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Identity Threats and Individual, Relational, and Social Resources among Refugees in Italy

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Abstract: Young people who migrate to another country, especially in the context of forced migration, must face complex and lengthy challenges. From a psychological point of view, the main challenges of migration are the re-signification of one's identity, the re-establishment of one's own life in the new country, and facing different social and institutional challenges as well as individual difficulties. All these challenges may constitute a threat to young migrants' identity. Based on the Motivated Identity Construction Theory, this study aimed to explore—in a sample of refugees—the identity threats faced by forced migrants in the settlement phase and the resources most frequently activated in dealing with this sensitive phase.

Keywords: identity needs; migration; identity threat; refugees; resources

1. Introduction

The world has seen millions of people become refugees. They come from many different countries, including the Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and South Sudan (UNHCR 2022). There were more than 34,000 arrivals in Italy in 2020 alone. Data show an additional increase in 2021, with departures from Tunisia and Libya. In 2021, there were 67,040 arrivals by sea, among which 14.1% were unaccompanied minors. A total of 56,388 asylum requests were received in 2021 (+173.9% more than in previous years). In contrast with declining foreign populations, irregular arrivals of migrants, including asylum seekers, have increased in recent years due to the significant impact of the pandemic on southern Mediterranean countries (ISMU Foundation 2021).

Yearly, people flee their home countries due to wars, natural catastrophes, or extreme poverty. They are forced to move away from their homes and towns, and their journey may last several years, often with long periods in which migrants live in developing countries in extremely difficult, even dramatic, conditions (Rossi and Mancini 2016). These migrants usually follow illegal routes, in which they must rely on traffickers, live in dangerous and demeaning conditions, and are more exposed to abuse and exploitation.

The literature widely shows that forced migration is a complex phenomenon that may expose migrants to high levels of vulnerability. Refugees struggle with legal, practical, emotional, and trauma-related problems that are likely to affect their physical and mental health (El Sount et al. 2019; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Kokou-Kpolou et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, vulnerability is not a written destiny but can change over time. Individuals can benefit from migration as it reflects and re-affirms their values, enhances their sense of self, and promotes a more fulfilling life (Batory-Ginda 2022). However, migration is a process that can lead to vulnerabilities that may take different forms in specific contexts, times, and developmental phases (Gilodi et al. 2022). In fact, the consequences of traumatic experiences depend on complex interactions between the individual, interpersonal, group, and intergroup dimensions that contribute to mitigating or exacerbating their effects (Cadamuro et al. 2021).

In other words, vulnerability is highly dependent on both the geopolitical context and historical moment and on migrants' personal lives and the circumstances of their migration (Elder 1998; Titzmann and Lee 2018).

Hence, it is necessary to understand the processes of forced migration by considering the different stages migrants are likely to go through. Along these lines, Rossi and Mancini (2016) argued that forced migration is a long-standing process including pre-migratory, arrival, and post-migratory phases. Four phases can be described as post migration: the arrival, early settlement, settlement, and establishment phases. Each phase poses unique challenges and difficulties that will impact the transition to the next phase. Specifically, in the early settlement phase, the main problems revolve around learning a new language (Birman et al. 2005), finding a job and house (Itzhaky and Ribner 1999; Nwadiora and McAdoo 1996), and seeking guidance in the new social and health service systems (Flynn et al. 2011; Papadopoulos et al. 2003). In the following settlement phases, the main challenges are particularly sensitive and need to be better explored. In fact, once the adaptive pressure of the first early settlement has passed, the dimensions of individual autonomy (Goodkind and Foster-Fishman 2002) and social integration (Kirkwood et al. 2014) become crucial for the migrant's personal experience and adaptation.

In other words, the mental health and wellbeing of resettled refugees are not only affected by the trauma they experience before and while fleeing persecution, but also by their experiences during the resettlement process. Young migrants must face microaggressions—characterized by subtle, covert acts as micro-insults, micro-assaults, and micro-invalidations that might appear harmless—that have a negative impact on the target's mental wellbeing (Pierce 1974; Sue 2010). On the one hand, refugees try to establish roots in the resettlement context despite micro-aggressions and everyday resistance by showing the role of the personal agency that impacts their wellbeing (El-Bialy and Mulay 2020). On the other hand, the local population necessarily plays a central role in the adaptation process of migrants into their new society and culture. More specifically, social support, trust, and mutual understanding between the local host population and migrants can significantly impact the migrant's adaptation process (Konstantinov 2017; Konstantinov et al. 2022). Similarly, attitudes toward migrants may impact their experience. For example, individuals who held more negative attitudes towards asylum seekers were more likely to be concerned with economic factors, such as the perceived cost of supporting asylum seekers, while individuals with more positive attitudes tended to place greater emphasis on humanitarian and religious concerns (Bansak et al. 2016). Similarly, increasing positive attitudes and social norms, as well as promoting personal contact with refugees, can help to increase individuals' willingness to provide help and support to refugees (Hellmann et al. 2021).

Considering this, a migrant's identity appears to be very delicate during the settlement phase (Smith 2013). One of the challenges facing these young people is the threats that forced migration pose to their identity. Along these lines, recent findings on Syrian refugees showed the ambivalent role of identity needs (the importance placed on one's ethnic identity) in moderating the relationship between discrimination and mental health, such that higher identity needs were associated with greater psychological distress in response to discrimination (Çelebi et al. 2017). Further evidence underlines the central role that satisfaction of identity needs has on the wellbeing of migrants. Specifically, a study by Crabtree and Pillow (2020) investigating the effects of stigma on authenticity found that self-distancing (perceiving oneself as separate from a stigmatized aspect of one's identity) and motive fulfillment (the degree to which an individual's needs and values are met) both had a significant impact on felt authenticity. Thus, reducing stigma and increasing self-acceptance may improve felt authenticity, leading to greater psychological wellbeing.

Based on the Motivated Identity Construction Theory (MICT; Vignoles et al. 2006), this study explored the threats to identity faced by forced migrants in the settlement phase and the resources they possess to overcome this sensitive phase.

1.1. Motivated Identity Construction Theory

The period of emerging adulthood is widely recognized as a specific developmental phase in which young adults experience wide-open possibilities and are engaged in identity exploration (Arnett 2014). From a psychological point of view, one of the main challenges of migration is the re-signification of one's identity (Gozzoli and Regalia 2005). This task can be more difficult for young adults because they undergo a period where fractures, displacements, and traumatic events may jeopardize the likelihood of building a coherent sense of identity. Therefore, the salience of the question "*Who am I?*" beyond the first settlement phase becomes even more apparent.

In the process of identity development, identity motives play a significant role. Identity motives are "psychological motivations that predispose people toward seeing themselves in certain ways" (Vignoles and Manzi 2014, p. 3061). Fulfilling these identity motives is associated with wellbeing, satisfaction, and psychological health in different contexts (Orth et al. 2008; Trzesniewski et al. 2006; Steger and Kashdan 2009; Hagerty et al. 1996). For this reason, people attempt to satisfy their identity motives by implementing different identity maintenance strategies. When these identity motives are frustrated, one experiences conflict and identity threat, and (un)satisfaction of each motive may negatively impact one's psychological health.

According to the Motivated Identity Construction Theory (MICT) (Vignoles et al. 2006; Vignoles 2011), people shape their identity to satisfy different motives, including self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, meaning, self-efficacy, and belonging. Each of these motives influences one's identity construction and re-negotiation.

