# Experiencing and resisting interwoven social boundaries: the case of highly educated recent refugees in Norway

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores forced migrants' experiences with mainstream social boundaries and investigates how classed resources are used to resist and renegotiate such boundaries. The case of forced migrants from Syria who came to Norway during the 'refugee crisis' is demarcated by 'bright' boundaries vis-à-vis mainstream society. Moreover, arriving with middle-class resources like higher education may represent bargaining power in boundary negotiations at the individual level. I show that the research participants encountered boundaries where prejudice against forced migrants and prejudice against established minorities are nested together. These *interwoven* social boundaries are resisted by signalling distance from excluded practices and renegotiated by drawing on classed resources such as higher education and classed repertoires such as mastering outdoor leisure pursuits. Drawing on interwoven resources, these strategies enable access to many important middle-class arenas. Access to mainstream sociability, however, remains limited even for individuals who manage to convert their classed resources and repertoires.

**KEYWORDS**

Boundary work, classed resources, highly skilled, leisure, repertoires, Syrian hipsters

## Introduction

This article investigates the experiences of social boundaries by Syrian forced migrants from middle-class backgrounds following their recent arrival in Norway and their responses. My point of departure is Richard Alba's (2005) work on variations between societies in the degree to which social boundaries against minorities form exclusionary barriers ('bright' boundaries)

or place membership of the receiving society within reach of minorities ('blurred' boundaries). The analysis first approaches the highly educated research participants' experiences of these boundaries and then turns to unpacking how they resist and negotiate them. I define bright boundaries as exclusionary barriers in line with Alba's (2005) conceptualisation and contend that the established power relations between recent refugees and the mainstream society are sufficiently stable to uphold bright boundaries. However, I nuance this definition by conceptualising social boundaries as instable constructs that may be open to renegotiation in social situations (Midtbøen 2018; Strømsø 2018) in a process akin to what Alba (2005, 2006) labels *boundary blurring*. Alba (2006) understood boundary blurring to be a process of cultural change, but I refer here to the renegotiation of boundaries as part of individuals' boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002). There is limited knowledge about the role of class in this renegotiation process (but see, Erel 2010; Midtbøen 2018; Yanasmayan 2016), especially in recent forced migrants' lives (for notable exceptions, see Scharrer and Suerbaum 202?; Stock 202?; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019). Therefore, to investigate this process further, I use the term *classed resources* to refer to capital such as higher education and *classed repertoires* to refer to cultural practices and lifestyles (Bourdieu 2010 [1984]) and ask whether and how such resources and repertoires help forced migrants *resist* (Kallio et al. 2019) and renegotiate boundaries.

The boundaries experienced and responded to by the research participants in this project are mainly attributed to two aspects frequently associated with Syrians in Norway after 2015: refugeeness and Islam. Boundaries against Islam have been recorded as being particularly bright and impermeable in the European context (Alba 2005) and prejudice against Muslims is more prevalent than that against other immigrants across the European continent (Strabac and Listahug 2008). In particular relevance to the current study, Muslim masculinities are particularly prone to encounter exclusionary boundaries and 'danger discourses' associated

with unequal Muslim gender practices (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009; Yurdakul and Korteweg 2020).

I draw on this work but contend that boundaries against recent forced migrants differ from those erected against established migrants and children of immigrants because forced migrants face prejudices attached to established migrants or descendants of migrants as well as those associated with refugees (Lacroix 2004; Ludwig 2013). These boundaries are not experienced separately but are nested together, and the work that recent forced migrants do to renegotiate their position relates to these different elements of the *interwoven* social boundaries they encounter.

However, refugeeness also involves negotiations of identity (Malkki 1995; 1996) and performative aspects challenging perceptions about who the refugee is (Häkli et al. 2017). Here, I lean on the conceptualisation by Häkli et al. (2017, 190) of refugeeness as 'a form of subjectivity' that entails the possibility of experiencing 'a subjective distance between one's sense of self and the refugee identity proposed in encounters with institutional discourses and practices'. I examine the role of classed resources and repertoires in carving out this subjectivity and approach individuals' capacity to *resist* (Kallio et al. 2019). I will start the first part of the analysis by asking what bright and clear boundaries against the Norwegian national community do recent forced migrants face? I continue the analysis by unpacking how classed resources and repertoires are embedded in the research participants' resistance against the interwoven social boundaries that they encounter.

## Studying the experiences of Syrians in Norway

In 2018, the Syrian community in Norway consisted of around 27,000 individuals, of whom 90% had lived in Norway for less than five years (Dzamarija 2018). The vast majority of Syrians who currently live in Norway arrived in Norway after 2013, but their arrivals peaked in 2015, four years after the 2011 uprisings against the Ba'athist regime and the protracted

state of civil war that followed. In Norway, those whose asylum applications are approved are first granted a three-year temporary stay and those eligible may apply for permanent residency (Eggebø and Staver 2020). After settlement follows a two-year introduction program. During this time, those enrolled in the program receive a monthly allowance for participating in Norwegian language training, schooling or 'work training', where the aim is to enter regular education or work (Djuve et al. 2017). It is also during this phase that the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education evaluates diplomas and previous education. For those who re-enter educational tracks, higher education is free of charge and the state offers loans and stipends to cover living costs.

