately recognize the complex trajectories shaping refugee women's lives (Borges, 2024).

These findings suggest that, beyond administrative barriers, the attitudes and everyday practices of institutional actors play a significant role in shaping refugees' experiences of inclusion, trust, and belonging within host societies. Integration research similarly highlights that trust in institutions, social participation, and positive interactions with professionals are key factors influencing refugees' long-term integration outcomes and sense of belonging in host societies (Ager & Strang, 2008).

A central component of effective social work practice in refugee contexts involves the development of cultural competency among practitioners. Cultural competency refers to the ability of professionals to engage respectfully and effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, considering differences in language, values, social norms, and migration experiences. As noted previously, evidence from recent research on migrant healthcare access by Casquilho-Martins et al. (2025) further highlights that insufficient cultural and linguistic sensitivity among professionals can hinder effective service provision. Interviews conducted with practitioners report that some healthcare units lack adequate training to address cultural differences and gender dynamics when interacting with migrant users, particularly in cases involving refugees and other vulnerable groups.

Studies emphasize that developing cultural sensitivity and empathy is essential for establishing trust between social workers and refugee clients, particularly when working with individuals who may have experienced displacement, loss, and institutional uncertainty (Costa et al., 2019; Rösgen et al., 2026). However, research also indicates that many professionals initially lacked specific training related to refugee experiences, highlighting the need for specialized educational programs that address intercultural engagement and refugee-specific vulnerabilities (Costa et al., 2019). Training initiatives for social workers increasingly emphasize intercultural communication skills and gender-sensitive approaches to better respond to the diversity of refugee experiences. These training programs also promote the development of professional competencies related to trauma awareness, cross-cultural dialogue, and conflict mediation. According to Demidenko and Štuopytė (2025), such training seeks to equip practitioners with the practical tools necessary to address the complex social and psychological needs of refugees while ensuring that services are delivered in culturally appropriate and sensitive ways.

The practices of social workers are also shaped by the broader institutional environment within which refugee reception takes place. Refugee integration policies in Portugal are implemented through the combined efforts of governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations, which collaborate to deliver services and implement public policies. In this context, decentralized municipal social intervention plays an important role in shaping the effectiveness of social action (Gonçalves & Ferreira, 2023). As these authors note, social workers operating within decentralized systems must often alternate between designating targeted social intervention strategies for specific groups and mediating access to universal rights and public services (Gonçalves & Ferreira, 2023).

By virtue of this, refugees should also have access to social rights. Hence, this mediating role further reinforces social workers' position as key actors in navigating the relationship between institutional structures and the everyday needs of refugee populations. At the same time, this mediating role is exercised under conditions of significant institutional pressure. Research on Portuguese social protection systems further highlights that increasing social vulnerability and growing demand for social services have placed additional pressure on frontline social workers, who must respond to complex social problems within institutional environments often characterized by limited resources and administrative constraints (Casquilho-Martins, 2021).

Institutions such as the High Commission for Migration (ACM), and more recently the newly created Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA)(de Sousa, 2024), have historically played a central role in coordinating integration programs and promoting initiatives aimed at supporting refugee inclusion in Portuguese society (Calado & Couteiro, 2020; Vieira et al., 2017). At the same time, civil society, organizations, and NGOs contribute significantly to the operationalization of integration policies by providing direct support to refugees through housing assistance, employment support, and social services. Through partnerships between public institutions and civil society actors, integration

programs aim to provide comprehensive assistance that addresses both immediate reception needs and longer-term processes of social inclusion (Calado & Couteiro, 2020). In addition to institutional coordination and cultural competency, contemporary social work practices increasingly incorporate trauma-informed care principles. Refugees often arrive in host societies after experiencing complex forms of trauma associated with conflict, persecution, forced displacement, and prolonged uncertainty. Trauma-informed approaches, therefore, seek to recognize the psychological impact of these experiences and to ensure that support services are delivered in ways that promote safety, trust, and empowerment (George, 2012; Wood et al., 2022).

Trauma-informed social work practice involves an awareness of how experiences before, during, and after migration can influence refugees' mental health and well-being. According to George (2012), effective service delivery requires practitioners to consider the cumulative effects of pre-migration violence, migration journeys, and post-migration stressors such as uncertainty, social isolation, and bureaucratic obstacles. By incorporating trauma-informed perspectives, social workers can develop interventions that support emotional recovery while also facilitating refugees' broader social integration (George, 2012; Wood et al., 2022). Research on refugee mental health further highlights that exposure to cumulative stressors before, during, and after displacement can significantly affect psychological well-being, emphasizing the importance of integrated psychosocial support within reception and integration systems (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; Silove et al., 2017).

Evidence suggests that the integration of trauma-informed approaches into social work practice can contribute to improved mental health outcomes among refugee populations. By recognizing the psychological dimensions of displacement and adopting supportive, empathetic engagement strategies, social workers are better able to foster resilience and promote long-term well-being among refugees navigating complex resettlement processes (George, 2012; Wood et al., 2022). Overall, social work practices in refugee reception systems in Portugal reflect a combination of multidisciplinary collaboration; however, the existing literature demonstrates that additional training in culturally responsive engagement and trauma-informed intervention strategies is needed. These practices operate within broader institutional and policy frameworks that shape resources available to refugees and influence the forms of support provided during the integration process.

While existing programs have established important foundations for refugee support, research indicates that ongoing adaptation and improvement remain necessary to respond effectively to the evolving needs of refugee populations and to strengthen the long-term outcomes of integration policies (Constantino & Minas, 2022). At the same time, the literature reviewed in this section suggests that social work practices are never neutral: they are embedded in institutional relations that shape how refugees are categorized, supported, governed, and recognized. It is precisely these dynamics of power, mediation, and subject formation that the following chapter examines in greater detail.

# 4. SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE, POWER, AND REFUGEE AGENCY

This chapter operationalizes the theoretical framework by examining how identity, power, and social work practice interact within empirical contexts, forming the basis for the subsequent qualitative analysis.

## 4.1 INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND IDENTITY FORMATION

The preceding sections have shown that refugee reception and integration in Portugal unfold within institutional environments structured by bureaucratic procedures, professional mediation, and uneven access to rights and services (Costa et al., 2019; Vacchiano, 2018). These dynamics are not only administrative or practical; they shape how refugees are perceived, categorized, and positioned within the host society. In this sense, identity formation must be understood not merely as an internal psychological process, but as one that unfolds within relations of institutional power.

This perspective can be further deepened through Relational Social Work, which shifts the analytical focus from individuals or institutions alone to the relational networks in which both are embedded. From this viewpoint, social problems and their potential solutions are not located solely within individuals or within structural systems, but within "coping networks" composed of interconnected actors who share concerns and act together toward change (Folgheraiter, 2017a; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017b, 2023). Within such networks, refugees are not passive recipients of institutional interventions but active participants in the co-production of solutions. Consequently, identity formation is shaped not only by institutional categorizations but also by the quality and structure of relationships within which individuals are positioned. This reinforces the argument that agency emerges relationally, through interaction, reciprocity, and shared meaning-making processes, rather than as an individual attribute detached from social contexts.

Refugees negotiate their sense of self within systems that assess needs, allocate resources, regulate access to services, and define the terms of legitimate participation.

In this context, social workers emerge as critical mediators of institutional power. Their role extends beyond service provision to helping refugees interpret their experiences within structural frameworks—understanding that barriers such as bureaucratic delays or labor exclusion are not personal failures but systemic conditions.

This mediating role is intrinsically linked to a human rights orientation, as it involves safeguarding refugees' access to rights while challenging institutional practices that may limit autonomy, participation, or recognition.

Institutional encounters, therefore, play an important role in shaping how refugees come to understand themselves and how others recognize them. As the literature reviewed in the previous section suggests, these encounters may position refugees simultaneously as subjects of protection and objects of governance, producing forms of dependence, uncertainty, and conditional inclusion (Vacchiano, 2018; Borges, 2025; Casquilho-Martins et al., 2025). Through such processes, institutional power does not merely organize reception; it also influences the symbolic and relational conditions within which refugee identities are formed.

At the same time, refugees are not merely passive recipients of institutional labels. Research increasingly highlights that they seek agency, affiliation, and continuity of self even under highly constrained conditions (Borges, 2024; Ager & Strang, 2008). Refugees frequently demonstrate emotional endurance, practical ingenuity, and future-oriented aspirations as they navigate displacement and resettlement (Borges, 2022; Borges, 2024). If the surrounding social and institutional environment is sufficiently flexible to recognize these capacities, refugees may actively negotiate new positions for themselves without abandoning prior identities, attachments, and competences (Lee, 2001; Borges, 2024). Identity formation, therefore, involves not only exposure to institutional power but also ongoing efforts to reinterpret, resist, and reconfigure the meanings imposed by institutional environments.

Within this process, social work occupies an ambivalent position. On the one hand, social workers are embedded within institutional systems and may, often unintentionally, reproduce classificatory logics that frame refugees primarily through narratives of need, dependency, or deficits in adaptation. A critical perspective on social practice, therefore, warns against exclusively assimilationist responses that privilege adjustment to host-society norms while neglecting refugees' histories, agency, and prior identities (Karlsson & Jönsson, 2020; Karim, 2023; Dominelli, 2022). On the other hand, social work also holds the potential to mediate institutional power in more reflexive and emancipatory ways. Empowerment-oriented practice recognizes that refugees are not defined solely by trauma or vulnerability but are also social actors capable of meaning-making, decision-making, and resilience (Borges, 2022; Borges, 2024).

Seen from this perspective, the central question is not whether institutions shape refugee identities, but how they do so—through which practices of recognition, mediation, and control—and with what consequences for agency and belonging. Understanding identity formation, therefore, requires attention to the interaction among institutional categorization, professional practice, and refugees' own efforts to sustain continuity, dignity, and self-determination under constrained conditions (Borges, 2024; Kivisto & La Vecchia-Mikkola, 2015).

This perspective highlights the need for a critical analytical framework capable of examining how institutional structures, professional practices, and refugee agencies interact in shaping identity formation within reception contexts. The following section,

therefore, develops a critical, reflective social work framework through which these dynamics can be examined more systematically.

## 4.2 TOWARDS A CRITICAL REFLECTIVE SOCIAL WORK FRAMEWORK

The process of identity formation for refugees and asylum seekers is inherently complex and multifaceted, shaped by ongoing negotiations between internal meaning-making and external socio-political constraints (Kivisto & La Vecchia-Mikkola, 2015). In Portugal, this process unfolds within institutional contexts marked by forms of "institutional ignorance" that frequently interpret refugee experiences through lenses of passivity, trauma, and dependency.

Rather than revisiting these dynamics descriptively, this section consolidates the preceding theoretical discussion by synthesizing three interrelated analytical domains: identity negotiation, the dialogical self, external socio-political influences, and resilience in hybrid identities.

By integrating Dialogical Self Theory, Ecological Systems Theory, and a Strengths-Based Approach with anti-oppressive, multifocal, and decolonial lenses, the section advances a critical framework for examining refugee identity formation and social work practice beyond "one-size-fits-all" models.

To put this theoretical outlook into practice, it is important to identify the fundamental roles that social work can play in the identity process without perpetuating institutional marginalization or dependency. A critical reflective framework can operate across four interconnected dimensions of refugee reception in Portugal: (a) facilitating access to rights, services, and social participation; (b) strengthening agency and informed decision making; (c) building relational belonging across family, peers, and community networks; and (d) safeguarding self-determination.

In line with this, Relational Social Work (RSW) conceptualizes the practitioner's role not as a problem-solver or service provider, but as a "relational guide" who facilitates the emergence of collaborative processes within networks of actors (Folgheraiter, 2017a; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017b, 2023). Rather than delivering predefined solutions, social workers support the conditions under which solutions can emerge from the interactions among refugees, institutions, and community actors. This approach is grounded in the principle of reciprocity, which holds that effective helping relationships require all participants to both give and receive support, thereby redistributing power and enabling shared agency (Folgheraiter, 2017a; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017b, 2023). Such a perspective reinforces the shift from treatment-oriented models toward relational, participatory, and empowerment-based practices, aligning closely with anti-oppressive and

decolonial approaches that emphasize co-construction, mutual recognition, and the validation of lived experience.

### 4.2.1 (a) FACILITATING ACCESS TO RIGHTS, SERVICES, AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

If identity negotiation unfolds within ecological systems structured by power relations, then access to rights constitutes not only a structural precondition for participation but a core dimension of human rights practice within social work. In Portugal, despite inclusive legislative frameworks, research highlights a persistent gap between formal rights and their realization in everyday practice (Costa et al., 2019; Goldberg, 2021; Souza & Costa, 2018). Bureaucratic fragmentation and institutional mediation frequently position social workers as intermediaries between refugees and state systems (Challinor, 2024; Lemaire & Oesch, 2024).

This positioning requires them to navigate administrative procedures related to status, housing, welfare, and healthcare tasks that increasingly rely on digital platforms, which can unintentionally deepen the digital divide for those without technological capital (Savadye et al., 2025; Claasens & Lombard, 2025). Furthermore, housing precarity, the scarcity of affordable accommodation, and discriminatory barriers further intensify refugees' vulnerability, demonstrating that access is not automatic but structurally contested (Constantino & Minas, 2022; Branco & Xerez, 2026).

In this context, facilitating access cannot remain a technical or procedural task; it requires a multidisciplinary and flexible approach to meet diverse human needs (Costa et al., 2019). This demands a rights-based orientation that frames refugee claims as enforceable entitlements grounded in human dignity (Daniel et al., 2025). Social workers may also contribute to legal mobilization processes, supporting strategic litigation and preventing the instrumentalization of refugees in institutional struggles (Pichl & Franke, 2025), thereby reinforcing their role as human rights defenders in contexts of systemic constraint (Teloni et al., 2023; Robinson, 2026; Rizopoulou, 2026).

Crucially, access must translate into social participation through the establishment of "linkages of trust" between providers and the community (Sharer et al, 2026). Multidisciplinary and culturally sensitive professional practices are essential in promoting inclusion that moves beyond passive reception toward active engagement in education, labour markets, and community life (Lau & Rodgers, 2021; Mroczkowska, 2024; Costa et al., 2019). Without such an orientation, reception systems risk reproducing conditional inclusion and managed dependency (Goldberg, 2021).