More specifically, self-esteem concerns the positive evaluation of self, while continuity refers to the perception of one's own identity as coherent over time, even in the face of the most critical life changes (reviewed by Chandler et al. 2003). Distinctiveness implies the identity need to see oneself as unique and different from others. *Meaning* refers to the perception that one's life has meaning. Self-efficacy means seeing oneself as able to control and influence one's own environment. Lastly, belonging refers to the perception of inclusion and acceptance by others (Vignoles et al. 2006; Vignoles 2011).

As previously mentioned, all six motives are typically involved in identity construction and may carry different weights depending on the intergroup context (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Jetten and Wohl 2012).

Again, while some motives have a direct impact on identity definition, others can influence identity enactment. Vignoles et al. (2006) found that meaning, distinctiveness, and continuity impacted individual self-definition. However, self-esteem, belonging, and efficacy were correlated with behavioral actions regarding identity.

Based on these considerations, we argued that exploring the experience of emerging adult refugees through the MICT may contribute to a better understanding of the weight of each motive in identity changes. Furthermore, the study focused on the strategies that may reduce/mitigate threats and enhance the preservation and re-adaptation of identity contents.

1.2. The Present Research

Drawing from previous considerations, the aim of the present study was two-fold:

1. First, the study aimed to explore identity threats experienced by refugees during the settlement phase, also taking into consideration the individual, relational, and resources activated to deal with the main challenges of this stage.
2. Secondly, by focusing on two different northern Italian localities, Milano (a metropolitan city) and Reggio Emilia (a smaller city), the study aimed to understand the similarities and differences between these two realities. Recent research showed that the dimensions of place, such as social interactions and physical features, can explain the relationship between local social identity and wellbeing. For example, a study by Maricchiolo et al. (2021) suggested that the dimensions of place can play a significant role in shaping an individual's local social identity and their wellbeing,

and that this relationship can vary based on the specific dimensions of the place in question. The authors concluded that a better understanding of the role played by the dimensions of place in shaping local social identity and wellbeing can have important implications for interventions. Starting from the above consideration, we selected two Italian cities with different dimensions. Furthermore, despite integration policies being coordinated at the national level, integration policies are mainly implemented at the local level. Civil society actors' involvement varies remarkably across regions. This phenomenon highlights different types of social policy arrangements and can have a significant impact on the local management of migrants and affect their inclusion and integration. Starting from these considerations, we focused on two cities—both members of the Italian Network for Intercultural Cities—that have a solid commitment to social cohesion and intercultural relations. We state that the contrasting size of the cities, the diversity of their economies, and their governance infrastructures will provide insight into contextually relevant integration frameworks. Furthermore, the local context can have a different impact on migrants' integration and acculturation processes.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of 18 participants. At the time of the research, 10 participants resided in Milan (the second most populated city in Italy, with a long history of migration), and 8 participants resided in Reggio Emilia (a smaller city). The average age of the participants was 25 years (range: 23–29 years). One participant came from Pakistan, whilst the others came from Central Africa (Mali: 8, Gambia: 3, Guinea: 2, Guinea Bissau: 2, Senegal: 1, Niger: 1). The participants had been living in Italy on average for 6 years (range: 3–12 years). The average age of arrival in Italy was 19 years old (range: 18–27 years old). Among them, 8 out of 18 participants lived with compatriots, 8 lived alone, and 2 lived with Italian families.

At the time of the interview, the selected participants were living independently. The choice of interviewing people who were experiencing the settlement phase and lived independently was motivated by the interest to investigate the extent to which and the forms in which problems related to adaptation to a new context can affect identity construction and become factors of vulnerability.

Recruitment was undoubtedly challenging due to the difficulties in reaching out to refugees outside the reception system. Furthermore, the recruitment phase overlapped with COVID restrictions and only some intercepted refugees had the green pass necessary to access interview spaces.

Participants were recruited between November 2021 and January 2022 through the relationships of researchers with stakeholders, NGOs, community volunteers, and, in some cases, peer researchers[1]. Interviewees received a 15 euro voucher for taking part in the study. Informed consent was signed by all participants before the beginning of the interview.

In summary, participants were male refugees between 18 and 29 years old who had left the first reception system and were between the early settlement and settlement phases of migration.

2.2. Instruments

Data were collected through a qualitative interview lasting approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted partly in person and partly online due to COVID restrictions. All the interviews were conducted in Italian because interviewees had sufficiently good knowledge of the Italian language to be able to carry out the interview. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before analysis, the interviews were anonymized to guarantee participants' privacy.

The interview was semi-structured to allow participants to narrate themselves through prompts, inviting them to reflect on threats, resources, and key events in their lives. For this reason, the interview grid was constructed to explore participants' migration experience and personal history, focusing on the participants' psychological, familial, and community factors that could have an impact on the quality of the integration process. The interviews also aimed to highlight whether the above-mentioned factors were perceived by young migrants as obstacles or facilitators during the integration process and trajectory.

The interview grid addressed the following areas:

- Personal history, exploring significant events that affected and changed interviewees' lives.
- Vulnerability and resources at a personal, family, and community level, exploring personal weaknesses and strengths, quality of familial processes, and social support.
- Socialization/educational path, educational attainment, educational experience, school memories, personal and family educational goals, external conditions, perceived importance of education, and current and future educational projects.
- Labor market experience and financial condition, past and current job experience, personal skills, and challenges to find or change jobs, expectations/strategies towards the labor market, perceptions on the adequacy of one's financial and housing conditions.
- Social and intergroup relationships, contact and quality of relationships with local non-migrant population.
- Future perspectives, wishes, fears, and future plans.

Interviewers took care in researching and emphasizing the respondents' perception of the context in which they were embedded. In particular, the interviewer was required to pay special attention to the following points:

- Urban vs. rural setting.
- Living and growing up in segregated, vulnerable, and disadvantaged areas (e.g., big urban suburbs with a relatively poor population and a high number of migrants; racially demarcated areas/spaces).
- Anti-migrant attitudes and hostility.
- Belonging to a minority religion group (i.e., Muslim).
- The place being a transit or destination country.

3. Results

The analysis grid (see Table 1) was created with a mixed approach, with the aim of looking for threats to identity motives in the migration experience of the interviewees. In creating the analysis grid, some categories were created with theoretical reference to the Motivated Identity Construction Theory (Vignoles et al. 2006)—more specifically, satisfaction of the six identity motives and related threats. Other categories were created following an inductive approach: during the analysis of the interviews, the topics deemed most frequent, or most relevant—traumatic experiences before and after settlement in Italy; external and personal resources—were grouped together. Comparison between the two local sites stemmed from the intention to compare two different settlement contexts within the same country. The interviews were coded following the categories indicated by the analysis grid. The thematic analysis was conducted using QSR NVivo 1.7.1 (2022) software. Several steps were followed to complete the coding and data analysis. First, interviews were repeatedly read to allow familiarization with their content and an overview of the entire corpus was collected. Next, initial coding was performed, following the outline of the analysis grid. The next step was refinement: some categories were better specified and some sub-categories were developed (e.g., the sub-categories "peers"; "social workers and services"; "family" and "religion" found within "external resources" were added during coding). Finally, relationships between the different categories of analysis were studied to discover meaningful and relevant links among variables. At the end of each step, the results were shared among the researchers to increase the degree of accuracy of the analysis.

Table 1. Analysis categories and representative quotes.