Statistically, Syrians who reside in Norway are relatively young, men are greatly over-represented and nearly one in four arrived with college- or university-level education (Dzamarija 2018). Nevertheless, we know little about how this group of highly educated young adult forced migrants fare in their first few years after arrival. This article is part of a larger project entitled *Imagining and Experiencing the Refugee crisis* that investigates imaginaries and encounters between recent refugees and local residents (see for example, Bygnes and Strømsø 2022).

The current analysis is based on qualitative interviews (N = 26) and follow-up interviews (N = 8) with Syrians in Norway with higher education (see Table 1). The majority of informants who contributed to this part of the project come from Arab Sunni families, but several report that they do not practice or identify with Islam. Some are from Syria's largest minority group, the Kurds. Most originate from Syria's largest cities. Many of the research participants had just started their university study before leaving, but several arrived with university diplomas. Some self-identified as middle-class in Syria, but their class positions were often indicated indirectly when talking about educational level and cultural habits. Many had one or two parents with higher education who had worked as lawyers, psychologists,

economists, researchers, teachers and medical staff in Syria and elsewhere. For the purpose of this article, I describe them as middle-class based on their family background and/or higher education.

An Arabic-speaking male research assistant from a Syrian background recruited interviewees in public places and asylum reception facilities in 2016. I recruited informants through social media networks such as Refugees Welcome and in public meetings in 2016 and 2017, where we conducted open-ended one- to two-hour interviews with twenty-six individuals (twenty-two men and four women) between eighteen and thirty-five years of age. Interviews in the first round were conducted in English or in Arabic with the help of an interpreter. In 2019, I reinterviewed eight of the informants. In the first round, most interviews were conducted individually, but some participants who knew each other were interviewed in groups of two or three. In the follow-up phase, all informants were interviewed individually—one in English and the rest in Norwegian.

Among the individuals asked to participate in the follow-up phase of the study, eight agreed to be interviewed again in 2019. In addition, I have kept in contact with two additional informants through social media. There are minor differences in the profiles of the individuals I followed up compared with the initial group. For example, they had received residency permits when I first talked to them and were somewhat more established in terms of educational tracks and careers than those who only participated in 2016 and 2017. These informants may thus have been slightly more successful in converting their classed resources and repertoires compared with informants who participated only in the first round of interviews.

The first interview guide featured open questions about their lives before leaving Syria, their flight and their lives after arrival, important events and challenges, victories and future prospects. The second interview guide also featured open questions about where informants

were in their lives at the time, both professionally and personally. I began by asking them to tell me about their lives since we had last spoken and about their plans, hopes, disappointments and feelings of belonging. The contextual information includes observations of status updates and pictures they had shared on social media, what jobs they had found, which universities they were admitted to, where they lived, family arrangements and recreational activities.

The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed. I coded the transcripts using an inductive thematic analysis strategy (Braun and Clarke 2006). Transcripts from both interview rounds were read separately and manually coded. I then recoded the material using analytical codes. Interviews conducted with an interpreter were transcribed and translated into English by the research assistant who was present during the interviews. Quotes in Norwegian were translated into English by the author, while interviews in English are quoted verbatim.

## Class, boundaries and boundary work

Bourdieu's (2010 [1984]) seminal work *Distinction* deals with how classed capital and symbolic distinctions between insiders and outsiders are articulated and upheld. Class positions are anchored both in different capital distribution and in status differences expressed through lifestyles and cultural practices, establishing a close relationship between educational capital and cultural practices (Bourdieu 2010). As such, class relations are manifested socially both through the monopolisation of advantage and by drawing boundaries (Jarness 2013).

The process of distancing oneself from others to maintain or achieve a privileged or positive social identity has since been examined by sociologists analysing social and symbolic boundary making (Lamont and Molnár 2002) and ethnic boundaries (Alba 2005). In their work, Lamont and Molnár (2002, 168) define *social boundaries* as 'objectified forms of

social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities'.