Facilitating access, therefore, constitutes the structural foundation of empowerment-oriented social work practice; it creates the material and institutional conditions through which refugees can reposition themselves as social actors within the host society. However,

structural access alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. Even when rights and services are formally available, refugees may remain passive recipients unless they are supported in developing their voice, confidence, and decision-making capacity. This can be achieved through participatory co-design (Bromark et al., 2023), highlighting that critical reflective practice must move beyond facilitating access toward strengthening agency.

Thus, facilitating access to rights becomes both a practical and ethical responsibility, transforming social work into a form of human rights advocacy that defends dignity and enables meaningful participation.

### 4.2.2 (b) STRENGTHENING AGENCY

Strengthening agency refers to enabling asylum seekers and refugees to exercise informed decision-making and to have a recognized voice in the choices that affect their lives (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Agency is not a static property, but an "ecological achievement" realized through the active engagement of individuals within their specific social and material contexts (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Branco & Xerez, 2026). In the Portuguese context, where bureaucratic complexity and institutional mediation often shape refugee trajectories, this achievement is frequently constrained by procedural opacity and significant power asymmetries between the individual and the state (Santinho, 2013; Constantino & Minas, 2022).

From a human rights perspective, agency is inseparable from the ability to exercise rights in practice, as decision-making, participation, and voice are central components of human dignity and autonomy.

One practical strategy for reinforcing agency is collaborative case preparation. Research demonstrates that when lawyers and social workers work jointly with asylum seekers to prepare legal cases, stress is reduced and the quality of the information presented improves, while asylum seekers remain actively engaged in narrating and shaping their own claims (Fiske & Kenny, 2004). Such collaboration enhances credibility not by speaking for refugees, but by supporting them in articulating their experiences with clarity and ownership.

Agency is further strengthened through multidisciplinary and flexible professional approaches. Studies on refugee inclusion highlight the importance of empathy, cultural and gender sensitivity, and pragmatic responsiveness to diverse needs (Costa et al., 2019). Training initiatives such as the *VeSTA* program emphasize shifting professionals' perspectives from viewing migrants as vulnerable subjects to recognizing them as social actors capable of participation and contribution (Allegri et al., 2020). Adapting similar models within the Portuguese system can enhance the capacity for informed decision-making.

Strengthening agency also requires reinforcing social networks. Research shows that social ties function as crucial resources for navigating institutions, accessing information, and making informed life decisions (Allegri et al., 2020). Beyond immediate networks, encouraging the development of economic and social capital enables refugees to create a sense of place and long-term orientation within the host society (Sahldengil, 2024). This perspective also challenges victimhood discourses surrounding forced migrants by emphasizing their capacity to mobilize resources, sustain aspirations, and actively participate in shaping their own futures. When refugees invest in skills, relationships, and economic initiatives, they reposition themselves from managed beneficiaries to active contributors.

Advocacy and activism likewise play a central role. Professionals who engage in collective advocacy help challenge narratives that frame refugees solely as victims or opportunists (Costa et al., 2019; Santinho, 2013). By increasing visibility and confronting restrictive interpretations of protection, social workers contribute to environments in which refugees' voices are politically and socially recognized.

Agency is also deeply connected to psychological security. Trauma and existential instability often inhibit participation in decision-making, acting as a primary barrier to the 'active engagement' required in legal case preparation (Fiske & Kenny, 2004). Evidence underscores the importance of attentive listening and culturally responsive support in restoring the narrative coherence necessary for refugees to make informed choices. Building upon this internal stability, economic empowerment constitutes a further dimension of agency. Initiatives such as the Migrant Entrepreneur Support Office (GAEM) in Portugal demonstrate that promoting entrepreneurship can strengthen autonomy, integration, and long-term empowerment (Calado & Couteiro, 2020). Supporting micro-business development enables refugees to exercise initiative, build economic independence, and shape their own professional trajectories.

Finally, strengthening agency requires attention to governance structures. Research on Portugal's multilevel refugee reception network shows that national actors often dominate decision-making processes, limiting local responsiveness and, by extension, individual agency (Muniz, 2023). Increasing the participation of local organizations and community actors enhances contextual sensitivity and supports more participatory integration pathways.

Although Portugal presents several best practices in refugee reception, integration programs continue to face implementation gaps that may constrain meaningful participation (Constantino & Minas, 2022). Therefore, addressing these gaps is essential for translating policy commitments into lived empowerment. Taken together, strengthening agency transforms social work practice from supportive accompaniment into a collaborative partnership. It ensures that refugees are not merely navigating systems but actively shaping their trajectory within them.

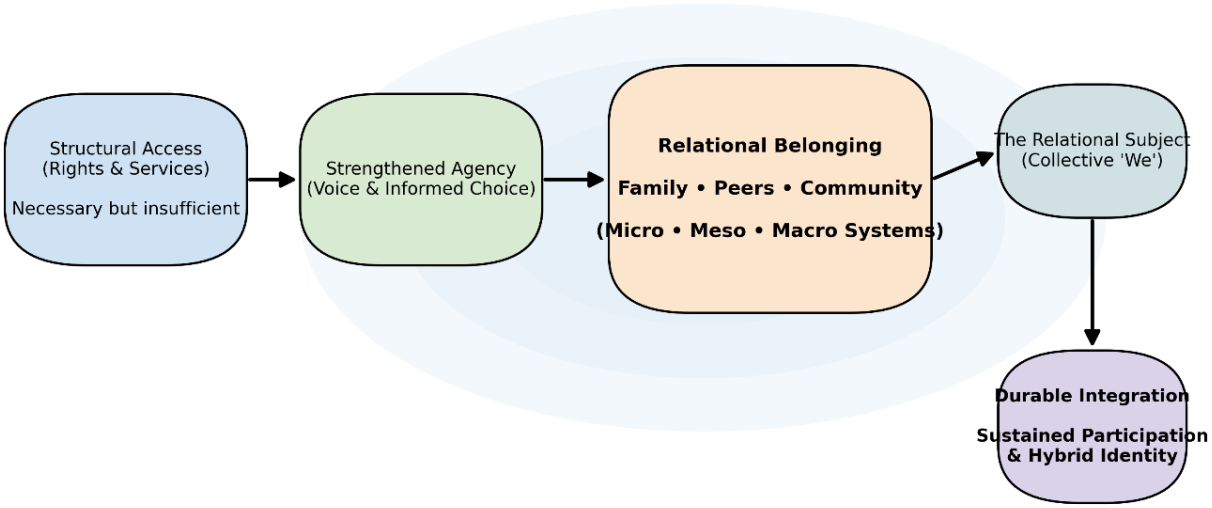
Ultimately, the exercise of agency is not an isolated act of the will, but a social process nurtured within the web of human connections. While the strengthening of individual voice and economic autonomy provides the "how" of integration, it is the quality of relational environments that provide the "where".

As refugees transition from managed beneficiaries to active social actors, their agency is both exercised and sustained through the stability and support of interpersonal ties. This underscores that agency cannot be fully understood or maintained in isolation; its durability depends on the relational contexts in which it is embedded.

Consequently, the analytical and practical focus must shift from the individual alone to the broader relational landscape they inhabit, highlighting the centrality of relational belonging across family, peer, and community networks, where identity is not only defended but also co-constructed, shared, and mirrored—a focus taken up in the following section.

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, durable integration depends not only on structural access and individual agency but on the relational ecologies in which agency is exercised.

*Figure 1- Conceptual model. The Relational Ecology of Refugee Integration*




**Source:** Prepared by the author. Conceptual model based on Donati (2010, 2017); Donati & Archer (2015); Ungar (2011); Oliveira, Novais & Ramos (2022); Folgheraiter & Raineri (2012); Borges (2024, 2025); Pereira et al. (2019); Wu et al. (2023); Ziersch et al. (2023); Bulled (2025).

### 4.2.3 (c) BUILDING RELATIONAL BELONGING ACROSS FAMILY, PEERS, AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS

While facilitating access and strengthening agency are necessary conditions for refugee empowerment, they are not sufficient to ensure durability over time (Donati, 2017; Ungar, 2011).

This reflects a broader understanding that integration is not merely an individual process but a fundamentally social and relational one, shaped through connections across family, peer, and community networks.

Agency, as demonstrated in the preceding section, is exercised within concrete social contexts and remains vulnerable when it is not supported by stable and meaningful relationships (Oliveira et al., 2022), as true social integration is an emergent effect of the "Relational Subject" rather than the sum of individual actions (Donati & Archer, 2015).

Donati and Archer (2015) argue that the "outcomes of relationality" cannot be explained by individual actions or a series of transactions. Instead, they regard "the relation itself as an emergent property, with internal causal effects upon its participants" (p.3). Hence, if a refugee has the agency to act but lacks a "Relational Subject" (a collective "We"), they lack the "commitment, cooperation, and collective action" (Donati & Archer, 2015, p. 3) that provide a stable social identity. Therefore, empowerment is only durable when it is anchored in these emergent social bonds.

This insight directs analytical attention beyond individual decision-making toward the relational environments in which agency is enacted (Donati, 2010; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012; Branco & Xerez, 2026). Identity formation unfolds dialogically and ecologically, co-constructed through ongoing interactions across family, peer, community, and institutional systems (Ungar, 2011; Oliveira et al., 2022; Borges, 2024, 2025; Pereira et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2023; Ziersch et al., 2023; Bulled, 2025).

Drawing on ecological approaches to resilience, meaningful relational embeddedness within micro- (family), meso- (peer and community), and macro-level (policy and institutional) contexts constitutes a key predictor of adaptive identity reconfiguration and sustained participation (Ungar, 2011). When such relational "moorings" are absent, empowerment initiatives risk remaining procedural rather than transformative, as individuals lack the solid social infrastructure necessary to maintain engagement, voice, and long-term orientation (Oliveira et al., 2022).

In the Portuguese context, this relational dimension acquires particular significance. Research on refugee reception demonstrates that trajectories are frequently shaped by "double forced mobilities," whereby refugees are relocated to municipalities lacking pre-existing networks of belonging (Oliveira et al., 2022). This fragmentation is further

intensified when institutional arrangements fail to account for family dynamics and gendered vulnerabilities. Studies on asylum-seeking women highlight how institutional discrimination undermines access to protection and participation, weakening family stability and relational continuity (Borges, 2024; Borges, 2025). Social work practices that adopt culturally responsive approaches and actively involve families as partners in decision-making processes foster trust and reposition belonging as a negotiated, shared process rather than an imposed framework (Pereira et al., 2019).

Peer networks likewise function as critical sites of belonging and identity affirmation. Community-based interventions show that structured spaces for connection, particularly for asylum-seeking mothers and other vulnerable groups, strengthen well-being, self-determination, and coping capacities while reducing resettlement stress (Wu et al., 2023). Broader research on social capital confirms that supportive friendships and neighborly ties enhance integration outcomes, self-perception, and everyday agency (Ziersch et al., 2023). In this sense, belonging operates not merely as a symbolic dimension of inclusion but as a protective and enabling resource embedded in daily relational practices (Bulled, 2025).

At the community level, civic society organizations and local actors play an indispensable mediating role. Evidence from Portuguese reception programs indicates that when refugee families' voices are meaningfully incorporated into program design and evaluation, integration pathways become more responsive, sustainable, and socially anchored (Barbosa et al., 2021). However, integration initiatives must move beyond service delivery toward fostering genuine community cohesion and reciprocal engagement between refugees and host communities (Daley, 2009). Without such reciprocity, belonging remains conditional and fragile, reinforcing asymmetrical inclusion and limiting long-term participation (Constantino & Minas, 2022).

Relational belonging is also closely linked to psychological resilience. Ecological and salutogenic studies demonstrate that connectedness to peers and supportive networks strengthens coping capacities among young refugees navigating restrictive and exclusionary environments (Papathanasiou et al., 2025). Yet these relational processes unfold within broader structures of inequality. Intersectional analyses of the Portuguese asylum system reveal how systemic discrimination continues to shape refugee trajectories, constraining substantive participation even when community initiatives are present (Branco & Xerez, 2026).

From a social work perspective, these findings underscore the need to move beyond individualized empowerment models. Professional intervention must be understood as the facilitation and strengthening of relational assets across family, peer, and community systems, rather than the correction of individual deficits (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012). Relational belonging thus operates as the connective tissue between structural access and lived agency, embedding identity formation within everyday relationships and enabling refugees to reposition themselves as social actors within the host society. In this sense,

durable integration emerges not from access or agency alone, but from relational ecologies that sustain both over time.

Relational belonging can therefore be understood as a social condition for the realization of human rights, as individuals are more able to exercise autonomy and participate when supported by stable, meaningful relationships.

### 4.2.4 (d) SAFEGUARD SELF-DETERMINATION

If facilitating access establishes the structural preconditions for participation, strengthening agency enables refugees to navigate and act within these systems, and relational belonging supports sustained engagement through supportive networks, then safeguarding self-determination represents the culminating stage of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008; Sen, 1999), at which individuals can exercise autonomy and actively shape their life trajectories within the host society. The framework, therefore, highlights how institutional conditions, individual agency, and social relationships interact to shape refugees' ability to translate formal rights into meaningful opportunities for participation and long-term autonomy. The following section applies this capability–based framework to the Portuguese asylum and integration context to examine how institutional structures, social relationships, and individual agency shape refugees' opportunities for self-determination.

Within this framework, self-determination represents the practical realization of human rights, where individuals are able not only to hold rights formally but to exercise them meaningfully in shaping their life trajectories.

In the Portuguese context, this process unfolds within a migration governance system shaped by successive policy reforms that balance immigration control with regularization and integration mechanisms, thereby establishing the institutional conditions that underpin refugees' capabilities and self-determination. As Peixoto, Sabino, and Abreu (2009) explain, Portuguese immigration policy has evolved through incremental institutional compromises that have gradually expanded migrants' access to rights and social participation. These institutional arrangements shape the opportunity structures through which refugees can access social institutions, exercise autonomy, and pursue pathways to integration (pp. 179-181, 190-193).

*Figure 2 - Capability-Based Framework for Refugee Self-Determination and Durable Integration.*




Source: Prepared by the author. Adapted from Sen (1999) and Ager & Strang (2008).

Portugal has often been described as a distinctive case within Europe due to its relatively inclusive immigration and integration policies and its emphasis on regularization mechanisms and institutional support structures (Cook, 2018). However, research on refugee experiences in Portugal also highlights tensions between the country's generally inclusive policy discourse and the everyday institutional practices encountered by refugees, demonstrating that formal commitments to integration do not always translate into effective access to rights and opportunities (Vacchiano, 2018; Santinho, 2013; Santinho & Rebelo, 2024).