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes and Representative Quotes
Traumatic experiences before settlement in Italy		Traumatic experiences in the country of origin: "Where I live there is still the war, and they kill each other." (MI2); "the people who followed Qaddafi [. . .] came with weapons because by force they want that land there and divide. From there the war started. Even today the northern part is not stable, there is always messy." (MI7)
		Traumatic journey: "We came in the same way as other people, but our story is a little different, because I came with a boat, about 46 people died on that boat." (MI4); "When I came to Libya, they beat me, and they forced me to work." (MI8)
Traumatic/bad experiences after settlement in Italy		Racism: "I feel good in Milan, but in some workplaces, they had problems with me due to my skin color." (MI9); "One day, there was a woman [. . .] I didn't speak Italian well [. . .] and she told me: "Why are you here? You don't speak Italian, there are Italian people who don't have a job, and you just came and you . . . " I didn't reply." (MI3)
		Lack of opportunities: "I slept on the street. I ate on the street. And I smoked." (MI4); "But when I came to Milan in Central Station, I saw people who live in the street, I saw them, and I didn't want to live like this. For living like this . . . I thought that if I stayed there, I would become a smoker, and I would do those other things . . . I thought this, and I went away." (MI5)
Identity motives: threats and resources	Efficacy	Bureaucratic issues: "When I came here, I was 18 years old. Now? 23? I am still waiting documents." (MI1)
		Feelings of incompetence: "You know how it works: I am not rich. They say that I must help them, but I am not rich here." (RE3)
		Sense of control: "Now I feel integrated, I feel good because I have a job, a house, I don't have problems in Italy, I can do almost everything." (MI2)
	Self-esteem	Social recognition: "I wanted to ask to a lady for information. She stopped me and answered that she hadn't got money to give me. I just wanted to ask for information, I am not a beggar." (MI2)
	Distinctiveness	Appreciation of diversity: "We have a different culture, if you have made them understand your thing and they try to understand, for example you Italians and we Africans are very different [. . .] For example, Italians made us understand this thing here, some understood, some did not. So, explanation and practice are important to understand." (RE5)
	Continuity	Bureaucracy: "I am a very, very strong person. But this problem related to documents made me stop as . . . As I had a handicap. Like people who haven't got a leg or an arm: This is not good, it is difficult when you have problems with documents, you become like this." (MI5) "What can you do if you don't have documents? You can't work. How can you imagine a future if you can't work? Just give me documents, and I go working." (RE3)
		Family roles: "Yes, my children grew up. My wife is alone and she is angry with me, she says, "Ali come to Pakistan with me, children ask for their daddy," but I must give them money." (RE)
		Connection between the past and the future: "I will stay where the future takes me" (RE5); "I left when I was a child, I don't know my country of origin very well [. . .] but I like my country. If I could, I would visit it." (RE3); "I don't want to change country, I started here, I worked. [. . .] If I go somewhere else, I must start again to look for new people, new friends, for a new job too." (RE8)
	Belonging	Nostalgia: "My fear is about not seeing people I left in Africa. This is, you are going away, you are leaving your home." (MI4); "No I just miss it sometimes. I really miss the people we know. Sometimes I really miss them. I miss the people we know and the people we joke with, we laugh with, we play with." (MI9)
		Belonging to the society: "A lot of people watch at me and I am African, and they don't help me." (MI4); "In my opinion, Milan is a population who can help a lot of migrants, as me." (MI2)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes and Representative Quotes
	Meaning	Imagining oneself in the future: "I'd like to be a nurse one day. I've never thought about stopping, since I've had the opportunity to study up to this point maybe when I find a job, I'll manage financially … then my dream is to at least become a nurse one day […] I feel calm, I feel helped. Also responsible for my life now sincerely." (RE2)
		Racism: "I was in Milan. I was lying on the ground. I was throwing up and all the people just walked near to me. No one stopped. No one. Absolutely no one. Absolutely, no one." (MI9)
		Quality of life: "We are always in shit. You go out for a better future. You can't go out to end up on the street. I can't have come out of Africa to sleep on the street. No." (MI1)
Personal resources		Internal predisposition: "I need to have a lot of patience. Yes, a lot of patience." (MI4)
		Open-mindedness: "I came out of my country. I met so many people. I saw life a little bit. Because if you're on one side you don't see anything." (MI4)
		Intergenerational values: "My mother always told me: respect people!" (RE3)
External resources	Peers	Support: "[This friendship] is a short time, but experiences and difficulties can be worth as many years spent together." (MI4)
	Social workers and services	Mother-son type of relationship: "She is my channel, she is my mother, my father, my all." (MI1); "You can have a child without carrying him in your belly, and this is who that person is for me." (MI7)
	Religion	Relying on God: "Yes, it depends on God. If God wants me to die today, I have to die. Everything depends on God. Every night when I was at sea I have to believe in God. We human beings can do many things, but it always depends on God." (MI8)
	Family	Support: "I have to thank my father. In my opinion I have to thank my father, because without my father I cannot make my life like this […] my father educated me well, it is because I am like this. I have to thank my father." (MI8)
		Family mandate: "All day long you have to, even when you send billions of billions they still need. That's why when so many people come here, that's why so many go to sell drugs. Because family always does that." (MI6)

The results are presented below, in order of relevance. First, we described the traumatic experiences before settlement in Italy and the negative experiences after settlement in Italy. We focused on the threats and satisfaction of identity motives and the available resources, both personal and external, used by young migrants to cope with identity threats and past difficulties. Lastly, we compared the two local sites.

3.1. Traumatic Experiences before Settlement in Italy

As refugees, the participants shared having undergone traumatic experiences and hardships in their respective countries of origin. Memories of war and persecution were vivid, adding to the fear and guilt felt towards family members and other loved ones who remained in the country of origin:

"Where I live there is still the war, and they kill each other." (MI2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Milan)

Moreover, the entire sample reached Italy illegally by sea. This led to several traumas related to the journey. Firstly, many interviewees described having crossed Africa from their country of origin to the Libyan coast, often under inhuman conditions. Some told of helplessly watching fellow migrants die of hunger and thirst or fall whilst crossing the desert without being rescued. A few of them told of the abuse and violence they suffered in Libya, later on in the journey:

> "They told me to work, but they didn't want to pay me. You can't say you don't want to do it; you must do what they say. I worked for two months, one day a person came and asked me: "Do you want to go to Italy?" I answered: "Of course I want." He kept me, we took the car and went to the boat. He told me: "You had worked, so I took you here. But if you die in the sea, it isn't my business." (MI2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Milan)

The sea journey was tragic, often accompanied by emergencies and ongoing risk of death. The common experience of many interviewees was disbelief at what they had faced. The time of the crossing seemed like suspended time or a black hole. Several participants reported that they did not think about or remember what had happened, or that they had become aware of it once they touched land in Italy:

> "I looked back at the sea that we crossed this sea, no, no. If I had seen it like this, no. Because we embarked during the night, I wasn't aware of it. We disembarked in Lampedusa at 9 am. I saw the sea that I crossed, and I thought that if I had fell, it would have been the end for me. My hand was spinning, and I was very worried." (MI7, migrant man from Mali, 28 years old, Milan)

One of the interviewees, as a crucial event in his own life, reported the following:

> "I have seen myself alive when I see 46 people die." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

The traumas that forced interviewees to leave their countries of origin added to those suffered during the journey, building a background of suffering that could not always be adequately dealt with. Interestingly, none of the participants communicated the choice to leave for Europe with their families. On the one hand, the reported motivations stemmed from the desire to protect their families from the pain of such a choice and worries about the trip. On the other hand, some underlined that they wanted to make this choice in total autonomy, without seeking advice from their relatives. When participants did communicate their choice, the memory was particularly vivid and painful because parents showed despair and begged their sons to return. The absence of a family mandate and non-bargaining at their departure, combined with the impossibility of saying goodbye, were other extremely painful and traumatic aspects for the participants:

> "No one knew it. I did it alone. I left like . . . The most of Africans, I could say the 95% of people who leave, they leave like this, because you can't say to your parents that you want to go to Europe." (MI3, migrant man from Mali, 26 years old, Milan)

> "We came to where the boat is and from there, I called dad to say that I had escaped and he asked, "Where are you?" I said the name of the city and I said I was going to Europe because there was no other way dad said, "Don't go, the sea is dangerous, when a border clears, I'll let you go." I said, "No, I'm with my friends and these things here, we've already taken the boat." Mamma mia, he went crazy. He was shouting, he was swearing, "Why don't you listen to me? Why didn't you tell me anything?"" (MI7, migrant man from Mali, 28 years old, Milan)

It is interesting to consider more closely the ways in which traumatic memories were evoked. Forced migration involved a range of traumatic events, from the motivations for leaving the country of origin, to the migratory journey, to the difficulties encountered during the arrival and settlement phases. Despite this, the paraverbal dimension of the communication, especially the tone used, was seemingly neutral, almost detached from the events that had been lived. This neutral tone could be for many reasons. It could indicate a desire not to open oneself emotionally to the narrative, with the assumption that young migrants cannot bear again the pain they have experienced. The detached tone could also indicate a willingness to let go of traumatic memories and not dwell on them, not out of fear of facing them but out of a willingness to move on with one's life.

3.2. Traumatic/Bad Experiences after Settlement in Italy

Negative experiences after settlement in Italy mainly concerned incidents of discrimination. Such incidents usually occurred in the workplace or when seeking a house:

"But if you try to look for a house, we can't. I have looked for a house a thousand times, but nothing. When you call them, the tone, the voice, they understand that you are a foreigner, and they say that the house is already rented." (MI7, migrant man from Mali, 28 years old, Milan)

"I feel good in Milan, but in some workplaces, they had problems with me due to my skin color." (MI9, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

Some participants cited the lack of opportunities and economic difficulties as possible risk factors for poverty:

"But when I came to Milan in Central Station, I saw people who live in the street, I saw them, and I didn't want to live like this. For living like this . . . I thought that if I stayed there, I would become a smoker, and I would do those other things . . . I thought this, and I went away." (MI5, migrant man from Senegal, 23 years old, Milan)

These issues will be analyzed in depth in the following paragraphs.

3.3. Identity Motives: Threats and Resources

All along the interview process, participants stressed several threats affecting all identity motives, with the partial exception of the distinctiveness motive. The overall picture outlined a subjective narrative of the forced migration as a journey that made people less efficacious, caused them to struggle with a precarious self-esteem, forced them to lose or risk losing a sense of continuity between their past and current life, caused them to feel detached and/or excluded from the social domain, and created uncertainty about the possibility of finding positive meaning in all of their endeavors.

We illustrate each of these motives in greater detail, showing both the experienced threats and resources that enabled them to buffer and counteract the negative effects of these threats.

3.3.1. Efficacy

Interviewees' sense of efficacy was mainly threatened by issues related to documents. Long bureaucratic delays and difficulties related to the recognition of refugee status prevented, as mentioned above, young migrants from planning their futures. In these terms, their sense of efficacy was strongly damaged. The powerlessness resulting from this impasse resulted in migrants having difficulty perceiving themselves as actors capable of changing and controlling their lives.

In general, the family mandate and economic promises made to family members in the country of origin were not topics that the interviewees wanted to explore in depth. However, one respondent reported that the inability to help his family economically negatively influenced his sense of efficacy. Feeling useless in this respect reinforced a negative self-perception, characterized by feelings of incompetence and helplessness:

"You know how it works: I am not rich. They say that I must help them, but I am not rich here." (RE3, migrant man from Mali, 26 years old, Reggio Emilia)

It is compelling to note that young migrants often needed and highly benefited from external and social recognition of their efficacy. As we will see more in depth when analyzing self-esteem, many respondents reported that they perceived a positive self-image in terms of control and competence thanks to what was given back to them by the people around them (i.e., work colleagues, peers):

"The day in which I signed my employment contract, and I took a coffee with my boss, someone who offered me a coffee and a sandwich. My first salary, he [my

boss] helped me to withdraw it and I saw that my life was happier than before." (MI10, migrant man from Niger, 29 years old, Milan)

The sense of efficacy also appeared to be correlated with the perception of having control over one's own life. Having documents in order, a decent housing situation, and a job were characteristics that allowed young migrants to feel able, which also influenced their ability to plan:

"Now I feel integrated, I feel good because I have a job, a house, I don't have problems in Italy, I can do almost everything." (MI2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Milan)

3.3.2. Self-Esteem

The main interesting result concerning this motive was the close link between self-esteem and the social environment in which participants lived. Their value was not primarily rooted in the recognition of personal strengths, resources, abilities, or skills, but was strictly intertwined with social feedback from the host community. Participants' narratives showed that the self-esteem motive was strongly challenged by racist experiences they had suffered since their arrival in Italy. Feeling that they could not have the same opportunities as natives undermined the self-image of young migrants, leading them to question their value as people:

"I wanted to ask to a lady for information. She stopped me and answered that she hadn't got money to give me. I just wanted to ask for information, I am not a beggar." (MI2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Milan)

Analogously, satisfaction of the self-esteem motive seemed to be strongly correlated with social recognition. Indeed, positive self-perception was narrated through the words of colleagues, family members, or other significant relationships established by the interviewee. It was compelling that respondents tended to see and evaluate themselves according to the feedback they received:

"Yes, I worked with a lot of good people, who want that I work with them now. They know that I am good. If I could quit my current job, I would find a new one, I just need to ask to these people, because they know that I am good." (MI1, migrant man from Guinea, 24 years old, Milan)

These findings seem to fuel the theory of the self-esteem system as a sociometer by Leary et al. (1995), who considered self-esteem as an indicator of one's social relations. According to this theory, people feel a low-level of self-esteem when they are not capable of maintaining a good social network. In this framework, self-esteem works as a human need to develop social relations and feel included in social groups.

3.3.3. Distinctiveness

This category was less explored in the interviews and did not seem to be seen as a specific threat. We believe that this category requires an awareness of one's position in relation to the culture of origin and the culture of the host country, which was not always achieved in interviews, partly due to the language barrier and the particularity of the sample selected.

Nonetheless, one interviewee provided a particularly interesting insight. In questioning encounters between people from different cultures, he noted that the best strategy for welcoming and enhancing differences is dialogue. Through telling one's story and listening to different experiences, one can reach a point of encounter that does not merely seek out and emphasize similarities, but instead aims to bring about an appreciation of diversity and the construction of a new, more complete, and enriched identity:

"However, let's say it's the explanation, everything when you explain it well, even if the person has never experienced it, if you have explained it well, he understands it. We have a different culture, if you have made them understand your thing and they try to understand, for example you Italians and we Africans

are very different as we come here, the fact of doing things slowly, for example. For us slowly does not exist. One thing done slowly does not exist, one thing done immediately is better, but things cannot be solved like that, so we have understood that everything has its time and must go slowly. For example, Italians made us understand this thing here, some understood, some did not. So, explanation and practice are important to understand." (RE5, young man from Mali, 25 years old, Reggio Emilia)

3.3.4. Continuity

The narrative of migration as a fracture or temporal divide in the experience of participants was widely stressed. Young migrants had the sense that the continuity of their life experiences was jeopardized by different obstacles that heavily influenced the course of their lives. The first and more evident issue concerned problems related to bureaucracy, documents, and recognition of refugee status. Almost all of the participants considered document-related difficulties as an obstacle that did not allow them to plan their future and continue building their new life in the host country:

"I am a very, very strong person. But this problem related to documents made me stop as . . . As I had a handicap. Like people who haven't got a leg or an arm: This is not good, it is difficult when you have problems with documents, you become like this." (MI5, migrant man from Senegal, 23 years old, Milan)

This experience was also present when the young migrants talked about difficulties they encountered in their school careers. The impossibility of recognizing the school qualifications obtained in their countries of origin led to the interviewees having to go to school again to obtain, in some cases, a lesser qualification than that obtained in their own country. This was experienced as extremely limiting and could lead to young migrants perceiving themselves as being stuck in suspended time that was not in line with their personal life story.