Recent perspectives have added further nuance to our understanding of exclusionary boundaries against migrant minorities. For example, Korteweg and Yurdakul (2009) and Midtbøen (2018) highlight that boundaries may encompass classed and gendered aspects as well as components related to ethnicity, religion, and migration status. Therefore, to include an important aspect in this analysis, I draw on the scholarly arguments that 'refugeeness' exists as a social category alongside the legal category of 'refugee', referring to the protections awarded by the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Malkki (1995, 1996) coined the concept in her studies of Hutu refugees from Burundi living in Tanzania, observing that embodying refugeeness was part of both the identity formation of the refugees and the expectations of refugee administrators. Many scholars have since analysed the subjective experiences of forced migrants using this label (Lacroix 2004; Ludwig 2013) to foreground the negative consequences of refugeeness. Refugees are associated with a low social status, poverty and dependence. Notwithstanding these aspects of the refugee situation, I rely on Kallio et al.'s (2019, 262) work, which emphasises the 'empowering potential of refugee subjectivities' and foregrounds peoples' capacity to *resist* (Häkli et al. 2017). In line with Hunkler and colleagues' (202?) call to conceptually develop links between class and forced migration, I am concerned with understanding the role of classed resources and repertoires in resistance strategies.

Scholars have highlighted that converting classed resources across national borders can be demanding in terms of having qualifications acknowledged, entering the high-skilled labour market and translating cultural capital (Erel 2010; Rye 2019). Others have shown that educational resources and cultural repertoires can be used to manage boundaries (Midtbøen 2018; Yanasmayan 2016). Fewer studies have analysed recent forced migrants' experiences

of social boundaries and their use of classed resources and classed repertoires to challenge exclusion. An important exception is Vandevoordt and Verschraegen's (2019) work scrutinising the symbolic boundary work of Syrian refugees in Belgium. Their research highlights how Syrians distinguished themselves from others by focusing on cultural boundaries, such as being educated to deal with the exclusionary boundaries of the mainstream (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019).

To analyse the strategies employed by migrants to challenge exclusionary boundaries, I refer to Lamont and Molnár's (2002) concept of 'boundary work'. Boundary work is an important individual strategy for identity preservation, whereby people stay at a safe social distance from individuals, groups or practices that carry social traits associated with lower status groups. The term refers to 'the kind of typification system or interferences, concerning similarities and differences that groups mobilise to define who they are' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 171). Previous research has shown that boundary work by minority individuals in such processes can include using classed privileges to construct boundaries against poorer or more racialised migrants (Bygnes 2017; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019; Yanasmayan 2016) and also against the racist assumptions of the majority. The concept of boundary work thus captures part of the social process discussed by Häkli et al. (2017), as it is an attempt to create distance between the sense of self and the refugee identity often encountered in perceptions of forced migrants. Together, these perspectives underscore the depth of relational social boundaries. They are drawn, contested and negotiated at the interface between insiders and outsiders in the public sphere, the policy sphere and everyday contexts (Erdal and Strømsø 2018; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009; Midtbøen 2018; Strømsø 2018).

### *Gaining a sense of bright boundaries in Norway*

This first part of the analysis illustrates the interwoven character of the boundaries that recent forced migrants from Syria report in Norway. The second part of the analysis devotes

particular attention to the role of classed resources and repertoires in resisting such boundaries and renegotiating new subject positions. I begin by reiterating two examples from the interview material that showcase the clear and bright boundaries demarcating the Norwegian mainstream. The first is a statement by Sali, who arrived to seek asylum in Norway in 2015. In an official demarcation of the mainstream, the Norwegian Minister of Immigration and Integration from the populist right-wing Progress Party made the following statement on her official Facebook page: 'My opinion is that that those who come to Norway have to adapt to our society. Here we eat pork, drink alcohol, and show our faces. You must align yourself to the values, laws and rules in Norway when coming here. Like and share!' (Sylvi Listhaug, Facebook Page, 17 October 2016, *author's translation*). Sali refers to the bright boundary articulated by the Minister of Immigration and Integration about one year after she had come to Norway:

> What is her name, the Minister of Integration? [Sylvi Listahug] … she once gave this speech where she set a very particular standard for what being Norwegian is like and how immigrants can become Norwegian. She said three things: eating pork, drinking wine, and I do not remember the last … I was quite surprised because she is the Minister of Integration and I think there must be better ways of integrating people. … It is really important to have gender equality and so on, but it does not change anything among immigrants if she just says it in the public like that. It only creates an image among Norwegians about … what immigrants are like. (Sali, 20s, social science background, 2019)

Echoing Alba's (2005) argument about Islam in European countries, the former Minister of Immigration and Integration placed certain practices associated with Islam outside the boundaries of Norwegian-ness and manifested Muslim practices as a bright boundary. Sali interprets the statement as exclusive and points to the dilemma of making such a statement while being the Minister of 'Integration'. Interestingly, Sali continues by questioning the validity of the statement by saying she knows Norwegian vegetarians. By moving the

practices meant to exclude based on religious affiliation into the world of urban and middle-class lifestyle choices like being a vegetarian, the minister's statement seems slightly absurd. The boundary between Norwegians and recent migrants is renegotiated by pointing out that shunning pork is common on either side of the boundary. Sali draws on her experience with middle-class life in Norway to expose an inconsistency between boundaries in official rhetoric and the everyday boundaries of nationhood (Strømsø 2018).