Portuguese legislation establishes key procedural and substantive guarantees that underpin refugees' capacity for self-determination. Law No. 27/2008 of 30 June regulates asylum and subsidiary protection, granting procedural rights such as access to information, interpretation, and legal assistance, which allow applicants to participate actively in decisions regarding their protection status (Lei n.° 27/2008, art. 3, 16, 52). The assessment of international protection claims follows a two-stage administrative procedure, consisting of an admissibility phase followed by a substantive examination of the application (Gomes, 2016). During this process, applicants may present evidence, respond to preliminary findings, and access judicial review mechanisms, ensuring that asylum seekers can meaningfully engage with the decision-making process rather than remain passive recipients of protection (Gomes, 2016).

Complementarily, Law No. 23/2007 regulates the residence and integration of third-country nationals, guaranteeing equal treatment for recognized refugees in areas such as employment, education, healthcare, and social services (Lei n.° 23/2007, art. 4, 133, 135). Together, these legal frameworks establish institutional conditions that support refugees' transition from beneficiaries of protection to participants in social and economic life (Neves & Nolasco, 2025; Gomes, 2016; Ferreira, 2015). The Portuguese protection regime further distinguishes between refugee status and subsidiary protection, which provide different levels of residence stability and renewal conditions that may shape refugees' long-term integration prospects and planning capacities (Gomes, 2016). Nevertheless, empirical studies indicate that the existence of legal protections alone does not guarantee effective integration outcomes, as refugees may still encounter bureaucratic complexity, precarious living conditions, and difficulties accessing institutional support systems (Santinho & Rebelo, 2024).

From a capability-based perspective, these legal guarantees function as institutional resources that expand refugees' substantive freedoms. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach, integration can be understood not merely as the provision of formal rights but also as the expansion of individuals' real freedoms and agency to pursue lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999, pp. 18–19, 73–75). Recent scholarship on refugee integration similarly emphasizes the importance of shifting policy attention from narrow outcome-based measures toward developing capabilities that enable refugees to live meaningful, flourishing lives within host societies (Phillimore, 2024). At the same time, research on refugee integration highlights that legal rights alone do not guarantee effective

participation if individuals lack the social, institutional, and economic resources necessary to exercise them (Decmann, 2021).

However, the extent to which these institutional resources translate into genuine capabilities depends on broader structural and socio-economic conditions within the host society, including access to stable housing, employment opportunities, language training, and the recognition of prior qualifications–factors that have been identified as significant barriers for refugees in Portugal (Santinho & Rebelo, 2024).

Within this institutional environment, professional mediation becomes critical, and social work plays a particularly significant role in safeguarding refugee self-determination by supporting individuals to navigate institutional systems and exercise agency within them (European Migration Network, 2008; Santinho, 2022; Santos & Mateus, 2019). Research on migrant and refugee mental health further shows that cultural norms surrounding masculinity, stigma, and expectations of self-reliance can discourage men from seeking psychological or social support, even when experiencing significant distress (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Research by Piatkowski et al. (2024), examining masculinity and help-seeking behavior more broadly, similarly demonstrates that stronger endorsement of traditional masculine norms is associated with more negative attitudes towards seeking psychological support and greater perceived barriers to accessing services. Consistent with these findings, more recent studies similarly confirm that stigma and culturally embedded expectations of masculine self-reliance continue to influence help-seeking behavior among refugee men, often limiting engagement with formal mental health services and institutional support systems (Nickerson et al., 2020; Abdikadir et al., 2024).

Such barriers can constrain refugees' ability to convert available support services into meaningful opportunities for wellbeing and participation. As a result, professional mediation becomes essential in helping refugees access appropriate services and navigate institutional systems.

While the legal framework established by Law No. 27/2008 provides formal guarantees of protection, the reception phase may unintentionally generate conditions of dependency and institutional passivity. Scholars describe how prolonged administrative procedures and fragmented institutional coordination can produce situations of "institutional liminality", in which refugees experience suspended lives while awaiting state decisions (Santos & Mateus, 2019). Qualitative research based on interviews with refugees across several European Union member states similarly highlights how refugees frequently experience uncertainty, dependency, and limited control over their everyday lives during the early stages of integration (Mestheneos et al., 2000). Therefore, during these periods, individuals may be positioned as passive subjects of administrative processes rather than active participants shaping their future trajectories (Santos & Mateus, 2019).

Social workers play a crucial role in counteracting these dynamics by acting as mediators of autonomy within complex institutional environments (European Migration Network,

2008; Santinho, 2022; Santos & Mateus, 2019). Gender norms may also influence patterns of help-seeking, as research shows that refugee men may be constrained by expectations of masculine self-reliance and, therefore, be less likely to request psychological or social support, leaving women to assume a greater role in seeking assistance for families (Freedman, 2016). These gendered patterns of help seeking are also linked to broader pressures experienced during resettlement, including expectations surrounding employment, family provision, and the renegotiation of masculine identities following displacement (Hughes, 2025). Research based on refugee interviews across the European Union also highlights the importance of creating opportunities for refugees to articulate their experiences and participate actively in shaping their integration trajectories (Mestheneos et al., 2000). By providing legal and social literacy, particularly regarding access to employment, healthcare, education, and administrative procedures, professionals help refugees navigate institutional systems and regain greater control over their integration trajectories (European Migration Network, 2008; Santinho, 2022).

Safeguarding self-determination also involves addressing the symbolic dimensions of integration.

This includes recognizing refugees not only as beneficiaries of protection but as holders of valid knowledge and lived experience, contributing to what decolonial scholarship identifies as epistemic justice–where refugees' perspectives are acknowledged as legitimate contributions to social work practice and knowledge production.

Social work practice increasingly challenges narratives that frame refugees' experiences primarily through vulnerability or victimhood and instead emphasizes empowerment, participation, and self-determination as core principles of anti-oppressive and rights-based practice (Dominelli, 2002, 2010a, 2010b). Research on migration and masculinity also highlights how refugee men are frequently portrayed in public discourse as culturally problematic or potentially threatening, reinforcing stereotypes that obscure the complexity of their experiences and identities (Herz, 2019). Empirical research further suggests that these representations intersect with expectations surrounding work, identity, and masculinity, shaping refugee men's experiences of integration and psychological well-being during resettlement (Clark et al., 2024). By recognizing professional experience, skills, and personal aspirations, practitioners support processes of identity reconfiguration in which refugees can project future-oriented identities beyond institutional labels and position themselves as contributors within the host society (Oliveira et al., 2022; Magano et al., 2023).

At the same time, enabling autonomy requires attention to structural inequalities embedded within integration systems. Gender-sensitive approaches are particularly important to ensure that women's pathways to independence are not constrained by institutional practices or cultural expectations that may limit access to employment, education, or public participation (Borges, 2025). Research on gender and humanitarian governance further shows that gender equality initiatives may simultaneously empower and constrain refugees

when they rely on simplified representations of women as vulnerable victims and men as problematic actors that need reform (Freedman, 2019; Olivius, 2016). Moreover, gendered migration experiences reveal that women actively develop strategies to navigate insecurity and pursue protection for themselves and their families, challenging simplified portrayals of female refugees as passive subjects (Freedman, 2016). Gendered social expectations can also shape refugees' willingness to seek assistance or to express vulnerability, thereby constraining access to institutional support and limiting individuals' capacity to exercise agency and self-determination (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Herz, 2019).

In capability terms, these gendered expectations may function as social conversion factors that influence the extent to which individuals can transform available institutional resources into real opportunities for participation and autonomy. By acknowledging differentiated vulnerabilities alongside existing strengths, social workers can support more equitable pathways toward self-determination.

Finally, refugee autonomy in Portugal frequently develops through forms of situated solidarity emerging from collaboration between state institutions, municipalities, and civil society organizations (Magano et al., 2023). Within this decentralized governance context, social workers facilitate partnerships that position refugees as active participants in designing their integration trajectories rather than passive beneficiaries of support (Constantino & Minas, 2022). Through such collaborative practices, social work contributes to transforming integration from a purely administrative process into a participatory pathway toward long-term self-determination.

Although Portugal maintains relatively inclusive frameworks and participates actively in European resettlement and relocation mechanisms, it receives a comparatively small number of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection (Strungari, 2023). Structural factors, including labor market conditions, economic prospects, geographic location, and migration networks, influence refugees' destination preferences and settlement patterns across Europe. These dynamics help explain why some beneficiaries of protection engage in onward mobility within the European Union, highlighting that legal protection alone does not guarantee durable integration outcomes (Strungari, 2023). The effective realization of refugees' autonomy, therefore, depends not only on formal rights but also on socio-economic environments that enable individuals to translate legal status into stable, substantive opportunities for participation and long-term planning (Phillimore, 2024).

Beyond legal and structural conditions, self-determination is further supported by the development of social and economic capabilities. Language acquisition facilitates access to education, employment, and public services while strengthening communication skills and social inclusion (Queirós et al., 2025a; Queirós et al., 2025b). Civil society organizations and NGOs also play an important role by providing legal counseling, language training, employment assistance, and integration programs that help refugees navigate institutional systems and strengthen their practical capacities (Costa et al., 2019;

Calado & Couteiro, 2020). Economic empowerment initiatives, including entrepreneurship and vocational training programs, further support refugees' independence by enabling access to employment and professional development opportunities (Calado & Couteiro, 2020; Pereira et al., 2019).

Together, these legal, structural, and social supports create the institutional and social conditions through which refugees can convert formal rights into real capabilities, enabling them to exercise self-determination and actively shape their life trajectories in the host society.

In this sense, refugee integration can be understood not only as a process of institutional inclusion but also as the expansion of individuals' real freedom to participate, make choices, and pursue lives they have reason to value.

# 5. METODOLOGY

## 5.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The preceding analysis has established that refugee identity formation in Portugal is not a linear process of adaptation but a dialogical and power-mediated negotiation unfolding within institutional, socio-political, and relational contexts. While refugees actively construct plural and hybrid identities, their self-understandings are shaped—and at times constrained—by bureaucratic structures, conditional forms of inclusion, and professional practices embedded in particular "webs of belief."

At the same time, the literature reveals a central tension: although Portuguese legislation promotes inclusive integration, implementation practices may produce deficit-oriented, assimilationist, or depoliticized frameworks that obscure refugees' agency and lived knowledge.

This misalignment between theoretical commitments to empowerment and everyday institutional realities creates a critical space for inquiry.

Accordingly, this study proceeds from the premise that identity, power, and social work practice are mutually constitutive. Understanding how refugees negotiate identity, therefore, requires attention to both individual meaning-making processes and the institutional environments within which these unfold.

In light of these considerations, this study aims to achieve the objectives outlined in the sections below.

## 5.1 GENERAL OBJECTIVE

To explore how refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal negotiate their personal and cultural identities within institutional and socio-political contexts, and to examine how social work interventions can support processes of integration grounded in agency, human rights, and self-determination rather than assimilation.

Grounded in the preceding theoretical and empirical discussion, the following research objectives and questions examine the intersection of identity negotiation, institutional structures, and social work practices in the Portuguese context.

## 5.2 SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze how refugees and asylum seekers construct and negotiate multiple identity positions in relation to heritage, migration trajectories, and host society expectations in the Portuguese context.
2. To examine how institutional structures and reception practices influence processes of belonging and self-understanding, particularly in relation to bureaucratic regulation, labor market positioning, language acquisition, and temporal uncertainty

3. To explore how imposed categorizations and public discourses shape refugees' self-perception, and how individuals resist, reinterpret, or reconfigure these labels in their everyday lives
4. To identify the resilience strategies and relational resources that support the development of hybrid and plural identities, emphasizing refugees' capacity for agency and meaning-making
5. To critically assess prevailing social work approaches in Portugal, examining whether and how they reproduce treatment-oriented, assimilationist, or deficit-based paradigms
6. To investigate how empowerment-oriented, strengths-based, anti-oppressive, and decolonial perspectives can inform social work interventions that foster refugees' "power to act" at individual, relational, and structural levels.
7. To contribute to the development of a critical-reflective social work framework that aligns integration practices with epistemic recognition, relational belonging, and sustainable self-determination

## 5.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To address the above objectives, this study is guided by the following research questions: *How do interactions with institutional labels and procedures shape refugees' identity negotiation in Portugal, and in what ways can supportive, rights-based social work practices strengthen their agency and relational belonging?*

This overarching question is further developed through the following subsidiary research questions, which allow for a more focused analysis of both lived experiences and professional practices:

1. How do refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal negotiate their personal and cultural identities within the socio-political and institutional contexts of reception?
2. In what ways can social work interventions in Portugal support refugees' integration processes while promoting agency, relational belonging, and self-determination?

## 5.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design grounded in a dialogical and narrative approach and primarily guided by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), while drawing on the iterative and comparative logic of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

The research design is guided by the assumption that refugee identity formation is not a fixed or individual phenomenon, but a dynamic, relational, and contextually situated process, shaped through ongoing interactions between personal meaning-making and institutional structures. In line with Dialogical Self Theory, identity is understood as a multiplicity of "I-positions" that emerge, interact, and transform over time and across contexts (Hermans, 2001).

In addition, the study acknowledges that identity formation occurs not only through internal dialogical processes but is also shaped by broader historical and structural conditions. Drawing on Bhatia and Ram (2001), identity is understood as situated within transnational contexts shaped by colonial histories, global inequalities, and power asymmetries. This perspective complements Dialogical Self Theory by situating individual meaning-making within wider socio-political and institutional frameworks, a perspective that is particularly relevant in the context of forced migration.

A qualitative approach is particularly well-suited to this study, as it enables in-depth exploration of lived experiences, subjective meanings, and relational processes that quantitative methods cannot capture. Furthermore, the exploratory nature of the study reflects its aim not to test predefined hypotheses, but to generate nuanced, context-sensitive insights into identity negotiation within refugee reception systems.

While the analysis is structured through reflexive thematic procedures, it is informed by the iterative, inductive, and comparative logic of constructivist grounded theory. This hybrid approach allows patterns, categories, and conceptual insights to emerge progressively from the data, rather than imposing a priori (Charmaz, 2014, p. 15). Importantly, the study does not aim to develop a full grounded theory but rather draws on its analytical logic to support depth, flexibility, and theoretical sensitivity.