These aspects were also compounded by changes provoked by the whole migration process, which challenges the role system within the family and in the social domain. In line with previous research stating the critical role of continuity between migrants' past and present to favor positive group dynamics and intergroup relationships (Smeekes and Verkuyten 2015), maintaining roles and relationships in one's country of origin when living on another continent is a central aspect, but also difficult to negotiate, which in turn can lead to a perceived interruption between the two life moments:

"Yes, my children grew up. My wife is alone, and she is angry with me, she says "Ali come to Pakistan with me, children ask for their daddy," but I must give them money." (RE4, migrant man from Pakistan, 29 years old, Reggio Emilia)

"But I left when I was little, I don't know my country well. Now, I know better other places than my country, but I like my country. If I could, I would go back." (RE3, migrant man from Mali, 26 years old, Reggio Emilia)

One interviewee expressed fear of having to change countries to start again from the beginning, as if the pre- and post-migration experiences were not only two moments but two different lives:

"I don't want to change country, I started here, I worked, I had two years in this stage, now I am attending the third year, I have two years left. If I go somewhere else, I must start again to look for new people, new friends, for a new job too. I am not young anymore, I am growing up, If I go to another country, I must start again from the beginning, and I don't like it." (RE8, migrant man from Gambia, 25 years old, Reggio Emilia)

Respondents sought continuity through various strategies. On the one hand, some managed to attribute continuity to their experience by keeping alive links and symbolic connections to their lives before migration, such as the job they learned from their parents

and values that were passed on. These aspects acted as a bridge between the past and present and allowed young migrants to keep their memories alive and, in this way, bind the two moments of life that they could hardly keep together.

> "I love this job, because it is the only one my mother made me learn." (MI1, migrant man from Guinea, 24 years old, Milan)

> "My family taught me to respect other people." (MI7, migrant man from Mali, 28 years old, Milan)

On the other hand, interviewees wished to maintain continuity in the future. The life plans and goals they wished to achieve were related to their present situation. It is interesting to note that there was not the need to understand continuity in terms of space and place. What distinguished the fulfilment of this identity need was the serenity of moving through different experiences and places while maintaining a life plan congruent with past life history and goals.

> "I would like to remain in Italy in the future. If I want to stay here, I must do something that I can see what I have done and what I have started." (MI2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Milan)

> "My future, however, will not only be in Italy, if what I want to do, I won't do it in Italy, maybe I can leave, I can go and look somewhere else and go there and if I don't see that there is what I want I don't stay there either. I stay where the future takes me." (RE5, young man from Mali, 25 years old, Reggio Emilia)

3.3.5. Belonging

The importance of relationships explains why the belonging motive was pivotal in participants' narratives. Recent research in other contexts found that felt stigma or rejection experienced by individuals due to a perceived difference from the majority reduced the belongingness or the sense of connectedness to a group, and in turn, negatively impacted identification with another group. Improving belongingness within a group can help counteract the negative effects of felt stigma and promote a stronger sense of identification and belonging among fans (Tague et al. 2020). In other words, the threat to belonging may impact group relationships and the acculturation process.

We found that the sense of belonging was threatened in relation to both the host society and the country of origin. On the one hand, racism and discriminatory behavior were undoubtedly two factors that strongly influenced young migrants' sense of belonging. The perception of not feeling welcomed and accepted prevented satisfaction of the need to feel part of the host society and, as we have seen before, to increase their own sense of efficacy and self-esteem:

> "A lot of people watch at me, and I am African, and they don't help me." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

On the other hand, the sense of belonging to a society and place where one has grown up but has not been for years needs to be rethought. Young migrants expressed feelings of nostalgia for their families and own countries, acknowledging that they were in a nowhere-land, neither part of the new society nor part of the society of origin. They painfully realized that lives in their countries of origin went on without them, and that they missed important events of family and community history. The difficulty in holding together ties with the country of origin within the host country was evident and strongly undermined their overall sense of belonging to and continuity with their native world.

> "No, I just miss it sometimes. I really miss the people we know. Sometimes I really miss them. I miss the people we know and the people we joke with, we laugh with, we play with. I had this difficulty in the beginning. Yes." (MI9, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

> "My fear is about not seeing people I left in Africa. This is, you are going away, you are leaving your home [. . .] If I come back now, I won't find all the people

who I left. Someone was death, maybe, I don't find people who I left, but I find new others who were born. And others left, others died in the sea, died in the street. It is a long time that you left, but you don't know where you are going."
(MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

The uncertainty about the links and bond with one's own culture makes more salient and necessary the building of positive relationships within the new country. Interviewees' acculturation attitudes towards the host society were not marked by separation or closure. On the contrary, they longed for a strong sense of belonging to the host society. Despite the experiences of refusal and discrimination, any positive connections and links with Italian people—citizens, social workers, and work colleagues—were underlined very strongly.

"In my opinion, Milan is a population who can help a lot of migrants, as me."
(MI2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Milan)

Specifically, the relationship with social workers with which they had been in contact was often characterized by family-related vocabulary, and the social worker was often compared to a second mother:

"This is what I will never forget: "Help from the unknown mother." You can have a child without carrying him in your belly, this is what this person meant to me."
(MI7, migrant man from Mali, 28 years old, Milan)

In summary, the perception of feeling welcomed and part of a new community is always a psychological relief and is seen as a fundamental resource, crucial both to overcoming moments of difficulty and stress and increasing the level of wellbeing perceived by the interviewees.

3.3.6. Meaning

As Steger (2012, p. 165) stated, "meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years." In this regard, the category of meaning can be considered as transversal and encompass the other motives. If people perceive themselves to be effective, experience continuity in their lives, are able to plan the future, have good self-esteem, and feel social support, they are able to attribute meaning to their experience.

"In Gambia, thanks to my parents, they really taught me so many things in life that I didn't know but also, I was smart, I tried to go to school, I was very good at going to school. Even if I think about these things here, they make me feel a little bad because, I was a smart person, I was really a person at school, that if I studied enough today, I could become something else." (MI9, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

For this reason, all of the quotations chosen to study the meaning motive convey broader and more complex thoughts about young migrants' evaluation of personal experience.