The second example is taken from a public statement made by participants of an extreme right-wing organisation. In 2019, economist Marwan passed a demonstration by the small but vocal fringe organisation *Stop Islamisation of Norway* on his way to our interview. He was clearly shaken by the experience, and said:

> Even though I do not consider myself a Muslim, I think they mean me when they argue against Islam in Norway; they mean me because I come from a Muslim country. It is against us really. They are against refugees, but they do not say it, they just criticise Muslims who came. … I heard what they said. They said that we come for money and freedom. … They say we come here to get money without working, but that is not true. I work. I pay tax. Just like Norwegians do. (Marwan, 30s, economist, 2019)

Although this organisation defines itself as against Islam, Marwan shows that the bright boundary against Islam (Alba 2005) and the social burden of refugeeness (Ludwig 2013) are nested together when he reiterates their message. These examples echo politicised debates about immigrants from Muslim backgrounds that reinforce existing bright boundaries between the mainstream residents and those from Muslim backgrounds (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009), but in this case the element of refugeeness is added to the amalgam of boundaries, clearly illustrating its interwoven character.

Such public expressions of explicit stereotypes are important to people, but bright boundaries articulated in relation to Muslims and against refugees are not unique to those with extreme viewpoints. Rather, as the selected extracts show, prejudices related to forced

migrants not working or paying tax (Jackson and Bauder 2013) and prejudice and exclusion related to established migrant minorities of Middle Eastern origin (Yanasmayan 2016) also appear in everyday interactions. As demonstrated in previous research (see, e.g., Scharrer and Suerbaum 202?; Vandevoordt and Verschraegen 2019), immense value is commonly placed on work ethic as a strategy to *resist* (Kallio et al. 2019) the prejudice against refugees as dependents. In this vein, Adar picks up on the importance of work to resist such prejudices by presenting an image of Syrians in Norway as hard-working and independent of state subsidies: "I think that we, refugees from Syria in Norway, we have to participate here in Norway. [..] That is important because Norwegians tell me that 'in this society, in Norway, we work'" (Adar, 20s, economist, 2016)

Samir's reference to a meeting at the asylum seeker centre where he lived when we interviewed him illustrates how bright boundaries also affect lived encounters in the street. His anger and frustration suggest that the bright boundaries communicated by politicians on the radical right are far from exceptional but experienced in everyday life and through first impressions (Erdal and Strømø 2018):

> Here they are trying to present us as barbarians and uncivilised people, so people will start to hate us and think we are far from integrating with Norwegians. You feel that they are anti-refugees. I don't know why. Maybe just because we are from the Middle East. … When they called us for a meeting in the Asylum Seeker Centre, the speech was directed at the Middle Eastern refugees…like a smile is just a smile and not sex and such irritating things. … To be honest, that created a big gap between us and the locals. When I see a girl in the street I try to avoid her as much as I can and sometimes I change my way, just so as not to embarrass her or myself; that is how they instructed us and I do this to keep quiet in my mind. I wish they would change the way they look at refugees because that pressure creates all the problems. (Samir, 20s, engineer, 2016)

Samir vividly describes how he feels socially restricted because of the 'danger discourse' attributed to 'Middle Eastern refugees' (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009; Yurdakul and

Korteweg 2020). By distancing himself from conceptions of 'the barbarians', Samir aims to restore an image of refugees from Syria as modern and educated by using boundary work to distance himself from 'uncivilised people' and indicates the interwoven nature of boundaries surrounding recent forced migrants from Syria that he senses when walking down the street. By resisting such images of who he and his compatriots are, Samir challenges prejudiced perceptions about both refugees and migrant men originating from the Middle East. As such, his boundary work against others can be understood as part of his attempt to create distance between his sense of self and the refugee identity (Häkli et al. 2017). As the research participants move out of the asylum centre and start to renegotiate their subject positions on new social platforms, their class and educational backgrounds become more clearly foregrounded. Therefore, the next part of the analysis will zoom into the role that classed resources and repertoires play in renegotiating boundaries.