## 5.5 EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONING AND RESEARCH PARADIGM

This study is grounded in a constructivist-dialogical epistemology, which assumes that knowledge is not discovered as an objective reality but co-constructed through social interaction, language, and context. From this perspective, identity is understood as relational, multi-voiced, and continuously shaped through narrative, interaction, and social experience (Hermans, 2001). Consequently, the research process is understood as relational, in which meanings emerge through interpretative engagement between the researcher and participants.

Constructivist grounded theory further supports this position by rejecting the idea of a neutral observer and instead recognizing that data and analysis are shaped through the researcher's interpretative engagement with participants (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 13-14)

This epistemological stance is further developed by Bhatia and Ram (2001), who argue that identity is not only dialogical but also *historically and politically situated*. From this perspective, identity negotiation among migrants and refugees unfolds within *transnational spaces shaped by colonial histories, global inequalities, and ongoing power asymmetries*.

This understanding is particularly relevant to the present study, as it situates identity formation not only within internal dialogical processes but also within broader structural and geopolitical conditions that shape available identity positions.

This theoretical positioning directly informed the design of the interview guides. As shown in the semi-structured interview framework, questions were developed to capture:

- Pre-migration identity formations (stabilizing I-positions)
- Moments of rupture and transformation during migration
- Experiences of institutional categorization and labeling
- Internal dialogical processes and identity tensions
- Expressions of agency, resistance, and self-determination

By structuring the interviews in this way, the study operationalizes the theoretical assumption that identity is simultaneously dialogical, relational, and structurally embedded. Questions addressing institutional encounters and imposed labels reflect Bhatia and Ram's (2001) emphasis on how identity is shaped through power relations and historically situated inequalities, while questions on internal dialogue align with Dialogical Self Theory's focus on multiplicity and voice.

This epistemological stance also aligns with:

- Dialogical Self Theory → identity as multiplicity
- Anti -oppressive and decolonial frameworks→ knowledge as situated and power-informed
- Strengths-based approaches → participants as meaning-makers, not objects of study

Thus, refugees are approached not as passive subjects but as active agents who interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct their identities within structurally constrained and historically situated contexts.

## 5.6 RESEARCH SETTING

This study was conducted within a single institutional setting in Portugal that provides structured support to refugees and asylum seekers. The choice of this setting is methodologically and contextually grounded, as the Portuguese Council for Refugees

represents the principal and most established civil society organization dedicated to the reception and support of this population in Portugal. Given the limited number of organizations with a formal mandate and sustained involvement in asylum reception and integration processes at the national level, conducting a multi-site study of comparable institutions is not feasible within the Portuguese context. As such, this case constitutes a key site of interaction between institutional frameworks, social work practice, and refugees' everyday lived experiences, offering a rich and analytically relevant setting for examining identity negotiation, agency, and relational belonging.

Focusing on a single institutional context enables a case-based, in-depth exploration of how identity negotiation unfolds in real-life reception environments. This approach is consistent with qualitative research that prioritizes contextual depth over generalizability, enabling a nuanced understanding of relational and institutional dynamics.

## 5.7 PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND SAMPLING STRATEGY

A convenience-based, access-driven sampling strategy was employed, given the exploratory nature of the study and the practical realities of conducting research in a refugee reception setting. Participant recruitment was shaped by the limited fieldwork duration (one week), reliance on participant availability, and ethical and institutional constraints on access within the organization.

Given the sensitivity of the research context and the vulnerability of the population involved, participation was voluntary and dependent on the organization's mediation and participants' willingness to engage in the study. This approach allowed the researcher to obtain contextually rich qualitative data while respecting institutional procedures and ethical considerations.

Participants were selected based on *accessibility and voluntary participation***,** resulting in two groups:

*Group A—Refugees and Asylum Seekers*

Adults (18+) currently receiving support from the organization.

*Group B—Social Workers*

Professionals working directly with refugee populations.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the sample size was not determined by theoretical saturation, as typically required in grounded theory. Instead, the study aims to generate rich, in-depth, and contextually situated insights from the available participants.

This positions the research as a qualitative case study, where the goal *is analytical depth rather than statistical generalization.*

## 5.8 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

### 5.8.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were used as a primary data collection method, allowing participants to *articulate their experiences, meanings, and identity narratives in their own terms.*

Interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent (Appendices A), and transcribed verbatim.

The interview design followed three analytical logics (Appendices B):

1. Chronological sequencing (origin → migration journey→ life in Portugal)
2. Dialogical mapping (identification of multiple I-positions and internal tensions)
3. Agency-violence continuum (capturing experiences of constraint, resistance, and self-determination)

This structure enables the exploration of identity as both a temporal and dialogical process, while also capturing the impact of institutional and structural conditions.

### 5.8.2 OBSERVATION

Observation was used as a complementary method to capture non-verbal expressions, social interactions, institutional dynamics, and contextual indicators of power and agency within the research setting. This method allowed the researcher to contextualize participants' narratives by examining how interactions and practices unfolded in everyday institutional environments.

As highlighted by Charmaz (2014), observation enables researchers to examine actions and interactions as they unfold in natural settings, thereby enriching interview data with contextual depth (p. 58). Observations were recorded through structured grids (Appendices C) and supported by reflexive field notes to facilitate ongoing analytical engagement with the setting.

The observational focus was theoretically informed by concepts related to power, oppression, resilience, recognition, and relational belonging (Dominelli, 2002; Karim, 2023; Lee, 2001; Saleebey, 2006). Observation, therefore, contributed to methodological

triangulation and supported a more multi-layered understanding of identity negotiation within institutional contexts.

### 5.8.3 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The analysis follows a *grounded theory-informed dialogical thematic analysis*, combining the flexible structure of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the iterative and inductive logic of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Reflexive thematic analysis provided a flexible yet systematic framework for identifying recurring patterns and themes across the data, while grounded theory principles supported ongoing comparison, conceptual refinement, and sensitivity to emerging meanings throughout the analytical process.

The hybrid approach allows for both structured analysis and emergent conceptual development. While the findings are presented thematically, the final analytical structure reflects a process-oriented organization of themes, tracing how identity is progressively shaped through institutional constraint, enacted through agency, internally negotiated through dialogical processes, and relationally constructed through encounters with others.

### 5.8.4 ANALYTICAL PROCESS

The analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 24 and followed five iterative phases:

*Phase 1-Narrative Structuring*
Data were organized chronologically to reconstruct participants' trajectories.

*Phase 2-Initial coding (Grounded Theory Logic)*
Line-by-line coding was conducted to identify actions, meanings, and identity expressions. This corresponds to the initial coding in grounded theory, which stays close to participants' language (Charmaz, 2014, p. 111).

The initial coding process was guided by a theoretically informed, flexible coding framework, derived from the study's conceptual foundations, interview design, and conceptual framework. This included sensitizing categories such as pre-migration identity, migration-related rupture, institutional categorization, internal dialogical processes, and agency-constraint dynamics (Appendices D).

These categories were not treated as fixed analytical units but as heuristic entry points that supported engagement with the data while remaining open to modification. In line with constructivist grounded theory, additional codes and categories were allowed to emerge inductively throughout the analysis, ensuring that findings remained grounded in participants' experiences rather than predetermined structures.

*Phase 3-Focused Coding and I-Position Identification*
Significant codes were grouped into analytically meaningful clusters, including identity positions, recurring patterns, and emerging categories. This step enabled the transition from descriptive coding to more interpretative analysis, in which individual expressions were examined as part of broader identity configurations across participants.

*Phase 4-Dialogical and Relational Analysis*
This phase examined how meaning was constructed through interactional and relational dynamics within the data. Attention was paid to conflicting voices, institutional influences, and silenced or marginalized identity positions, enabling a deeper understanding of how identity negotiation unfolds in tension with structural and relational conditions.

*Phase 5-Theoretical Integration*
In the final phase, codes were synthesized into broader conceptual categories such as identity negotiation, agency and resistance, and relational belonging. These processes involved moving from empirical patterns to higher-level conceptual interpretation, linking the findings back to the study's theoretical frameworks.

Throughout this process, the constant comparative method was applied to compare participants, narratives, and data sources, thereby supporting the development of conceptual insights grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 132).

*Memo Writing*
Analytical memo writing was used throughout the analysis as a reflexive and interpretative tool. Memos were used to document emerging interpretations, connect empirical data with theoretical concepts, and support the progressive development of analytical categories. In line with constructivist grounded theory, memo-writing played a central role in moving from coding to theoretical abstraction by enabling ongoing reflection on patterns, meanings, and conceptual relationships (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162).

## 5.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple qualitative criteria that support the rigor and credibility of the study. Credibility was strengthened through reflexive memoing and data source triangulation, supporting a more nuanced interpretation of participants' accounts. Dependability was ensured through a transparent and systematic coding process, while confirmability was supported by maintaining an audit trail documenting analytical decisions. Finally, transferability was addressed through rich contextual description, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar settings.

## 5.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of Iscte-University Institute of Lisbon and the GDPR (Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, 2019).

Participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, data processing procedures, and their rights, in line with the principles of transparency and informed participation (Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, 2019). Informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequences.

All data were handled in accordance with the principles of confidentiality and anonymity. Personal data were securely stored on password-protected and encrypted devices and accessed only by the researcher, in accordance with data protection and security requirements (European Union, 2016; Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, 2019). Data were retained only for the duration necessary for the research and subsequently anonymized or deleted.

Given the sensitive nature of the research context, particular attention was paid to participants' emotional safety throughout data collection. Ethical engagement was prioritized by ensuring respectful interactions, voluntary participation, and avoiding intrusive questioning. These measures were essential in maintaining a trauma-informed and ethically responsible research approach, particularly when working with vulnerable populations such as refugees and asylum seekers.

## 5.11 METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to several methodological limitations inherent to its qualitative and exploratory design. These include a small and non-representative sample, a single institutional research setting, a limited fieldwork duration, and the absence of theoretical saturation. However, these limitations are consistent with the study’s aim of generating in-depth, contextually grounded insights rather than statistical generalizability. The findings should therefore be interpreted as analytically transferable rather than broadly generalizable.

# 6. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

## 6.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study, based on the analysis of semi-structured interviews with refugees, asylum seekers, and social workers, complemented by observational data. The analysis follows a grounded theory-informed dialogical thematic approach, aiming not only to describe themes but also to develop a process-oriented understanding of identity negotiation within institutional contexts.

Consistent with the critical and reflexive epistemological positioning outlined in chapter 5, the analysis acknowledges the interpretative role of the researcher in the co-construction of meaning, particularly in tracing how identities are narrated, negotiated, and positioned within institutional encounters.

Rather than presenting isolated themes, the findings are structured as analytical progression. The chapter traces how refugee identity is shaped through institutional constraint, enacted through agency within limitation, internally negotiated through dialogical processes, and relationally sustained through recognition, belonging, and social work encounters. In this sense, each theme is presented not as a separate category, but as part of a broader process through which identity, agency, and belonging are continuously negotiated within the reception context.

The findings are organized through the following analytical progression:

1. Structured by institutional conditions and everyday constraints
2. Enacted through agency, self-reliance, and future orientation
3. Internally negotiated through dialogical tension and shifting self-understandings
4. Relationally shaped through recognition, belonging, and misrecognition
5. Mediated through social work practice, professional power, and institutional limitation

## 6.2 INSTITUTIONAL LIFE AS STRUCTURED CONSTRAINT

A central finding emerging from the data is the pervasive influence of institutional structures in shaping refugees' everyday experiences. Participants consistently described institutional life as characterized by delays, limitations, and restricted access to basic resources, highlighting a tension between formal support and lived realities.

This theme was developed through coded material relating to bureaucratic constraint, food insufficiency, delayed support, financial constraint, and suspended autonomy, which collectively point to the structuring role of institutional systems in everyday life.

This tension is particularly visible in relation to material provision. While institutional support is designed to meet basic needs, participants' accounts suggest that this provision is often experienced as insufficient or poorly managed. As one asylum seeker explains:

> *"They are a good idea and they are well formulated, but I consider them poorly managed" (AS2, Pos. 51)*

This critique points not to the absence of support, but to its implementation, revealing a gap between policy intention and everyday experience. This gap becomes more evident in participants' descriptions of food provision:

> *"They give one piece of chicken for three days" (AS2, Pos. 53)*
> *"a can of tuna for Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, until Wednesday" (AS2, Pos. 54)*

These accounts illustrate how material support, while present, is experienced as limited in both quantity and adequacy. The issue here is not solely nutritional, but symbolic:

Food thus becomes a site where dignity, care, and recognition are not only provided, but actively negotiated and contested.

These experiences are reinforced by observational data collected during fieldwork. While the institutional setting allows individuals to prepare their own meals, this apparent autonomy is structured within clear material limitations. Residents rely on allocated food packages or limited financial support, which restricts the range and quality of available options. As observed in the communal kitchen, food items were stored collectively, and their condition occasionally reflected scarcity rather than sufficiency, with some products appearing close to or beyond optimal quality.

This suggests that autonomy within the institution is not absent, but structurally conditioned. The ability to "choose" is present in form, yet limited in substance, revealing how everyday practices such as eating become sites where dignity, dependency, and constraint intersect.

Institutional constraint is further experienced through temporal uncertainty and delay. As one asylum seeker notes:

> *"it has been slow" (AS2, Pos. 62)*

Although brief, this statement captures a broader pattern within the data: the experience of time as prolonged, uncertain, and externally controlled. This experience of delay was not only articulated verbally but also reflected in the institution's temporal structure. Field

observations indicated that access to resources was mediated by multiple administrative layers, resulting in interruptions in the flow of support.

For instance, financial assistance was subject to procedural delays between the government's allocation and institutional distribution, resulting in periods when individuals waited without clear timelines.

This experience is further illustrated by another participant, who highlights how bureaucratic delays directly shape everyday survival:

> *"They said they said so we'll pay you 200 like financial support 200 euro. I said okay, but you have to have a NIF. I said okay I know I said you have to have a bank account Portuguese bank account and I on that time I said okay but to create a bank account I have to have a NIF to get a NIF I have to wait the appointment so like it will take a time what will do until that time like what I will eat" (AS1, Pos. 64-65)*

This condition was also reflected in observation, where individuals were often seen waiting in prolonged states of inactivity, suggesting that institutional time itself becomes a mechanism of constraint that shapes everyday life.