People pointed to the ability to imagine themselves in the future and the perception of being responsible for their own lives and choices as factors that contributed to developing meaning in their experience and lives:

"I'd like to be a nurse one day. I've never thought about stopping, since I've had the opportunity to study up to this point maybe when I find a job, I'll manage financially . . . then my dream is to at least become a nurse one day. But you never know how [. . .] I found myself here, I started a new experience that helped me a lot to grow. I feel calm, I feel helped. Also responsible for my life now sincerely. Because eventually I will have to choose a path. Right to make my life. The reason is to study and so to take courses to make a new life at least not like others." (RE2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Reggio Emilia)

Meaning seemed to be strongly threatened by racism and discrimination. The intensity, frequency, and repetition of discriminatory experiences contributed to a dehumanization of the individual, with the additional risk of a repetition of the traumas experienced in the

country of origin and during the journey. Dehumanization appeared to be strongly related to the meaning of life. The perception of not being seen as people, as reported by some quotations, led young migrants to question their entire life experience:

> "I was in Milan. I was lying on the ground. I was throwing up and all the people just walked near to me. No one stopped. No one. Absolutely no one. Absolutely, no one. [. . .] Once, while I was jogging, I tripped, and I hurt my ankle. Cars didn't stop, and even honked." (MI9, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

This had a strong impact on their well-being and ability to plan a future:

> "We are always in shit. You go out for a better future. You can't go out to end up on the street. I can't have come out of Africa to sleep on the street. No. Before, I slept on the street for many years, and my back is against the wall . . . I had imagined looking for a girl and getting married, but Italy did it [he repeats the gesture of squeezing with his foot], nothing. I had decided on that, but it went away. . . . I wanted to open a shop. But I don't have the documents, I can't do it! I cannot imagine so. I must wait. If you know the rules you can imagine. You can't imagine if you don't know the rules." (MI1, migrant man from Guinea, 24 years old, Milan)

The case of the latter interviewee, who perceived a repetition of negative events in most of the identity motives, was compelling. The difficulty in finding a social environment and reference group with which to identify, the impossibility of maintaining continuity in the migration experience, the perception of loss of control, powerlessness, and low self-esteem, caused mainly by factors such as waiting for bureaucratic delays, difficulty in obtaining documents, and suffering discriminatory episodes, led him to have a catastrophic view of his experience and deny himself hope for a better future:

> "But my life wasn't like this, my life is like this [he draws an imaginary line from one corner to the opposite corner of the paper, obliquely] . . . because when you were born you see that there is so much to face. You have a mountain to do, so many things to do. You [referring to the interviewer] were born this way and you find life easy; you have life very easy. But I was born here [points to the bottom of the rising line] and now I'm here [points to the sign he used to represent himself in the lifeline]. What I've experienced up to now, I haven't even tasted anything of life and freedom, nothing. And I'm in Italy. I live here today, I said earlier that it was very difficult in Libya, and I also said in my country that life was very difficult. Here too, the pressure is not that you are . . . You are living, but you have pressure in your brain, you are not free. The body isn't explanatory, you see I'm in shape, but my brain . . . even my face . . . I have trouble sleeping too, I have too many thoughts. You don't have help, you don't have someone . . . a good psychologist, who calls you every time and makes you go through your thoughts. Thanks to technology we can play, otherwise it's very difficult for me." (MI1, migrant man from Guinea, 24 years old, Milan)

On the other hand, satisfaction of the meaning motive was related to the fulfilment of other identity motives. Good self-esteem and good capacity of giving continuity to one's own experience, for example, enabled young migrants to give meaning to their lives and experiences:

> "I found here, I started a new experience that has helped me a lot to grow, in my opinion. I feel calm, I feel helped. Also responsible for my life now, sincerely. Because in the end I will have to choose a path. Just to make my life. This is the reason why I am here. The reason is to study and thus to take courses to make a new life at least not like the others." (RE2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Reggio Emilia)

3.4. Personal Resources

Young migrants counted on many internal resources, such as courage, patience, perseverance, and respect:

"I need to have a lot of patience. Yes, a lot of patience. And close my eyes, yes, because to carry on I need to close my eyes and my ears." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

These resources were developed to cope with difficulties and made explicit because of traumatic experiences. One common factor that seemed to impact participants' coping capacities was open-mindedness. Some of the participants tended to live the journey as an experience of personal growth and meeting different cultures was perceived as personal enrichment. They experienced and perceived stressors as less obstructive than other participants:

"I came out of my country. I met so many people. I saw life a little bit. Because if you're on one side you don't see anything." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

On the other hand, not having a defined migration plan was an obstructive factor. Participants who underlined not having a defined plan about migration tended to not have concrete plans for the future.

Interestingly, many participants emphasized that these resources were transmitted by their parents, highlighting once again the prominence of relationships acting as a bridge between pre- and post-migratory events. From this perspective, meaningful relationships played an important role in satisfying identity motives and ensuring a continuity of values not only on an intergenerational level, but also within the respondent's personal life history.

3.5. External Resources

3.5.1. Peers

As previously highlighted, the quality of interpersonal relationships was a fundamental resource for young migrants. However, it is necessary to emphasize that interviewees exhibited difficulty in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships. Relationships with peers appeared to be the least fruitful, with participants expressing, in many cases, isolation not only from the host society, but also from other compatriots. Strong and developed cultural and ethnic networks were not mentioned. The missing or reduced network of interpersonal relationships was likely to be linked to a sheer lack of time. Many interviewees worked and studied and found it difficult to invest time in building relationships. The major desire of these young adults was to build a solid future from an economic—and therefore professional—point of view, which took all their energy. It seemed that on a scale of priorities, they were absorbed by the satisfaction of basic, albeit necessary, needs: to be in order with documents, to have an economic basis that allowed them to live with dignity, to learn the language well, and to obtain school certificates. In this scenario, young migrants were not able to deploy their energy to also satisfy relational needs. This can also explain the absence of specific reference to any kind of romantic relationship. Forming a family was a shared wish, but it still seemed placed in a far future.

However, when relationships with peers were cultivated, young migrants perceived valuable support:

"I made friends in my city. I wasn't looking for them, it just happened. It happened something to us, and at least we trusted each other, we trusted each other, like that we help each other in our lives." (RE2, migrant man from Mali, 23 years old, Reggio Emilia)

It is interesting to note that often the relationships considered most meaningful were those established during traumatic moments:

"Those friends can last, because I have a lot of friends that I met when I was sleeping in the streets. They call me and I call them. We laugh. It is a friendship

that has lasted a short time, but in this short time, it seems that this friendship has lasted for a long time. Because it is a short time, but experiences and difficulties can be worth as many years spent together." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

3.5.2. Social Workers and Services

Most interviewees were grateful to social workers that they met along their migration trajectory. They were seen as the reference figure to cling to in time of great stress, such as the period following their arrival in Italy. Often, young migrants tended to attribute their life's successes to the skills of social workers:

"That job there, it all came from Antonella." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

The type of relationship migrants formed with these people was reminiscent of family bonds, in which social workers took care of them, meeting their practical and emotional needs:

"The moment in which I understood my life had changed was my birthday. Mrs. Francesca gave me a present. In that moment, I understood that someone was thinking about me [. . .] I will never forget that day." (MI1, migrant man from Guinea, 24 years old, Milan)

"If today I feel well, it's thanks to her [. . .] She helped me with documents, school, work, all. She made me meet a lot of people that helped me. Everything was born with her, and I can't forget her." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

"I met a lot of people who treat me as a son." (RE8, migrant man from Gambia, 25 years old, Reggio Emilia)

3.5.3. Religion

Among the interviewees, religious faith was considered a great resource for overcoming difficult times. In some cases, respondents attributed every event in their lives to the will of God, who became the only entity capable of deciding their fate. If religion was a strong anchor that gave meaning to disastrous events and induced hope, a different interpretation can be hypothesized. Some of the young migrants interviewed introjected the perception of ineffectiveness of their actions, so much so that they no longer considered themselves able to actively change their future. Religion, in this case, would take an active role against the threat to efficacy:

"Yes, it depends on God. If God wants me to die today, I have to die. Everything depends on God. Every night when I was at sea I have to believe in God. We human beings can do many things, but it always depends on God. I said so to my lawyer. Before I already had negative documents, I told him: it's not your fault it's God's fault. I have seen so many friends they had documents, but God did this, but for me it did not arrive." (MI8, migrant man from Guinea Bissau, 24 years old, Milan)

3.5.4. Family

The family of origin played a very important role for respondents. Despite the physical distance, parents (often mothers) were a strong emotional resource and point of reference for advice and support:

"From when I left until now is always, they stand there, at least to ask how I am. To ask, even if they don't see me, to ask other people. It's not that they don't think of me anymore. Actually, I'm happy to have them as family. Also, my brother really a person who gave me so much courage. Actually, I am happy to have them as family. I'm lucky." (MI4, migrant man from Gambia, 24 years old, Milan)

As previously highlighted, narratives concerning family were mainly characterized by a strong feeling of nostalgia and, at the same time, gratitude for the values passed on. When present, wives and children also acted as a resource. They acted as a stimulus to overcome difficulties and build a solid base in Italy, with the goal of family reunification, and to be able to ensure a better future for their children:

> "My wife, every morning, and every evening, she wants to know where I am and how I feel. It helps me to be good with my head." (MI10, migrant man from Niger, 29 years old, Milan)

> "I want my daughter to study when she comes here. Here there is an obligation for all children to go to school, in my country there is not. That's how I like it, so everyone studies." (MI6, migrant man from Guinea Bissau, 28 years old, Milan)

However, the relationship with the family of origin was challenged by the family mandate. Since none of the interviewees had notified their parents of their departure, there was no opportunity to share or negotiate reciprocal expectations. This aspect added complexity to the relationship, redefining roles between the young migrants and the family members who remained in the country of origin. Moreover, the absence posed a threat to efficacy. Often, as a sort of wishful thinking, young migrants thought they would be able earn a lot of money and lead a decent life in Italy and Europe, and at the same time, help their family of origin economically. However, this expectation clashed with reality, instilling in the interviewees a sense of inadequacy and ineffectiveness:

> "That's why when you are here all your family in the country, when you enter Europe here, they think you take the money on the ground . . . and send money. All day long you have to, even when you send billions of billions they still need. That's why when so many people come here, that's why so many go to sell drugs. Because family always does that." (MI6, migrant man from Guinea Bissau, 28 years old, Milan)

3.6. Comparison between Two Local Sites

As mentioned in the methods section of this paper, the sample was recruited in two different Italian cities. Although they share a well-founded migratory history, the cities differ in other respects, including the size of the city itself, accessibility to some services, and a different culture. Milan is a metropolis. For years, it has been a destination for people from all parts of Italy and the world. Reggio Emilia, which has a substantial number of non-natives, remains a smaller reality. For this reason, a comparison of the two local sites would appear interesting.

Differences regarding pre-migration vulnerabilities were hardly noticed: both local sites' interviewees reported loss of relatives, social, and war-related problems as main factors. Looking at migration, Milan's interviewees focused on Libyan memories and the boat experience, while Reggio Emilia's interviewees focused on the first part of migration, from the origin country to Libya. Looking at post-migration events, Milan-based interviewees seemed more concerned with documents and bureaucracy and spoke more about racist episodes. Both local sites reported language-related difficulties. Participants considered themselves more vulnerable in Milan than in Reggio Emilia.

Personal resources were more often cited by Milan's sample than Reggio's sample, although the addressed topics largely coincided. Family was a reference point for both local sites' interviewees and religion was perceived as a supportive resource by both groups.

Education was perceived by both local sites' participants as a necessary step for building one's future. In the Milan-based sample, two participants attended university, while no one reported it in the Reggio Emilia-based sample. Families always supported interviewees in their studies.

Participants from both local sites reported instances of racist behavior. Interviewees reported having met bad people but also very good people during their period in Italy. They

all had good relationships with Italians or people from other countries. Strong differences between local sites were hardly present.

Looking at future expectations, three areas equally emerged in both local sites: where migrants would like to live, their plans for family formation and personal growth, and intergenerational perspectives. Intergenerational perspective was cited by one interviewee from Milan.

Usually, no interviewees from either local site reported gender differences regarding the way they were treated by their family of origin. Looking at other themes, we found some factors that could facilitate or hinder integration. As a facilitator, we mentioned open-mindedness. In the Milan sample, this construct was shared more by people who attended university, while in the Reggio Emilia sample, we found open-mindedness in one participant who did not attend university. Not having a defined plan about migration appeared to be an obstructive factor, especially in the Reggio Emilia sample, which was declared by one interviewee. Religion was perceived as an obstructive factor by only one interviewee from Milan who tended not to share his emotions with other people. On the other hand, people from both local sites appeared to be very reserved. Participants from both local sites were orphans of one or both parents and were otherwise faced with the loss of a close relative. Participants hardly shared their migration plans with their families.

In comparing the two local sites, we would have expected differences in terms of the integration process. As anticipated, the two locales differ in size and accessibility of services, including those for integration. However, no major differences were found, probably because issues regarding resources and difficulties in migration and integration processes are transversal, and they are common to all migrants, regardless of the context in which they arrive. From what emerged from the analysis, it could be said that the housing context had less impact than might be expected. In fact, it was seen that, in terms of resources used and difficulties encountered, the small town and big city were perceived in similar ways.

4. Discussion

4.1. Relationships among Identity Motives

The data analysis highlighted the relationships between identity motives. Some identity motives seemed to have a reciprocal connection and play a shared role in accomplishing the participants' identity.

First, efficacy measures the person's perceived sense of control and competence over their actions and life. Self-esteem, on the other hand, is a more general indicator of the individual's evaluation of himself or herself. These two identity motives appeared to be interrelated: the more efficacious—and consequently, competent—a person perceives themselves to be, the better their self-evaluation will be, and vice versa.

In addition, one of the consistent findings across the interviews was the prominent role of the relationship with the respondent's wellbeing. Indeed, the sense of belonging appeared to have a direct link with both efficacy and self-esteem motives among young migrants. As seen previously, self-perception and self-esteem were often measured through the words of other people. The trend that could be noted was: "I am worth it because other people say I am good." This was also noticed for the sense of efficacy: again, respondents recognized their competence through the words of colleagues or employers, introjecting the positive evaluation given by the people around them.

The category of meaning appeared to be reinforced by the efficacy, self-esteem, belonging, and continuity motives. The category of meaning was general, asking the individual to consider all aspects of his or her life in order to arrive at an evaluation. For this reason, respondents showed difficulty in finding meaning in their lives and—given the specificity of the sample—in migration when they did not perceive relational support, perceive themselves as competent, did not perceive their own value, and finally, when they failed to grasp continuity between the past and present or between the present and future. It is compelling to note that dissatisfaction with the category of meaning can be associated with

the perception of a catastrophic outcome of one's life. Often, those who showed difficulty in satisfying the meaning category also showed difficulty in satisfying other categories. Thus, threats on multiple fronts to identity motives can seriously endanger a person's identity construction, with serious consequences for the wellbeing of the individual. To sum up, meaning could be defined as the identity motive subsuming the other identity motives and as an overall indicator in identity construction. It is also interesting to investigate the inverse relationship: a strong threat to meaning and low identity construction could make the person unable to seize resources and satisfy identity motives.

4.2. Relationships among Vulnerabilities and Identity Motives

As previously noted, identity motives are threatened by specific vulnerabilities. The overall analysis enabled determining that said difficulties had a concurrent impact on several identity motives.