### *The role of classed resources and repertoires*

This part focuses on the ten informants that I followed up after the asylum and settlement process (see Table 1). In this group, seven had entered high-skilled work or higher education and thus managed to convert some of their classed resources. Among the eight individuals I reinterviewed, Mohammad was still in the introduction program and Walid had taken a semi-skilled job as a middle manager in a grocery chain. The remaining six were in high-skilled work and/or at university. Their attendance on these platforms suggests that although they had encountered obstacles such as labour market discrimination and lengthy bureaucratic procedures to have their qualifications accepted, the highly skilled segments of working life were not closed off to them. Their trajectories into high-skilled venues meant entering circles where relatively few other forced migrants were present, offering informants like Marwan and Nasim opportunities to resist common prejudice and to renegotiate their subject positions using classed resources like higher education and language skills. Arriving in 2015, Marwan

had secured a permanent highly skilled job as an economist in 2018. Work is an important arena for him, a place he describes as ‘extremely inclusive’. In line with Cichockam’s (2021) findings from Berlin and Amsterdam, social ties with majority members of society are foregrounded as a core element in his sense of inclusion in a city in Norway. It is important for Marwan not to feel like a ‘special guest’, and he aims to be treated by his colleagues as ‘just a regular man who works there’. To obtain this, he articulates the need to distance himself from practices that his colleagues associate with Syrians. He illustrates this with an example from a social event:

> They had a party with a separate table without alcohol and pork, but I wanted pork and alcohol ... so I said I want to come to your table, to that table. I drink alcohol and eat anything, so that is not [a problem] for me. So that is perhaps why they started being more open towards me, … they feel and think that ‘you are one of us’. (Marwan, 30s, economist, 2019)

Marwan describes how the boundary between himself and his co-workers is ‘opening up’ as he distances himself from the Muslim practices sometimes explicated in the public sphere as not part of Norwegian culture. As he stated clearly at the beginning of the follow-up interview (quoted previously), Marwan does not consider himself a Muslim. He indicates that signalling distance from Muslim practices is paramount for convincing his colleagues that he is one of them. His approach to be included into the social sphere of his workplace is anchored in his highly skilled position as a trained economist. Becoming part of this middle-class (social) space provides a platform for performing a subject position that challenges common perceptions about who a male Middle Eastern refugee can be (Häkli et al. 2017). His strategy could however also be said to implicitly reproduce classed and racialised hierarchies that exclude migrants and descendants of migrants who are considered less acceptable to the majority (Turner 2020).

In a somewhat different vein, Nasim uses his attendance at a prestigious university program to distance himself from the interwoven social boundary he encounters:

> Here [at university] nobody knew I was a refugee until I told them. But the thing is that I am in a different place from most Syrians. I am at university … I am the only one in [names highly competitive study programme]. … I am from Syria. Hello, I am here. I am glad to tell them that I am a refugee …. The thing is that I am very concerned with showing others what 'refugee' means. It does not mean that you are poor or uneducated, or other pictures that appear in their heads. When someone says 'refugee', an image comes up, for example of a terrorist with a [signals turban and weapon]. … No, I am a refugee, and we are just like you. (Nasim, 20s, IT, 2019).

Nasim draws on class-based resources and platforms to resist common prejudices about both Syrians and refugees, 'performing refugeeness' in a manner reminiscent to Kallio et al.'s (2019, 262) approach to refugeeness as encompassing 'the political dynamics and empowering potential of refugee subjectivities'. He counters the interwoven boundary of danger, poverty and lack of education by foregrounding his classed resources and their convertibility in the Norwegian higher education context.

As the informants develop their understanding of the boundaries in place and the use of classed resources to perform their subject positions in ways that help them resist, new distinctions (Erel 2010) and old racial hierarchies (Turner 2020) are also reinforced in the process. Such distinctions can be based on different configurations of classed, gendered and racial privilege. Victor (late 20s, engineer) explicitly exemplifies some of these distinctions when he lists the elements of exclusion and bright boundaries present in the Norwegian context by also illustrating his own privileged position in this regard:

> I am an engineer; I am undertaking a master's degree at the university, so he [a Norwegian] feels reassured that this is a serious person. … It is very important that Norwegians see that we are useful to this country, on par with Norwegians. If you are like that you are welcome; if you are

> not, then you are not. … Now I will present the other side. 'Hello, my name is not Victor', the name plays a role because I have an English name, so I am lucky. 'Hi, my name is Muhammed, I come from Somalia, I do not work, I live alone, I receive money from NAV [social welfare]' What is the difference between that person and myself? If two people present themselves to the same Norwegian people, to the same Norwegian labour market, to the same Norwegian neighbour, to whom will that neighbour feel closer? The first person of course! So many different things play important roles. (Victor, 20s, engineer, 2019).

By pronouncing the racial and classed hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion in the Norwegian context, Victor sheds light on how interwoven boundaries can be resisted and renegotiated using *interwoven privilege*. He suggests that because he has the privileges of being highly educated, white, and having a European sounding name, he can renegotiate his position differently from other migrants without these privileges. By doing so, recent migrants who draw on interwoven privilege to counter boundaries also play their parts in reproducing a reoccurring racial comparison that position Syrian refugees 'relative to hierarchies of race, as well as gender, class and ability' argued to be 'inseparable from white supremacy and anti-blackness' (Turner 2020, 138–139).