In this sense, time within the institutional setting is not neutral; it becomes a mechanism that produces and sustains uncertainty. Rather than facilitating progression, institutional temporality often places individuals in suspended conditions, reinforcing the experience of constrained agency.

These experiences are mirrored, from a different perspective, in social workers' accounts. As one practitioner reflects:

> *"we are led by the bureaucracy." (SW3, Pos. 29)*

This account suggests how institutional constraints operate not only at the level of refugee experience but also within professional practice. Social workers themselves are embedded within systems structured by procedural requirements, financial limitations, and administrative demands.

This limitation is further reflected in the everyday realities of care provision. As another practitioner explains:

> *"we would like to do more… You would like to do more? Yes, but sometimes we can't." (SW2, Pos. 11)*

Here, the limitation of care emerges not as unwillingness, but as a consequence of structural conditions that restrict professionals' capacity to adequately respond to refugees' needs.

From a reflexive and observational standpoint, these constraints were also evident in the institution's everyday functioning. Social workers appeared engaged in continuous administrative and coordination tasks, often navigating between multiple responsibilities with limited resources.

At the same time, interactions with asylum seekers were frequently brief and task-oriented, reflecting the pressure to manage high demands within constrained organizational structures.

This reinforces the interpretation that institutional constraint is not imposed solely on refugees but is co-produced by the conditions under which professionals themselves operate.

Taken together, these findings suggest that institutional life is characterized by a complex interplay between support and limitation. While structures are designed to provide support, their implementation often generates experiences of dependency, delay, and reduced autonomy.

Rather than functioning as neutral systems of support, institutions actively organize the conditions under which identity, agency, and belonging are experienced, negotiated, and at times constrained.

From a reflexive perspective, these observations required careful interpretation, as many forms of dissatisfaction and constraint were not always explicitly articulated, but instead embedded within routine practices and subtle interactions.

## 6.3 AGENCY WITHIN CONSTRAINT

A key finding emerging from the data is that, despite pervasive institutional constraints, refugees actively engage in processes of self-reliance and future orientation. Rather than positioning themselves solely as passive recipients of support, participants consistently articulated forms of agency that operate within, rather than outside of, structural limitations.

This theme was developed through coded material on self-reliance, self-motivation, self-sufficiency, future-building, work aspirations, and language learning as a form of agency. Together, these codes point to a pattern in which agency is not absent under constraint, but reconfigured through everyday practices, decisions, and aspirations.

This is particularly evident in how participants describe their efforts to maintain autonomy and direction in their lives. One participant reflects:

> *"when I fail, I know that no one will help me get up again. So I have to stand up by myself." (AS1, Pos. 84-85)*

This emphasis on self-reliance is echoed by another participant who, despite experiencing homelessness, states:

> *"I have slept in train stations, I have slept under a bridge, anywhere, I have slept in parks and even so, I don't give up." (AS2, Pos. 50)*

Although brief, these statements reflect powerful assertions of independence and persistence. They suggest that even within institutional environments that structure access to resources, individuals actively construct a sense of self grounded in capacity, endurance, and autonomy rather than dependency.

This agency is not only expressed at the level of self-perception, but also through concrete practices of survival and initiative. As one participant describes:

> *"no, I'm not gonna make any problem. I called my friends. I said I just go into out, I go into center. I start to find some job. I try to find something like per day. So today I'm going to work a little bit. Yeah yeah I found something like manual like what cleaning yeah like anything so for 20 euro 30 euro anything like because I need to be more independent so to get some money buy some sandwiches all that stuff so I see." (AS1, Pos. 67—38)*

This account illustrates how agency is enacted through everyday strategies that seek to restore a degree of autonomy within constrained conditions. Even when institutional support is delayed or insufficient, individuals mobilize available opportunities, however limited—to maintain a sense of control over their immediate circumstances.

Beyond immediate survival, agency is also expressed through more structured forms of self-regulation and future planning. As one participant explains:

> *"I give myself some set goals every day." (AS3, Pos. 31)*

This statement reflects a more deliberate, internally organized form of agency, in which individuals actively impose structure, purpose, and direction amid otherwise uncertain conditions. Rather than reacting solely to immediate needs, participants demonstrate the capacity to orient themselves toward longer-term development, including education, language acquisition, and personal growth.

This form of agency is also expressed through forward-looking aspirations. Participants frequently referred to goals such as learning the language, finding employment, or building a future beyond the institutional setting. These aspirations are not abstract; rather, they

represent concrete strategies through which individuals seek to reclaim control over their trajectories.

From an observational perspective, this orientation towards agency was visible in everyday practices. During fieldwork, individuals were observed engaging in activities such as cooking their own meals, using shared resources, and occupying communal spaces in ways that reflected both adaptation and initiative. While these actions occur within structural constraints, they nonetheless demonstrate active engagement with the environment rather than passive compliance.

At the same time, this agency unfolds alongside periods of enforced waiting and inactivity, in which individuals must navigate not only material but also temporal constraints, oscillating between moments of action and suspension.

However, this agency does not exist in isolation from structural conditions. Instead, it is continuously negotiated in relation to them. As demonstrated in the previous section, access to resources, time, and institutional support is mediated through bureaucratic processes. As a result, agency takes on a particular form: it becomes situated, constrained, and adaptive.

This dynamic is also recognized within social work practice, where professionals acknowledge the role of refugees' own strength and initiative in navigating constrained environments. As one practitioner reflects:

> *"you are here, you survive. Maybe someone help you, but most of the things it was you. It was you who have the strength" (SW1, Pos. 13)*

This perspective reinforces the interpretation that agency is not externally granted but internally enacted, even within institutional settings that simultaneously shape and limit the conditions under which such agency can unfold.

This dynamic reflects what can be understood as "agency within constraint"—a condition in which individuals act, decide, and aspire, but always within boundaries they do not fully control. In this sense, agency is not the opposite of constraint but is co-constructed with it.

Importantly, these findings challenge dominant institutional narratives that frame refugees primarily as vulnerable, dependent, or in need. While participants do experience structural limitations, their accounts reveal a simultaneous and persistent effort to maintain dignity, autonomy, and future orientation.

From a dialogical perspective, this can be understood as the coexistence of multiple "I-positions" within the self. On the one hand, individuals may be positioned externally as beneficiaries of support or subjects of institutional processes. On the other hand, they maintain internal positions such as "I as capable," "I as worker," or "I as future-builder."

These positions do not replace one another but exist in tension, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between structure and self.

This tension was not always explicitly verbalized but was evident in how participants spoke about their present circumstances in relation to their aspirations. Agency, in this sense, is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing process of negotiation, shaped by both internal dialogue and external conditions.

From a reflexive standpoint, these expressions of agency required careful interpretation. In some instances, agency was articulated directly through statements of independence or aspiration. In others, it appeared more subtly, embedded in everyday actions and orientations toward the future. Recognizing these forms required attention not only to what participants said, but also to how they positioned themselves within their narratives and interactions.

Taken together, this theme suggests that identity formation within the refugee experience cannot be understood solely through the lens of constraint. Instead, it must be conceptualized as a dynamic interplay between limitation and possibility, where individuals continuously negotiate their capacity to act, decide, and imagine futures within structurally bounded environments.

At the same time, this ongoing negotiation is not only external but internal, unfolding through tensions, contradictions, and shifting self-understandings that shape how individuals make sense of their position within these constrained environments.

## 6.4 INTERNAL NEGOTIATION AND DIALOGICAL IDENTITY

Building on the previous sections, a further key finding emerging from the data is that identity formation within the refugee experience is not only shaped externally through institutional structures or enacted through practices of agency, but also internally negotiated through complex and often conflicting self-understandings.

This theme was developed through coded material relating to internal tension, self-reflection, identity conflict, cultural expectations, gender norms, and future-oriented self-positioning. Together, these codes point to identity not as a stable or unified construct, but as a dynamic and dialogical process in which multiple “voices” or positions coexist, interact, and at times contradict one another.

This internal negotiation is particularly visible in how participants articulate their sense of self in relation to past experiences, present constraints, and imagined futures. As one participant reflects:

> *“I’m more in the present than in the future.” (AS3, Pos. 35)*

This statement reveals a tension between temporal orientations, where the capacity to imagine or invest in the future is shaped by present uncertainty. Rather than indicating a lack of aspiration, it reflects a strategic positioning of the self in response to unstable conditions, where focusing on the present becomes a way of maintaining psychological balance.

At the same time, this present-oriented positioning coexists with future-directed aspirations, as seen in the same participant's account:

> *"I told myself I need to go to school, to study." (AS3, Pos. 36)*

The co-existence of these positions – "*I focus on the present*" and "*I invest in the future*"— Illustrates the dialogical nature of identity, where multiple and sometimes contradictory orientations are held simultaneously. Identity, in this sense, is not resolved but continuously negotiated across shifting contexts.

This internal tension is further reflected in participants' reflections on what is gained and lost through migration. As one participant expresses:

> *"I have gained some things, I feel like I've lost another." (AS2, Pos. 47)*

This statement captures the coexistence of opposing evaluations within the self, where progress and loss are experienced simultaneously. Rather than representing a linear transformation, identity emerges here as a balancing process between competing meanings attached to displacement and change.

Internal negotiation is also evident in how participants navigate personal, cultural, and social expectations. This is particularly visible in the account of one participant, who reflects on gendered and cultural norms:

> *"I'm Muslim, you need to marry a man, Muslim, not a Christian, Catholic, no." (AS4, Pos. 19)*

This statement points to culturally embedded identity positions that shape how individuals understand their roles, relationships, and possible futures. However, these positions do not exist in isolation; they are encountered within a new social context that may offer alternative possibilities or challenge previously held norms. The result is not a simple shift from one identity to another, but an ongoing negotiation between different value systems, expectations, and personal desires.

This internal negotiation is not always fully articulated. In some cases, it appears as partially expressed or unnamed tension, as reflected in the same participant's account:

> *"I now feel…Yes. Yes, there is some conflict." (AS4, Pos. 16)*

The hesitancy and lack of elaboration in this statement suggest a conflict experienced but not easily verbalized. This aligns with the observation that certain identity tensions—particularly those related to family expectations, cultural norms, and personal safety—may remain partially silenced yet continue to shape how individuals position themselves.

This internal complexity is further reflected in expressions of resilience and self-assertion:

"*you can decide whatever happens, you have to be strong." (AS4, Pos. 20)*

Here, strength is framed as both a necessity and a self-imposed expectation, suggesting an internal voice demanding endurance and control in the face of adversity. This can be understood as a protective identity position— "*I as strong*"—which coexists alongside experiences of vulnerability and uncertainty.

From a dialogical perspective, these findings align with the notion that the self comprises multiple "I-positions" that interact within a dynamic internal landscape (Hermans, 2001). Participants simultaneously occupy positions such as "*I as survivor*," "*I as worker*," "*I as student*," "*I as culturally situated self*," and "*I as future-oriented individual*." These positions are not fixed but emerge, shift, and gain prominence depending on context and experience.

Importantly, these internal dialogues are not purely individual; they are shaped by interaction with external structures and relationships. The constraints described in Section 6.2 and the forms of agency explored in Section 6.3 are not separate from identity but actively inform how individuals understand themselves. Institutional categorization, access to resources, and social expectations all contribute to the configuration of internal identity positions.

From a reflexive standpoint, these internal dynamics were not always explicitly articulated by participants but often required interpretative engagement. Moments of hesitation, contradiction, or shifts in narrative tone suggested underlying tensions that were not directly named but nonetheless shaped how individuals positioned themselves. As such, the analysis does not treat identity as merely a "state," but as something revealed through the way they narrate, negotiate, and make sense of their experiences.

Taken together, these findings suggest that identity formation within the refugee experience is best understood as a dialogical process characterized by multiplicity, tension, and ongoing negotiation. Rather than moving linearly from disruption to stability, individuals continuously navigate between different positions, balancing past identities, present realities, and future possibilities.

This internal negotiation forms a crucial link between structure and agency, demonstrating that the experience of constraint and the enactment of agency are both mediated through

how individuals understand and position themselves. In this sense, identity is not merely shaped by external conditions but is actively constructed through an ongoing internal dialogue that reflects, resists, and reinterprets those conditions.

## 6.5 RELATIONAL BELONGING AND RECOGNITION

A central finding emerging from the data is that belonging is not experienced solely through access to institutional support, but through the quality of relational encounters that recognize individuals as whole persons. Participants' accounts suggest that belonging is shaped not only by material conditions but also by whether they feel understood, respected, and acknowledged beyond administrative categories.

This theme was developed through coded material relating to recognition, prejudice, relational support, cultural understanding, and identity acknowledgment. Together, these codes point to a pattern in which belonging is negotiated relationally, rather than guaranteed structurally.

This dynamic is particularly evident in participants' experiences outside institutional support systems. As one participant explains:

> *"do you have the documentation?...that's how it all started. Like a kind of...prejudice." (AS2, Pos. 57)*

This account highlights how identity can be reduced to bureaucratic status in broader social interactions, producing forms of misrecognition that extend beyond formal institutional settings. In this context, the label of "asylum seeker" becomes a point of exclusion, shaping how individuals are perceived and treated.

However, this experience contrasts sharply with how participants describe their interactions with social workers. As the same participant reflects:

> *"I don't think they should know, but they should understand." (AS2, Pos. 77)*

This statement shifts the focus from technical knowledge to relational understanding. Rather than emphasizing expertise or information alone, the participant highlights the importance of being understood at a human level. Belonging, in this sense, is not produced through procedural correctness, but through empathetic engagement and recognition.

This emphasis on recognition is further developed in another participant's account, who reflects on the conditions necessary for meaningful interaction:

> *"They have to know me in totality…that can only happen if they get the right information…not making assumptions." (AS3, Pos. 47-48)*

This statement is significant because it links recognition to ethical practice. The participant is not asking only for services, but for a form of engagement that understands the person beyond status, appearance, or administrative category. In this sense, relational belonging is closely tied to principles of epistemic justice: the ability to be heard, understood, and represented on one's own terms.

Importantly, this also reflects a critique of assumption-based practice. The call for "not making assumptions" highlights how misrecognition can occur when individuals are interpreted through generalized categories rather than their lived experiences. Belonging, therefore, depends on processes that enable individuals to actively participate in shaping how they are understood.