However, Victor is not only highly aware of how various aspects of privilege set him in a favourable situation compared with others but also of which aspects of his interwoven resources and privilege appeal particularly to the Norwegian mainstream. By foregrounding the need to counter danger discourses related to men from the Middle East and prejudice about refugees' dependence on the welfare state, he illustrates his awareness of the interwoven character of the social boundary he aims to renegotiate:

> You must go down to the level of the people and understand how they think. If I were to present myself in Egypt, I would do it in a completely different way. 'Hi, my name is Victor, and I have a very high income. I earn almost 10,000 dollars, I have a house in Norway, I have two cars; yes, I have a master's degree, I have worked as a manager, I am a boss'. If I were to present myself in

> Egypt. … In Egypt you must focus on economics. In Egypt, it is 'I have'. Here in Norway you think about … how you contribute to the country, how useful you are, how safe you are to them and their country. Because when you say you are a refugee, these are the things they are worried about.

As contended by Bourdieu (2010, 1985) class positions are anchored in capital and in status differences expressed through lifestyles and cultural practices. Classed resources and repertoires, however, do not travel easily (Rye 2019). As the interview extracts above illustrate, migrants become aware of changes in the importance and relative value of resources across contexts. For example, middle-class and Middle Eastern masculinities have different connotations in Egypt and Europe (Suerbaum 2018). Victor's statements illustrate that it is not merely gendered, racial, and classed resources that may create distance between the sense of self and prejudiced perceptions. Classed repertoires like middle-class lifestyle preferences can also play a role when resisting exclusion.

### *Leisure activities as cultural practice*

As noted above, Bourdieu (2010) set cultural practices and lifestyles at centre stage in his analysis of how class privilege is reproduced. The interviews show that having access to the domains of work or higher education are also important in leisure activities, illustrating the link between social and symbolic space (Bourdieu 2010, 1985). Work, university, and mainstream civil society organisations provide access to the material and social platforms necessary to use resources to renegotiate boundaries. The interlocutors draw on their toolbox of classed repertoires. In addition to being highly educated, some of our interlocutors found cultural repertoires like knowing how to overcome alpine conditions useful.

As in other countries, resourceful Norwegians adhere to ideals of exercise, fresh air, and a healthy lifestyle (Sølvberg and Jarness 2018). Posing on top of the highest mountains and eating as healthily as possible are part of a classed repertoire that signals esteemed middle-

and upper-class values that resonate across a variety of national contexts. Taking part in outdoor activities came through in several interviews, but public displays of nature were particularly evident on the social media profiles of some of our interlocutors, who had posed on top of several of Norway's highest mountains, sometimes in dangerous locations.

Access to platforms such as work, university or mainstream civil society organisations is thus important to acquire the financial resources, social ties and venues that allow cultural capital to be converted and invested in social mobility. One example is Sali (in her 20s, social science background), who had joined several civil society organisations shortly after gaining her residency. She mentions several trips to alpine locations in connection with her work as a volunteer:

> Sali: I was a volunteer with [three NGOs]. So, I went to Galdhøpiggen [Norway's highest mountain, 2469 meters above sea level].
>
> Interviewer: Yes, I saw the picture on Facebook.
>
> Sali: Yes. [laughs] … It is really great … The view is amazing. I like that about Norway. There are so many mountains where you can hike.

Climbing Galdhøpiggen requires preparation, knowledge and equipment. Sali had experience of nature and hiking since early childhood, and after coming to Norway she gained access to the local knowledge, social ties and infrastructure needed for alpine hiking by volunteering for various organisations. University also provides access to platforms that offer possibilities to use classed repertoires. For example, Nasim referred to a pleasant experience with fellow students in a mountain cabin in Norway:

> [In Syria] We had a cabin near the Hermon Mountain on the Israeli side. We used to go there to play in the snow and chill out. … The last time [I went skiing, in Norway] was on a cabin trip with my school. We went there and I joined a group I have never been with before. We lived together for three days. I invited them to smoke a water pipe and we enjoyed ourselves a lot. It

> was very cosy. They helped me ski as well. I am not very good at it. I know how to, but I am not good. But we go together. (Nasim, 20s, IT, 2019)

Nasim's story shows how outdoors pursuits can allow boundaries with the mainstream to be blurred by bridging leisure experiences in Syria with middle-class practices in Norway. His case illustrates the important mediating role of social platforms for using acquired classed repertoires in new contexts and creating distance between the sense of self and prejudice perceptions.