A similar concern is articulated through a decolonial lens by another participant, who emphasizes the importance of cultural specificity:

> *"each country and each culture are different…Africa is big…East Africa, Central Africa…Africa in the West, their criteria is different…And don't generalize everything." (AS4, Pos. 23)*

This account challenges homogenizing perspectives that treat cultural identity as uniform or static. It highlights the importance of context-sensitive understanding and reinforces the idea that recognition requires attention to difference rather than its erasure. In this sense, belonging is not achieved through inclusion into a predefined system, but through the acknowledgment of diverse identities and experiences.

From an analytical perspective, these findings suggest that belonging operates as a relational and dialogical process. It is shaped through interactions in which individuals are either reduced to categories or recognized as complex, multi-layered subjects. This aligns with dialogical theory, in which the self is understood as emerging through relationships with others and where recognition plays a central role in identity formation.

At the same time, these findings connect directly to anti-oppressive and rights-based approaches in social work. The emphasis on understanding, non-assumption, and cultural specificity reflects a shift away from hierarchical, expert-driven models toward more collaborative and reflexive forms of practice. In this context, belonging becomes not only an outcome but a process grounded in ethical engagement.

From a reflexive standpoint, these dynamics were also evident in the research process itself. Moments of hesitation, difficulty in articulation, or partial responses highlighted the challenges participants faced in expressing complex experiences across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Interpreting these moments required attentiveness not only to what was said, but also to what remained implicit, reinforcing the importance of a reflective and dialogical analytical approach.

Taken together, these findings suggest that belonging within the refugee experience cannot be understood as a static condition guaranteed by institutional inclusion. Rather, it emerges through ongoing relational processes in which recognition, understanding, and the validation of lived experience play a central role. In this sense, belonging is not simply about being present within a system, but about being seen, heard, and understood within it.

## 6.6 SOCIAL WORK AS MEDIATION

Building on the previous section, which highlighted belonging as a relational process, the findings indicate that these relational encounters are not independent of structural conditions but are mediated through social work practice. In this sense, identity, agency, and belonging are not only experienced by refugees but are actively shaped through everyday interactions with professionals operating within institutional constraints.

While institutional constraints were previously identified at the level of everyday life (Section 6.2), here they emerge within professional practice itself, shaping both what social workers can do and how they relate to those they support. This theme was developed through coded material on professional limitations, bureaucracy, financial constraints, relational ethics, empowerment practices, and negotiated power dynamics. Together, these codes point to a pattern in which social work practice functions as an intermediary space where structural conditions and relational processes intersect.

A central tension emerging from the data concerns the extent to which social workers can translate relational intentions into practice within constrained systems. As one practitioner explains:

> *"we don't have money to do what we want and give them the best." (SW2, Pos. 23)*

This statement reflects how material limitations directly shape the scope of care, not only in terms of resources but also in terms of relational capacity. The inability to "do more" is not framed as a lack of willingness, but as a structural restriction that limits how support can be enacted in practice.

This constraint is further reinforced by the broader institutional environment in which social workers operate. As another practitioner notes:

> *"we have to obey to the bureaucracy of what they want…otherwise, it will be cut." (SW3, Pos. 29)*

Here, professional action is explicitly tied to compliance with funding and administrative requirements. Practice is therefore not solely guided by professional judgment or relational

ethics, but by external frameworks that regulate what is possible, measurable, and legitimate within the institutional setting.

At the same time, these structural pressures do not eliminate the relational dimension of social work. Instead, they reshape it. Social workers consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining a practice grounded in empathy and respect, even within constrained conditions. As one practitioner reflects:

> *"empathy and respect…is the basement of our relation." (SW2, Pos. 17)*

This highlights that relational engagement is not secondary to institutional work, but central to it. However, this relational approach must be continually negotiated within a context in which time, resources, and institutional expectations impose limits on interaction.

This negotiation is particularly visible in how power dynamics are managed in everyday practice. Rather than reinforcing hierarchical relationships, social workers described efforts to minimize perceived inequalities and create more balanced interactions. As one practitioner explains:

> *"I try to not show that I have more power than them." (SW2, Pos. 17)*

This reflects an intentional effort to reduce asymmetry within the professional-client relationship. However, as suggested in the interviews, power is not removed but reconfigured. It remains present through institutional authority, decision-making processes, and control over resources, even when relationally softened.

A similar dynamic is evident in how another practitioner describes the importance of maintaining both accessibility and professional boundaries:

> *"there is always a distance…you have to be…it's about ethic." (SW3, Pos. 42)*

This highlights the dual positioning of social workers as both relational actors and institutional representatives. On the one hand, they seek to create open, supportive relationships; on the other, they must maintain professional boundaries and adhere to organizational expectations. Identity and belonging, in this sense, are shaped within relationships that are inherently structured by both care and control.

Despite these constraints, social workers actively engage in practices that support agency and self-determination. This is particularly evident in their emphasis on empowerment as a core aspect of their work. As one practitioner describes:

> *"empower in order to empower them to be what they can be." (SW3, Pos. 45)*

These accounts suggest that empowerment is not understood as a fixed outcome, but as an ongoing relational process. It involves creating spaces in which individuals can express needs, make decisions, and reconfigure their sense of self beyond the constraints of their current situation.

However, the enactment of empowerment is itself shaped by structural limitations. Time pressures, bureaucratic demands, and funding requirements often restrict the extent to which meaningful engagement can take place. This creates a tension between the intention to support self-determination and the conditions under which support is delivered.

In addition to these relational and structural tensions, the data also highlights a gap between the normative frameworks guiding practice and their everyday implementation. As one practitioner reflects:

> *"When the policy is…based on human rights, sometimes the practices don't accompany." (SW1, Pos. 91)*

This statement points to a disjuncture between rights-based policy ideals and the realities of institutional practice. While social work is formally grounded in principles of human rights and dignity, the translation of these principles into practice is shaped by structural constraints, resource limitations, and bureaucratic demands.

At the same time, this gap is closely linked to the question of professional power and accountability. As another practitioner emphasizes:

> *"We do have power. So we must acknowledge that we have this power." (SW1, Pos. 56)*

This explicit recognition contrasts with earlier efforts to minimize or soften power dynamics, suggesting that ethical practice involves not only managing power relationally but also critically reflecting on its presence and effects. When considered alongside the emphasis on boundaries and ethics in practice, this highlights that power within social work is not simply exercised or reduced, but must be continuously negotiated, acknowledged, and made accountable within institutional contexts.

From an observational and reflexive standpoint, these dynamics were also visible in the institutional setting. Field notes indicated that social workers frequently navigated between administrative responsibilities and relational engagement, often shifting rapidly between tasks. Interactions with asylum seekers, while present and meaningful, were at times structured by immediacy and necessity rather than depth, reflecting the broader organizational pressures within which practice unfolds.

At the same time, moments of relational connection—whether through brief conversations, gestures of reassurance, or ongoing communication—highlighted how recognition and support can still be enacted within constraint. These interactions, although sometimes subtle, played a significant role in shaping how individuals experienced their position within the institution.

Taken together, these findings suggest that social work practice operates as a mediating space in which institutional structures, relational processes, and identity negotiations converge. Social workers are neither fully constrained by the system nor fully autonomous within it; rather, they continuously negotiate their role between policy requirements and ethical commitments, between professional authority and relational engagement.

In this sense, identity, agency, and belonging are not only shaped by institutional conditions or individual efforts but are co-constructed within everyday encounters between refugees and social workers. These encounters are shaped by both possibility and limitation, highlighting the complexity of supporting identity, agency, and belonging within structurally bounded environments.

# 7. DISCUSSION

## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter interprets the findings in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework, moving beyond description to examine how identity negotiation unfolds within institutional contexts in Portugal and how social work practice mediates these processes.

Rather than restating the findings, the discussion synthesizes the analytical progression developed in Chapter 6—moving from structural constraint to agency, internal negotiation, relational belonging, and professional mediation—into a set of key arguments that address the central research question: how identity negotiation is shaped through institutional procedures and how rights-based social work can support agency and belonging.

In doing so, the chapter situates the empirical findings within the broader theoretical framework, particularly Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001), ecological and structural perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and anti-oppressive and empowerment-oriented social work approaches (Dominelli, 2002; Lee, 2001). It also selectively engages with the concept of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980) to interpret how policy is enacted in practice.

At the same time, the discussion is informed by decolonial and relational perspectives, including epistemic justice and Ubuntu-informed approaches, which foreground the importance of recognition, relationality, and the validation of refugees' lived knowledge within social work practice (Tusasiirwe, 2024; Suzuki, 2025; Ylä-Kotola, 2023).

## 7.2 IDENTITY NEGOTIATION WITHIN INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT

The findings demonstrate that identity negotiation among refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal is fundamentally shaped by institutional structures that organize access to time, resources, and recognition. Rather than emerging solely from individual processes, identity is produced within systems that shape action and opportunity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Participants' experiences of delayed support, bureaucratic fragmentation, and restricted autonomy reflect structurally mediated conditions of "suspended agency," where individuals must navigate systems that regulate both material resources and temporal progression. These findings reinforce existing research highlighting the gap between inclusive policy frameworks and their lived implementation in Portugal (Costa et al., 2019).

Importantly, institutional constraint does not merely restrict action but actively shapes identity positions. Participants are repeatedly positioned within administrative

categories—such as “asylum seeker” or “beneficiary”—which can reduce complex identities to bureaucratic status. This aligns with anti-oppressive perspectives that highlight how welfare systems may reproduce hierarchical frameworks of recognition (Dominelli, 2002).

At the same time, the findings show that individuals do not passively internalize these imposed positions. Instead, identity emerges through ongoing negotiation between institutional categorization and personal self-understanding, consistent with dialogical approaches to the self, in which multiple “I- positions” coexist and interact (Hermans, 2001), here unfolding under conditions of institutional constraint.

However, the capacity to enact preferred identity positions—such as “worker,” “student,” or “independent actor”—is structurally constrained by limited resources, prolonged waiting, and bureaucratic dependency. In this context, agency appears as adaptive and situated rather than fully autonomous.

These findings resonate with Lipsky’s (1980) concept of street-level bureaucracy, which emphasizes how policy is implemented through the discretionary practices of frontline workers operating under constraint. The gap identified between rights-based frameworks and lived experience reflects how institutional actors operate under constraints that influence decision-making, resource allocation, and interactions with service users. Identity negotiation is therefore shaped not only by formal policy, but by its situated enactment in practice.

This suggests that identity negotiation is not solely an internal or individual process but a structurally embedded one, organized through institutional logics that shape how individuals can act, relate, and position themselves. At the same time, these institutional dynamics also raise questions of whose identities are recognized, interpreted, or reduced within these systems—an issue that connects to broader epistemic recognition and justice explored in the following sections.

At the same time, these conditions do not fully determine identity outcomes. As the following section demonstrates, identity is also negotiated internally and relationally, highlighting the role of dialogical processes and social recognition in shaping belonging and self-understanding.

## 7.3 RELATIONAL AND DIALOGICAL PROCESSES OF BELONGING

Building on the structural conditions outlined in the previous section, the findings indicate that identity negotiation is shaped not only by institutional constraints but also by relational and dialogical processes. Belonging, in this sense, emerges not as a fixed outcome but as

an ongoing, negotiated experience formed through interactions across social and institutional contexts.

Participants' accounts highlight the importance of everyday relationships—whether with peers, family members, or professionals—in shaping how they understand themselves and their position within the host society. These interactions function as spaces in which identity is expressed, challenged, and reconfigured, supporting the view that identity is co-constructed through social engagement rather than individually determined.

These findings can be further interpreted through the lens of Relational Social Work, as developed by Fabio Folgheraiter, which conceptualizes social processes such as belonging and identity formation as emerging within networks of relationships rather than residing solely within individuals. From this perspective, integration unfolds through the development of "coping networks," in which refugees, social workers, and community actors collaboratively negotiate meaning, participation, and recognition (Folgheraiter, 2017a; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017b, 2023). In line with the findings, these relational configurations function as spaces in which agency is sustained, and identity positions are enacted, particularly when individuals can participate as active contributors rather than passive recipients. This reinforces the argument that belonging is not granted solely through institutional inclusion but is co-produced through relational processes characterized by reciprocity, dialogue, and shared action.

This is consistent with dialogical approaches to the self, which conceptualize identity as composed of multiple "I-positions" that develop in relation to different social voices and contexts (Hermans, 2001). The findings suggest that these internal dynamics are closely linked to relational experiences, where recognition, misunderstanding, or exclusion influence which identity positions can be expressed or sustained.

At the same time, belonging is experienced as uneven and conditional. Participants frequently describe forms of partial inclusion in which they feel simultaneously connected and excluded across different domains of social life. This can be understood in relation to research indicating that belonging in migration contexts is often provisional and continuously renegotiated rather than fully achieved (Kusari, 2025). In this sense, belonging is not secured through institutional inclusion alone but develops through repeated relational encounters.

Importantly, the findings also show that relational contexts can support the maintenance of agency under constraint. Supportive relationships—whether through peer networks, community ties, or meaningful engagement with professionals—create spaces in which individuals can sustain identity positions that are not fully recognized within institutional systems. This reflects ecological perspectives that emphasize the importance of social environments in supporting participation and adaptation (Ungar, 2011), without reducing these processes to individual resilience alone.

These dynamics also raise questions of recognition and voice within relational encounters. When individuals' experiences and perspectives are acknowledged, belonging is strengthened through processes that extend beyond formal inclusion. This can be understood in relation to the concept of epistemic justice, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing individuals as credible knowers of their own experiences (Suzuki, 2025; Ylä-Kotola, 2023)

Similarly, relational perspectives such as Ubuntu highlight that identity and belonging are constituted through interconnectedness and mutual recognition rather than individual autonomy (Tusasiirwe, 2024). The findings resonate with this orientation, as participants' sense of belonging is closely tied to the presence or absence of meaningful human connection.

However, these relational processes remain shaped by broader structural conditions. Institutional constraints, time pressures, and social barriers may limit opportunities for sustained interaction, affecting the stability of relational ties. As a result, belonging often remains context-dependent rather than fully secure.

Taken together, these findings suggest that identity negotiation cannot be understood without considering the relational contexts in which it unfolds. While institutional structures shape conditions of possibility, it is within everyday interactions that belonging is experienced, contested, and redefined.

This relational dimension also highlights the importance of social work practice, as professionals frequently occupy key positions within these interactional spaces. As the following section explores, social work functions as a mediating practice that can both shape and respond to the relational conditions through which identity, agency, and belonging are negotiated.

## 7.4 SOCIAL WORK AS MEDIATING PRACTICE

The findings position social work practice as a mediating space in which institutional structures, identity processes, and relational dynamics intersect. Rather than functioning solely as a support mechanism, social work operates at the interface between policy frameworks and lived experience, shaping how refugees navigate institutional environments and negotiate their identities within them.

In this sense, social work interventions contribute not only to access to services but also to the conditions under which agency and belonging can be exercised, highlighting their role in supporting integration processes grounded in participation and self-determination.

Ecological perspectives help situate this role within broader systems that shape opportunities, constraints, and institutional pathways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, the findings show that social workers' role extends beyond structural positioning to include

interpretative and relational dimensions. Through everyday interactions, practitioners influence how institutional procedures are understood, how categories are translated into lived experience, and how individuals position themselves within these systems.

This indicates that institutional labels and procedures do not operate only as formal administrative mechanisms; they are also mediated through professional encounters that shape how refugees experience, interpret, and negotiate their institutional positioning.

At the same time, this mediating role is inherently ambivalent. Anti-oppressive perspectives highlight that professional practice can both reproduce and challenge institutional power relations (Dominelli, 2002). On the one hand, social workers operate within bureaucratic frameworks that regulate access, impose categories, and structure interactions. On the other hand, the findings show that practitioners may also contest these dynamics through relational engagement, ethical reflexivity, and efforts to support participation.

This tension is particularly visible in the management of power within practice. Rather than eliminating asymmetry, social workers engage in practices that seek to make power more transparent and relationally negotiated. This aligns with power-informed approaches, which emphasize that power is not removed from practice but must be recognized, negotiated, and used ethically (Karim, 2023).

Through these practices, social workers help strengthen refugees' capacity to act, make decisions, and navigate institutional systems. However, agency remains situated within structural constraints rather than existing in unrestricted autonomy.

The findings further highlight that social work plays a key role in facilitating relational conditions for belonging. By fostering trust, communication, and ongoing engagement, practitioners support social connections that sustain identity beyond institutional categorization.

This demonstrates that identity negotiation is not only shaped by institutional structures (Section 6.2), individual agency (Section 6.3), and relational belonging (Section 6.5), but is also co-constructed within professional encounters, where social work practice can either narrow or expand possibilities for recognition, participation, and belonging.

These interactions can also be interpreted dialogically. Dialogical Self Theory conceptualizes the self as composed of multiple "I-positions" that coexist and interact (Hermans, 2001). In this context, social work encounters may create spaces where different identity positions—such as "beneficiary," "worker," "parent," or "future-builder"—can be expressed, negotiated, and recognized. This does not imply that dialogical transformation is guaranteed, but rather that relational practice can support conditions in which such negotiation becomes possible.

At the same time, the extent to which dialogical engagement can occur is shaped by structural limitations, including time constraints, resource scarcity, and bureaucratic pressures, which may reinforce more procedural forms of interaction.

From a decolonial and relational perspective, these dynamics also raise questions of epistemic recognition within practice. Decolonial approaches emphasize recognizing individuals as knowers of their own experiences rather than solely as objects of intervention (Suzuki, 2025; Ylä-Kotola, 2023). In this study, this is reflected in the importance of listening, cultural specificity, and non-assumptive engagement within social work encounters.

Ubuntu-informed perspectives further reinforce this interpretation by emphasizing relationality, shared humanity, and recognition through connection (Tusasiirwe, 2024). In this sense, social work moves beyond administrative assistance by affirming refugees as whole people whose identities, histories, and knowledge are integral to practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest that social work operates as a critical mediating mechanism that connects institutional structures, identity negotiation, and relational belonging. Identity negotiation is therefore shaped not only by institutional procedures and structural constraints, but also by how these are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted within professional practice.

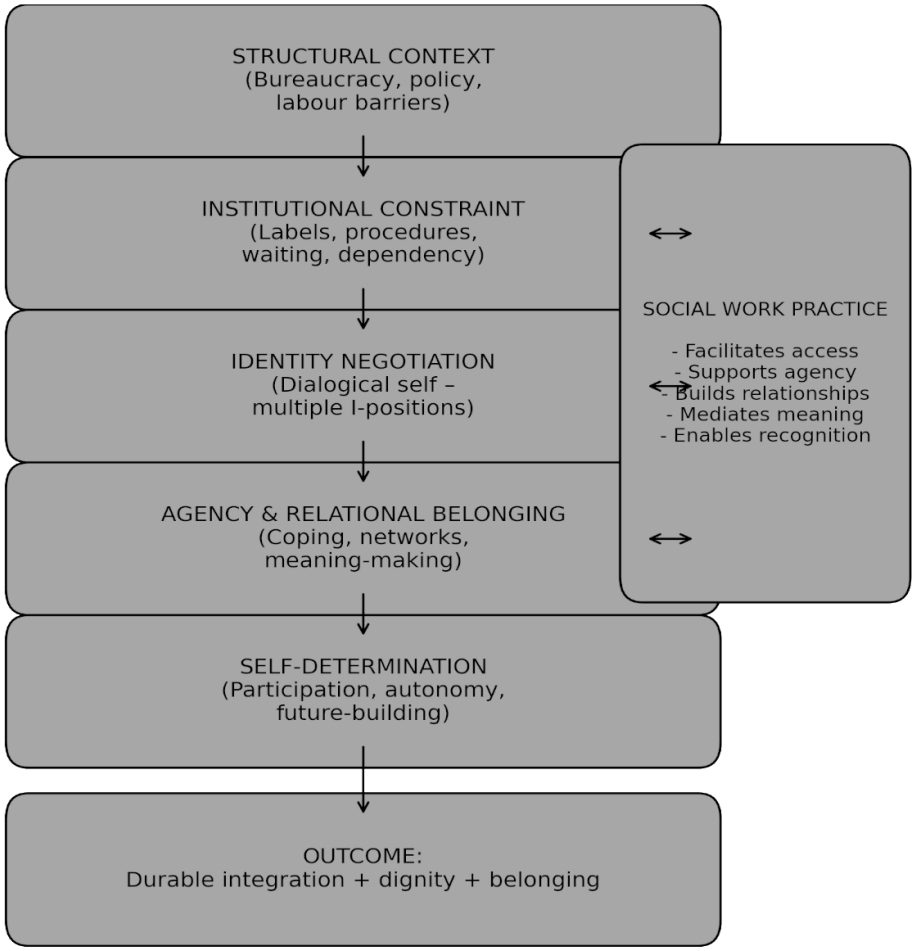
The relationships identified across these dimensions are synthesized in the integrated model presented in Figure 3. The model illustrates how identity negotiation unfolds as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between structural conditions, internal dialogical processes, and relational contexts, mediated through social work practice.

Rather than representing a linear progression, the model highlights the interdependence between these dimensions, showing how institutional constraint, agency, and belonging are continuously negotiated across different levels of experience.

In this sense, social work is positioned not only as a provider of support but as a mediating practice that can either reinforce structural limitations or expand refugees' capacity for agency, recognition, and self-determination within the host society.

To synthesize these findings, the following model illustrates the dynamic interplay among institutional constraints, identity negotiation, and social work mediation.

*Figure 3 - Conceptual model of identity negotiation, institutional constraint, and social mediation in refugee integration.*




**Source:** Prepared by the author

This model illustrates how identity negotiation unfolds within institutional constraints, mediated by social work practice, linking structural conditions to agency, relational belonging, and self-determination.

# 8. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal negotiate their identities within institutional and socio-political contexts, and how social work practice can support processes of integration grounded in agency, relational belonging, and self-determination.

The findings demonstrate that identity negotiation is not a linear process of adaptation, but a dynamic, dialogical process shaped by continuous interaction among institutional structures, relational contexts, and individual meaning-making. Refugees actively construct and negotiate multiple identity positions; however, these processes unfold within environments structured by bureaucratic regulation, temporal uncertainty, and conditional access to resources.

In response to the first research question, the study shows that identity negotiation is fundamentally shaped by institutional procedures and categorizations. Administrative labels, bureaucratic processes, and structural constraints do not merely regulate access to services; they also influence how individuals understand themselves and are recognized within the host society. At the same time, refugees are not passive recipients of these structures; they actively reinterpret, resist, and reconfigure imposed identities, demonstrating forms of situated agency within constrained environments.

In relation to the second research question, the findings highlight that social work plays a critical role in mediating these processes. Social workers operate at the intersection of institutional systems and lived experience, facilitating access to resources while simultaneously shaping the relational conditions that sustain agency and belonging. Their practice is characterized by ongoing negotiation between structural constraints and ethical commitments, where relational engagement, empathy, and reflexivity become central to supporting participation and self-determination.

Taken together, the study answers the central research question by demonstrating that identity negotiation is co-constructed through the interaction between institutional structures and social work practice. Institutional procedures shape the conditions under which identity, agency, and belonging are experienced, while social work mediates these conditions by interpreting, negotiating, and, at times, transforming them in everyday interactions.

Collectively, these findings fulfill the study's objectives by demonstrating how identity negotiation, institutional structures, and social work practice interact dynamically within refugee reception contexts, while also highlighting the relational and dialogical conditions through which agency, belonging, and self-determination can be sustained.

A key contribution of this research lies in shifting the analytical focus from integration outcomes toward the lived processes through which refugees navigate and make sense of their experience. While existing research in the Portuguese context has predominantly emphasized policy frameworks, institutional design, and measurable integration indicators, the study foregrounds refugees as active agents who interpret, negotiate, and reshape their positions within these systems. In doing so, it highlights the importance of understanding integration not only as a structural outcome but as an ongoing process of identity construction, relational belonging, and agency.

This contribution is particularly relevant in the Portuguese context, where inclusive policy frameworks coexist with gaps in implementation and everyday institutional practice. The findings demonstrate that integration cannot be fully understood through legislation alone but must be examined through the interactions between policies, professional practices, and lived experiences. This reinforces the need for more critical, relational, and context-sensitive approaches to refugee integration within both research and practice.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the integration of dialogical, ecological, and anti-oppressive frameworks by demonstrating how identity, power, and practice are mutually constitutive. It further extends decolonial and relational perspectives by emphasizing the importance of epistemic recognition, highlighting that refugees are not only subjects of intervention but also holders of knowledge whose life experiences must inform social work practice.

This study also contributes to emerging relational perspectives in social work by demonstrating that identity formation, agency, and belonging among refugees are co-constructed within relational networks rather than located solely within individuals or institutional systems. In line with Relational Social Work, as developed by Fabio Folgheraiter, the findings suggest that effective practice depends on social workers' capacity to facilitate collaborative processes that enable shared meaning-making and collective action (Folgheraiter, 2017a; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017b, 2023). This reinforces the importance of moving beyond treatment-oriented and individualizing models toward approaches that recognize the relational foundations of social life and the co-produced nature of integration.

More specifically, the findings suggest that relational practice is not simply an interpersonal attitude but a condition that makes agency possible within constrained institutional environments. When social workers recognize refugees as participants in meaning-making rather than only as beneficiaries of support, they help create spaces in which imposed labels can be questioned, alternative identity positions can be sustained, and belonging can be experienced as recognition rather than mere inclusion. This becomes particularly important within refugee reception contexts, where bureaucratic procedures may unintentionally narrow how individuals are seen and how they come to understand themselves.

From a practice perspective, the findings underline the importance of rights-based and empowerment-oriented approaches that move beyond procedural support toward meaningful participation. The findings further suggest that institutional conditions influence not only access to support but also social workers' capacity to engage in sustained relational practice, highlighting how bureaucratic pressures and organizational constraints may limit opportunities for deeper forms of recognition, participation, and collaborative engagement. Social work practice is most effective when it facilitates access to rights, supports decision-making, and fosters relational environments that enable individuals to sustain their agency and sense of belonging over time.

The study also highlights the importance of reflexive awareness within both research and professional practice. Encounters with refugees and asylum seekers are inevitably shaped by institutional assumptions, interpretive frameworks, and personal perceptions held by practitioners, institutions, and researchers themselves. These assumptions may emerge through exclusionary categorizations and deficit-oriented perspectives, as well as through seemingly positive narratives that idealize resilience, gratitude, or successful integration. Such framings, even when well-intentioned, may inadvertently simplify lived experience and shape how recognition, participation, and belonging are understood within institutional contexts. Reflexive and relational practice, therefore, requires ongoing critical awareness of how meaning, representation, and recognition are co-constructed within human encounters.

In this sense, the study reaffirms the relevance of core social work values within contemporary refugee contexts. The emphasis on agency and self-determination reflects the principle of respecting the dignity and worth of the person, while the identification of structural inequalities highlights the ongoing need for social justice-oriented practice. The centrality of relational belonging aligns with the importance of human relationships, and the mediating role of social workers underscores the ethical responsibility to act with integrity, competence, and reflexivity when navigating complex institutional environments.

These insights also resonate with broader humanistic and intercultural approaches to social work, emphasizing the importance of dialogue, cultural sensitivity, and the recognition of diversity in shaping inclusive and sustainable integration processes.

Finally, the conceptual model developed in this study provides a framework for understanding how structural conditions, identity negotiation, and social work practice interact dynamically across different levels of experience. Rather than representing integration as a fixed endpoint, the model highlights it as an ongoing and relational process shaped by both constraints and possibilities.

While the study provides important insights, it is not without limitations. The qualitative and context-specific focus limits generalizability; however, the findings offer transferable analytical insights that may inform future research and practice in similar contexts. Further research could explore comparative settings, longitudinal identity trajectories, and the

perspectives of additional institutional and community actors to deepen understanding of these dynamics. Future studies may also examine how institutional constraints shape not only refugees' experiences but also the relational and ethical capacities of social workers themselves. In addition, further research into participatory and community-based forms of relational practice may offer valuable insights into how collaborative initiatives can support agency, belonging, and collective forms of self-determination within refugee reception contexts.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that refugee integration is not simply a matter of structural inclusion but a complex process of identity negotiation, relational belonging, and mediated agency. Social work plays a central role in this process, not only as a provider of support but as a mediating practice capable of shaping how individuals experience, interpret, and transform their position within institutional systems.
Supporting meaningful integration, therefore, requires not only inclusive policies but also reflexive, relational, and rights-based practices that recognize refugees as active participants in shaping their own lives.

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# APPENDICES A

**Informed Consent Form**

My name is Vasilios Bellos, and I am studying Social Work with Children and Youth at ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon. I want to understand how refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal think about who they are – their personal and cultural identity – and how social workers can help them feel more included and independent.