### *The limitations of classed resources and repertoires*

While activities such as walking in the mountains were part of a classed repertoire that helped some informants gain a foothold and negotiate boundaries, others reported feeling that status devaluation and lack of social platforms prevented them from taking part in activities they would have enjoyed. For example, Mohammad (medical doctor in his mid-30s) was the only research participant that I interviewed twice who had not yet entered the labour market or university. In the first interview, he had just received permission to stay in Norway and explained how 'degrading' he found it to be declassed and have such a 'low financial status'. He highlighted that Norwegian society is a very affluent place where 'you are under a lot of pressure to buy clothes; I don't have the money for that, you know' (Mohammad, 30s, 2017). In our follow-up interview two years later, Mohammad had access to slightly more economic resources through his attendance in the introduction programme for refugees but was yet to enter the labour market or university. He explained that although he would have very much liked to 'walk in the mountains or at the seashore', he felt it was difficult to take part in such activities because he had no one to go with. Having very limited access to mainstream social platforms, he lacked a bridge to the world of the outdoors people and other mainstream venues where he wanted to go. Mohammad's example thus highlights how class does not travel easily in the migration context (Erel 2010; Rye 2019). When conversion of classed

resources such as university diplomas becomes difficult, classed repertoires can in turn become locked in and unavailable because one is dependent on the other being converted. Expressing status differences through cultural practices and lifestyles is contingent on access to resources (Bourdieu 2010, 1985) and without having converted classed resources such as higher education in the new context, access to other middle-class domains remains very limited.

However, even Nasim, who has access to mainstream venues and a social network of university students through his higher education, imagines a bright boundary between himself and what he refers to as 'Norwegian sociability':

> I am not sure if it is just me, but I still find it difficult to make close friends, Norwegian friends, so all my close friends are Syrians or immigrants. Even though I go to university and study with them, they are colleagues or a type of friends that are not close friends. So, the people I hang out with are Syrians; most of them are Syrians. (Nasim, 20s, IT, 2019)

He attends many outdoors and highly demanding leisure activities with students of majority background but describes with regret the social boundary between him and having close 'Norwegian friends'.

In a similar vein, Faisal places his approach to boundary renegotiation mainly in the domain of work and describes spending a large proportion of his social life in cafes and bars. Faisal arrived in 2014 and had a highly skilled job in the medical profession at the time of the follow-up interview five years later. He describes a thriving social life including many friends of different nationalities and a girlfriend. In this study, Faisal's description of his group of friends, 'the Syrian hipsters' represents an evocative illustration of how the experience of boundaries can change after arrival and how strategies to challenge exclusion are adapted as information about boundaries and permeability is decoded:

> In the beginning, you want to become Norwegian. When we first came, we all wanted to be Norwegian and have only Norwegian friends. Everyone wanted to integrate into Norwegian society. But we have learned that we are not part of Norwegian society; we are not Norwegians … but we have learned an important lesson in Norway: you can be whatever you want to be. You have much more freedom to choose what you want. (Faisal, 20s, medicine, 2019)

While in the very beginning it may have seemed like an option to become part of mainstream Norwegian sociability, Faisal notes that after five years they have accepted that is simply not a possibility. His take on social boundaries in Norwegian society involves a tension: on the one hand highlighting the strong individual freedom by suggesting that 'you can be whatever you want to be' but on the other hand making it clear that 'we are not Norwegians'. Faisal illustrates what appears to be a key limitation to the boundary-blurring capacity of classed resources and repertoires when he suggests that while being in Norway with middle class resources and repertoires gives one considerable freedom, it does not provide the freedom to 'become Norwegian'.

However, Faisal has found his crowd, a group of friends where migrants and non-migrants alike socialise across ethnic boundaries united by their cultural preferences. With reference to middle-class hipster culture, Faisal explains how his friends have a particular kind of beard and spend time in hip urban cultural venues frequented by the Norwegian cultural elite. While not feeling part of Norwegian society, they seize opportunities to enjoy life with friends and embrace individual freedom:

> We are a group of Arabs who drink alcohol and go to events, and we do not belong to the Islamic group. We are a group, we have our friends, and we hang out and have our activities; we are more like hipsters … Syrian hipsters. … so, we do not belong to that group, but we are also not Norwegians. The process is different. (Faisal, 20s, 2019)

Faisal has succeeded in landing a high-skilled job but describes severe obstacles such as lengthy, Kafkaesque bureaucratic procedures and labour market discrimination before making

it (see, Bygnes 2021). Although Faisal includes many kinds of people and nationalities in his group of friends, this diversity fits into a cosmopolitan and liberal lifestyle different from that of the 'Islamic group'. Thus, Faisal describes integration into a culturally complex reality, not only using elements from different spheres to manage exclusion, but also upholding traditional boundaries against Islam and creating new distinctions that draw on both migrant and mainstream cultural references (Erel 2010). As the analysis has demonstrated, the interviewees often successfully renegotiate and cross boundaries in work, university, and leisure venues. However, despite their higher education and ability to negotiate and individually cross into some mainstream arenas, many report 'giving up' on crossing the boundary into mainstream *social circles*.

## Discussion

The contribution of the current article is twofold. First, it adds to the conceptual discussion on forced migration and class by highlighting how highly educated forced migrants from Syria draw on interwoven privilege to renegotiate and resist the interwoven boundaries they encounter. Second, it offers empirical scrutiny of both professional and leisure venues to show how individual classed resources and repertoires are important tools for resisting and negotiating these boundaries.

The analysis has shown that the research participants encounter bright boundaries in political rhetoric, the public sphere and in everyday life after coming to Norway to seek asylum. The informants quickly pick up on which exclusionary boundaries mainstream society associates with their backgrounds. Compared with previous studies focusing on social boundaries among highly skilled labour migrants and children of immigrants in Europe (Alba 2005; Midtbøen 2018; Yanasmayan 2016), the forced migrants in this study must handle exclusionary mechanisms and prejudice, demarcating boundaries against both established immigrant groups and against refugees. Therefore, this article adds to the literature on

migrants' boundary work by conceptualising their resistance as negotiating *interwoven social boundaries*. Although these social boundaries are deeply entangled at the level of experience, they represent different aspects of exclusion that merit analytical disentanglement.

To do so, the analysis has borrowed from Lamont and Molnár's (2002) approach to social boundaries by being sensitive to both structural constraints and the role of individual agency while looking beyond ethnicity as the most prevalent boundary to the mainstream. I contend that boundary work conceptually also captures what Häkli et al. (2017) refer to as individuals' attempt to create distance between the sense of self and the refugee identity.

The analysis of the in-depth interviews with recent forced migrants has revealed how their presence in arenas such as work and higher education facilitates social mobility and offers possibilities not only to counter but also to reproduce stereotypes. Although the privileges that migrants arrive with are not easily convertible, the recent forced migrants interviewed here draw on interwoven privilege when countering prejudice and thereby sometimes cement the gendered, racial and classed hierarchies in place (Turner 2020).

I suggest that it is not merely classed resources and access to middle-class social platforms that aid forced migrants in resisting and renegotiating boundaries but also classed repertoires like middle-class lifestyle preferences. The professional and social platforms they use provide anchors to social venues that make it possible to draw on classed resources and repertoires in less formal settings.

Unpacking how the interlocutors talk about their leisure activities has offered a largely underexplored perspective on how drawing and renegotiating boundaries using classed repertoires may occur. However, when people are unable to transfer the important classed resource of higher education into a new context, it becomes difficult to gain access to economic privileges and social ties that in turn make the use of classed repertoires such as cultural practices more difficult. As Erel (2010) has previously pointed out, arriving with the

resources that suit mainstream society can thus be important but not necessarily sufficient. Cichockam (2021) highlights the importance of context and social attachment for such processes. Migrants feel better in Berlin than they do in Amsterdam because they have stronger social networks with both migrants and natives in Berlin (Cichockam 2021). In a similar vein, the lack of access to mainstream social circles appears to be a limitation to the boundary blurring capacity of classed resources for recent forced migrants in Norwegian contexts. The *interwoven social* boundaries that recent forced migrants from Syria face in Norway can therefore be said to remain important obstacles, even for individuals who can draw on several, interwoven privileges.

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**Table 1.** Overview of respondents.

| Number | Age | Education | Pseudonym | Follow-up |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 20s | Economics | Adar | Follow up on social media. At university. |
| 2 | 20s | Agronomy | Walid | Follow-up interview in 2019. Semi-skilled work. |
| 3 | 30s | Economics | Tariq | |
| 4 | 18+ | Student | Hussein | |
| 5 | 20s | Information technology | Nasim | Follow-up in 2019. At university |
| 6 | 20s | Agronomy | Omran | Follow-up on social media. Low-skilled work. |
| 7 | 20s | Agronomy | Yaser | |
| 8 | 20s | Linguistics | Nour | |
| 9 | 20s | Professional soccer player | Bashir | |
| 10 | 20s | Clerk | Jamal | |
| 11 | 20s | Philosophy | Farid | |
| 12 | 20s | 1st year university student | Karam | |
| 13 | 20s | Agriculture | Nabil | |
| 14 | 20s | Civil engineering | Samir | |
| 15 | 20s | English | Labib | |
| 16 | 20s | Economics | Yusuf | |
| 17 | 20s | Economics | Badr | |
| 18 | 20s | Law | Munir | |
| 19 | 30s | Economics | Marwan | Follow-up interview in 2019. High-skilled work. |
| 20 | 20s | Social science | Sali | Follow-up interview in 2019. At university. |
| 21 | 20s | Medicine | Faisal | Follow-up interview in 2019. High-skilled work. |
| 22 | 20s | Engineering | Victor | Follow-up interview in 2019. At university and working. |
| 23 | 20s | Linguistics | Diana | Follow-up interview in 2019. At university and working. |
| 24 | 30s | Medicine | Mohammad | Follow-up interview in 2019. Introduction program. |
| 25 | 20s | Engineering/architecture | Amira | |
| 26 | 20s | Technical university | Mahdi | |