If you decide to take part of my study, we will have an interview. It will be recorded with audio. The interview will take about 60 to 90 minutes. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer.

Your participation is your choice. You can stop or leave the study at any time. You do not need to give a reason. Nothing bad will happen if you decide to stop.

Everything you say will be kept private. Your real name will not be used. Any information that could identify you will be removed. All the data will be kept safe and protected, and it will only be used for academic work. This follows the European data protection rules (GDPR).

We do not expect any serious risks. Still, some questions may bring up sad or difficult memories. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can pause or end the interview.

This study follows the ethical rules of The University (ISCTE) and respects all European data protection laws.

The title of this study is "Navigating Identities in Migrants: Dialogical Formations of Personal and Cultural Self-Understanding among Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Portugal."

Contact: Researcher Email: vabellos@stud.mruni.eu Supervisor: elsa.justino@iscte-iul.pt Consent Declaration: [ ] I have read and understood the information. [ ] I agree to participate voluntarily. [ ] I consent to audio recording. Participant Name: _____
Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

# APPENDICES B

**Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaires**

**Interview Template A: Refugees / Asylum Seekers**

This interview guide is grounded in Dialogical Self Theory and the Agency–Violence Continuum framework. It is structured to allow thematic coding in MAXQDA 24 using hierarchical code systems and co-occurrence analysis.

THEME 1: Life Before Migration (Stabilizing I-Positions)
1. To understand who you were before your journey began…How would you describe yourself before leaving your country?
2. Thinking about the different parts of your life that were important to you…What roles were most important to you (e.g., professional, family, community, religious)?
3. o better understand what made you feel valued or respected in your community…What gave you a sense of dignity, recognition, or social value?
THEME 2: Migration as Rupture
1. Thinking about the moment when things started to feel different for you…When did you first feel that your identity began to change?
2. "Many people feel that some parts of their life or identity shift during migration…Were there parts of yourself you felt were lost during migration?
3. Sometimes new experiences also help us discover new sides of ourselves…Did new parts of yourself emerge during the journey or after arrival?
THEME 3: Institutional Encounters in Portugal
1. Now I'd like to talk a bit about your interactions with services in Portugal. Do you know how Portuguese institutions (e.g., asylum services, employment offices) describe or categorize you?
2. Some people have different experiences with the labels used in official processes. Have you ever felt reduced to any label as 'refugee'? If so, how?
3. I'd also like to understand how you see the systems that support people arriving in Portugal. How do you experience the asylum or integration system in Portugal?
THEME 4: Internal Dialogue (Dialogical Self)
1. Now I'd like to ask a question about how you see yourself today. Are there different 'voices' inside you when you think about who you are today?
2. People sometimes experience their inner world in different ways. Do some parts of you feel in conflict?
3. I'd also like to understand which aspects of yourself feel most present right now. Which part of you feels strongest or most dominant at this moment?
THEME 5: Agency and Resistance (Agency–Violence Continuum)

1. Now I'd like to ask about choices you have made since arriving in Portugal. What choices do you imagine you might take in the future that could affect your life here in Portugal?
2. Have you ever resisted expectations placed on you by institutions or society?
3. I'd also like to understand what supports you in difficult moments. What keeps you going despite difficulties?
THEME 6: Social Work Intervention as Dialogical Space
1.When you think about the help you received, what support from social workers—not other professionals—made you feel respected or understood?
2. Can you describe a time when you felt that a social worker understood you well—or a time when you felt they didn't understand you? How was it different from your experience with other workers or services?
3. From your experience, what do you think social workers should know about identity and belonging? And do you think this is different from what other professionals need to understand?

**Interview Template B: Social Workers**
**This interview guide explores how professional practice intersects with identity formation, power, institutional structures, and empowerment processes.**

THEME 1: Conceptualizing Refugee Identity
1. How do you understand refugee identity in your professional experience?
2. Do you observe identity shifts over time among refugees you work with?
3. How do migration histories shape present identity negotiations?
THEME 2: Institutional Structure and Constraints
1. What structural barriers most affect refugees' self-determination?
2. How does bureaucracy influence your ability to support clients?
3. Are there institutional expectations that shape how refugees are categorized?
THEME 3: Practice and Power
1. How do you avoid reinforcing dependency or victim narratives?
2. Have you observed situations where identity was reduced to 'victimhood'?
3. How do power dynamics manifest in your daily practice?
THEME 4: Empowerment in Practice
1. What does empowerment mean in your daily work?
2. How do you create space for agency and self-determination?
3. Can you describe an intervention that strengthened a client's sense of identity?
THEME 5: Social Work as Dialogical Practice
1. Do you see yourself as co-constructing meaning with clients? How?
2. What tensions do you experience between policy requirements and relational practice?
3. What changes would improve identity-sensitive social work practice in Portugal?

# APPENDICES C

**GRID 1 — Characterization of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (Potential Participants)**

*Purpose: to help mapping the "accessible universe" of individuals present during the week of fieldwork, without collecting identifiable personal data.*

**A. General Information (observed + general institutional information, never names)**

| Dimension | Category / Record |
|---|---|
| **Apparent gender** | ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other / Not identifiable |
| **Apparent age range** | ☐ 18–25 ☐ 26–35 ☐ 36–45 ☐ 46–60 ☐ 60+ |
| **Observed family situation** | ☐ Alone ☐ Couple ☐ With children ☐ With other relatives |
| **Region of origin (when known publicly through CPR)** | ☐ Middle East ☐ Sub-Saharan Africa ☐ North Africa ☐ Asia ☐ Eastern Europe ☐ Latin America ☐ Other |
| **Approximate time in Portugal (if informed by staff, without asking directly)** | ☐ <3 months ☐ 3–6 months ☐ 6–12 months ☐ 1–2 years ☐ +2 years |

**B. Administrative situation (only general categories)**

| Dimension | Category |
|---|---|
| **Status** | ☐ Asylum seeker ☐ Refugee status ☐ Subsidiary protection ☐ Relocated/Resettled ☐ Unknown |
| **Current accommodation** | ☐ Reception center ☐ Supported housing ☐ Independent housing ☐ Unknown |
| **Approximate administrative stage** | ☐ Initial request ☐ SEF/Interview stage ☐ Decision pending ☐ Appeal ☐ Status granted |

**C. Socio-economic situation (when visible/mentioned in the institutional context)**

| Dimension | Category |
|---|---|
| **Employment** | ☐ Employed ☐ Unemployed ☐ In training/course ☐ Actively searching ☐ Unknown |
| **Apparent language skills (observed only)** | ☐ Speaks Portuguese ☐ Basic English ☐ Functional English ☐ Other language dominant |
| **Apparent education level** | ☐ Low ☐ Medium ☐ High ☐ Cannot determine |

**D. Interactions with institutional services (brief observation)**

| Dimension | Record |
|---|---|
| **Use of the institutional space** | ☐ Occasional presence ☐ Daily presence ☐ Frequently on site ☐ Brief presence only |
| **Observed interactions** | ☐ Requests information ☐ Interacts with staff ☐ Interacts with peers ☐ Keeps to themselves |
| **Visible vulnerability indicators** | ☐ Stress ☐ Document confusion ☐ Language barriers ☐ Signs of exhaustion ☐ None apparent |

**GRID 2 — Non-Verbal / Behavioral Observation (For individuals not interviewed)**

*Purpose: to capture contextual and relational information without collecting sensitive or identifiable data.*

**A. General behaviors observed in the space**

| Dimension | Record |
|---|---|
| **Body posture** | ☐ Tense ☐ Relaxed ☐ Closed ☐ Open/approachable |
| **Movement within the space** | ☐ Sits alone ☐ Seeks staff help ☐ Approaches other users ☐ Avoids interactions |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Contact with professionals** | ☐ Waits silently ☐ Appears anxious ☐ Actively seeks help ☐ Observes quietly |
| **Interaction with peers** | ☐ Talks with others ☐ Shares resources ☐ Conflict/tension ☐ No interaction |

**B. Visible emotional expressions**

| **Dimension** | **Record** |
|---|---|
| **Apparent emotional state** | ☐ Calm ☐ Anxious ☐ Sad ☐ Irritated ☐ Neutral ☐ Hard to identify |
| **Facial expressions** | ☐ Smiling ☐ Worried ☐ Tired/exhausted ☐ Confused ☐ None visible |

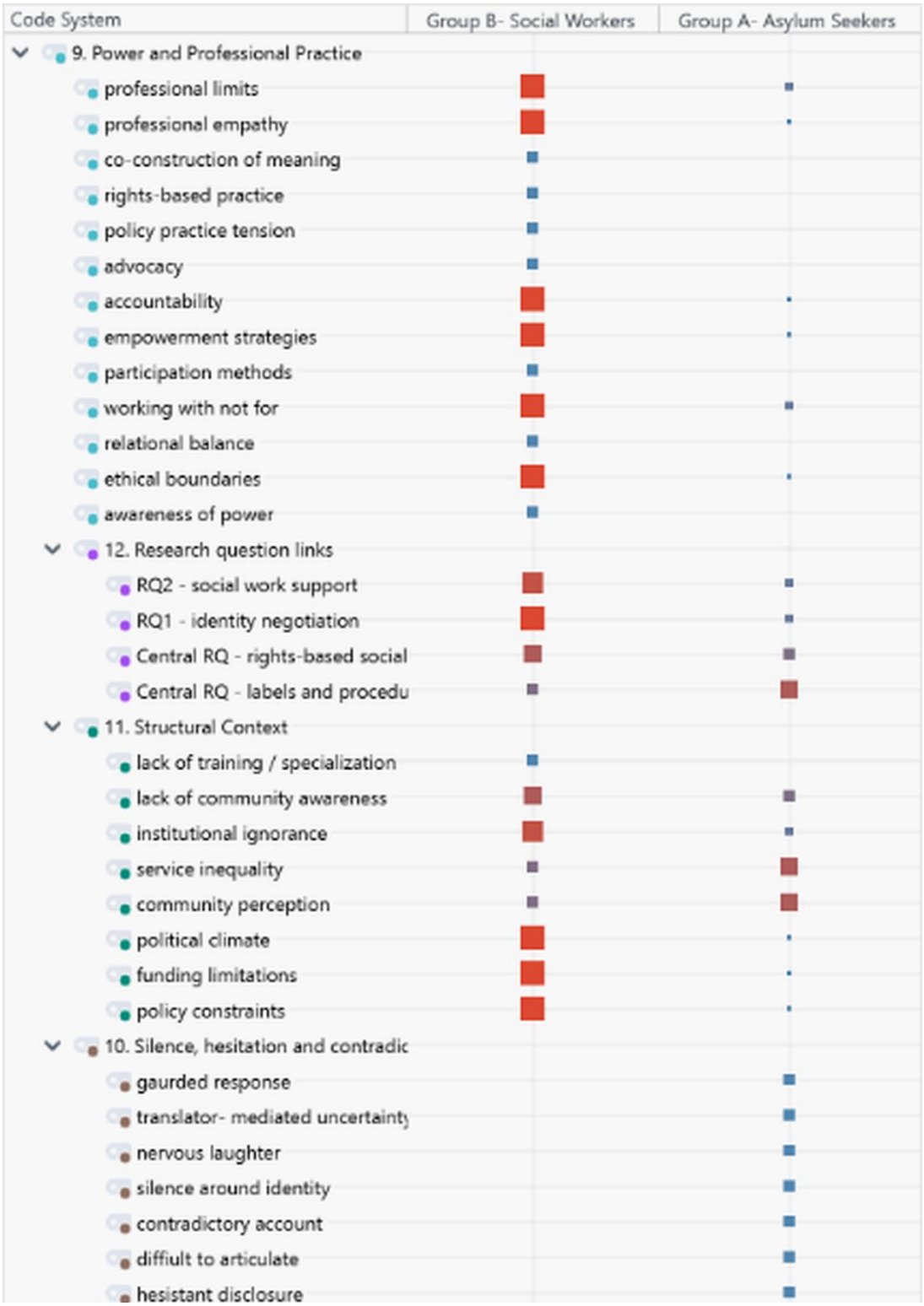
**C. Relational and identity indicators (non-intrusive)**

| **Dimension** | **Record** |
|---|---|
| **Visible cultural markers** | ☐ Traditional clothing ☐ Use of translation apps ☐ Visible religious practices ☐ None visible |
| **Situations of apparent power/vulnerability** | ☐ Relies heavily on staff ☐ Shows autonomy ☐ Repeated requests ☐ Appears disoriented |
| **Signs of agency** | ☐ Leads interactions ☐ Organizes documents ☐ Helps other users ☐ Avoids staff intervention |

**D. General impressions for characterizing the field context**

| **Dimension** | **Short notes** |
|---|---|
| **Cultural diversity notes** | |
| **Age diversity notes** | |
| **Common behavioural patterns** | |
| **Possible profiles suitable for interview** | |
| **Individuals not reachable and observed reasons** | |

# APPENDICES D




8. Social Work Experience
positive reinforcement
workers should understand culture
workers should avoid assumptions
workers should know background
recognition by social workers
institutional limits on care
delayed response
practical help valued
hope from workers
feeling supported
7. Family and Belonging
cultural difference matters
community welcome
relational belonging
belonging through community
family as pressure
family responsibility
protecting family
family separation
family anchor
6. Self-Relience and Agency
language learning as agency
agency within constraint
faith-based resilience
strategic decision-making
resisting harmful norms
future-building
work aspiration
study aspiration
surviving by self
self-motivation
self-reliance
5. Internal Negotiation
future self
silenced / unnamed conflict


mental strengthening
everyday sameness
safe but dependent
hope voice
despair voice
identity conflict
continuity of self
4. Label and categorization
poor refugee image
rights-bearing person
victim label
institutional categorization
label-based discrimination
label hurts dignity
label uncertainty
label as temporary
label as stigma
rejecting asylum label
3. Institutional life and constraint
documentation barrier
bank account barrier
Dublin regulation constraint
unsupported arrival
delayed support
poor conditions
food insufficiency
financial constraint
bureaucratic constraint
dependency condition
suspended autonomy
uncertain status
waiting state
2. Rupture and displacement
multiple migration stages
migration as transformation
emotional imbalance
family separation pain


loss of stability
betrayal as rapture
violence and injury
forced departure
life under threat
1. Pre-migration self
community role
educational aspiration
recognition before migration
cultural / religious identity
family-based identity
dignity through work
skilled / capable self
prior professional self