Document-related problems and long, exhausting bureaucratic processes affected the participants' sense of efficacy, self-esteem, continuity, and meaning. The experience of feeling blocked by documents had an impact on migrant youths' perception of competence and sense of control (sense of efficacy), which affected their self-esteem. Young migrants often experienced waiting for documents as suspended time, making it difficult to plan a future and jeopardizing the continuity motive.

Ultimately, the ubiquity of document-related difficulties also affected their sense of meaning. The legal recognition of refugee status had a very strong impact on the young migrant's definition of self and gave a different meaning to the lived experience in the host country. In addition, when a person was stuck for a very long time in this waiting period, he or she could come to question the entire migration experience and the motivations behind it.

The possibility of establishing meaningful relationships and perceiving a powerful support network were two resources that influenced self-esteem and effectiveness. This aspect was not only identifiable with the sense of belonging, but generally indicated the two-way openness between the young migrant and the host society, services, colleagues, and family.

A major condition of vulnerability was linked to the experience of discrimination and racism, which had simultaneous influences on efficacy, self-esteem, sense of belonging, and meaning.

First, discrimination undermined the sense of efficacy because it prevented participants from having control over the situation and from being evaluated based on their competence. Similarly, self-esteem was affected by racism since being judged on intrinsic and not modifiable characteristics—such as skin color and country of origin—influenced the general evaluation of the self. This statement is also supported by the findings in the previous section about these two identity motives: participants were strongly influenced by the judgment of other people. When this judgment was strongly negative, it was introjected by young migrants, with the risk of low self-evaluation.

The perception of not feeling accepted by the local population and feeling judged obviously had a strong impact on the need to belong. As highlighted earlier, when the experienced discrimination was continued over time and was impactful, it had a strongly negative effect on the meaning young migrants attached to their lives. Indeed, unfounded negative judgment based only on personal and unchangeable characteristics prevented young migrants from constructing an experience with meaning. This aspect also developed with respect to future expectations. As stated by one interviewee, it was not possible to build a future in a society where one has had a strong discriminatory experience. Indeed, discrimination, by affecting all identity motives, prevented young migrants from perceiving the possibility of changing their destiny.

4.3. Relationships among Identity Threats and Resources

One striking aspect of the findings was that participants who showed greater difficulty and more identity threats were also those who cited fewer resources, both personal and external. Conversely, those who perceived their own resources and were able to activate them also showed fewer attacks on their identity motives. As an explanation of this finding, one can argue that those who were more focused on the difficult aspects of their lives had fewer resources of which to take advantage. Alternatively, those who directed their energy into coping with vulnerable conditions might have had more difficulty in focusing on the positive aspects of their experience, and consequently would be challenged to seek and use their potential personal and social resources. A reverse explanation could be further proposed: those who managed to enhance their available resources may have had a more positive view of their experience, and consequently perceived fewer attacks on their identity. Future studies could better disentangle this question.

5. Conclusions

The present study aimed to explore the identity threats experienced by a sample of refugees who had been living in Italy for an average of 6 years. Consequently, we expected that participants would focus their narratives on the process of individual autonomy and their future life plans. The expectation was that most participants would be focused on the settlement phase, in which the issues related to arrival (learning the language, obtaining documents, worrying about a job, and searching for a house) had largely been overcome and they would exhibit a future-oriented attitude. However, the analysis suggested that participants were (still) undergoing a further stabilization phase, in which they dealt with the same issues (such as obtaining documents, stabilizing their legal status, and building a support network) for many years. This issue raises questions about the difficulties of the post-migration period, which greatly slow down future planning.

Moreover, the identity motivation model used for the data analysis highlighted that migration is a major threat to the construction—and maintenance—of identity, as it variously affects the latter.

The first significant contribution that emerged from the study is the influence of the attitudes of the local population and social relations on favoring or hindering the development of identity and overcoming these transition phases. These young people tried to overcome threats to self-efficacy and self-esteem with social recognition and searched for self-image through what people of the local community gave back to them.

Furthermore, episodes of stigma, discrimination, and exclusion are factors that strongly influenced the identity development of these young people and hindered the satisfaction of various identity needs, such as the need to belong. This was undermined by the perception of not feeling welcomed by society, which, in turn, also influenced self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity (e.g., the impossibility of recognizing school qualifications obtained in the country of origin), and meaning through a process of dehumanization that risked emptying the meaning of the migratory experience.

In general, all of this made it difficult to successfully overcome the settlement phase, which would include personal fulfillment, social integration, and autonomy.

Equally valid is that these young people reported remarkable resilience and an optimistic retelling of their experiences and relationships. Despite the experiences of rejection and discrimination, positive connections and ties with Italians, locals, social workers, and co-workers were underlined. In particular, migrants tended to give credit to social workers for their successes, showing great gratitude towards them. This, in turn, underlined a third important lesson: services are central to the experience of these young people, especially when primary support relationships may have the ability to compensate, at least in part, for other relational deficiencies, such as family distance or difficulty in building strong friendship networks.

Working on intergroup relationships seems central and in line with the literature in supporting the local community's active role and social responsibility in favoring or

hindering a positive migrant experience. Involving the local community to provide more information about refugees seems central. This can positively impact attitudes toward refugees, help to reduce prejudice, and promote greater understanding and integration between refugees and the local community (Bajrami et al. 2017).

At the individual level, future studies may further investigate strategies for coping with identity threats. For example, the role of religion, which for many interviewees was central to overcoming difficult moments, was only partially addressed. Therefore, future studies may explore whether religion represents an anchor that gives meaning and hope to refugees about the future or an active strategy for managing the identity threat linked to the absence of control over events. At the relational level, future studies may better explore family relationships, with a focus on cultural background and value transmission. The departure was sudden for all participants, not negotiated, and often followed a critical loss, such as that of the father. Analyzing cultural and value dimensions to explain the impulsive migration choice may help to understand the long-term experience of migrants, as well as the continuity threat linked to the family's expectations of their migration.

Furthermore, relational resources emerged as fundamental and were recognized as such by migrants themselves. However, despite said acknowledgment, there seemed to be little effort to maintain them and create new ones, either by the participants themselves or by local policies. It can be hypothesized that young migrants still feel stuck in a phase where they feel the urge and pressure to satisfy the most basic and foundational needs linked to survival, such that they direct less energy towards the search for meaningful relationships. It is also worth noting that young migrants perceived low commitment from local policies towards maintaining and enhancing interpersonal relations as a strategy to foster young migrants' integration and wellbeing.

Therefore, it would be interesting to further investigate the role of migration in the identity motives model, with particular effort in investigating distinctiveness. Distinctiveness needs seemed to be the least explored, even if an interesting cue was provided by a participant who emphasized that it was helpful to enhance one's values. This is in line with the literature showing that reflecting on and re-affirming one's values enhances the sense of self and promotes a more fulfilling life (Batory-Ginda 2022). Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate whether, in the settlement phase, less distinctiveness emerges because the need to belong is more urgent, which collides with micro-aggressions and daily discriminations that undermine the integration and adaptation of refugees. It would therefore be important to investigate the impact that everyday racism has on the identity development of these young people, as well as the resources they activate to overcome it. As anticipated above, despite the difficulty of establishing deep relationships, refugees emphasized positive relationships with locals and Italians. It would be interesting to explore whether gratitude and a positive attitude towards the premises are helpful ways of mitigating identity threats or whether they can help maintain the status quo, in line with the System Justification Theory (Jost and Banaji 1994), such that members of the disadvantaged group tend to support false beliefs that are contrary to their interests, thus contributing to reinforcement of the disadvantaged position of the self and its group.

Some limitations of the study need to be underlined. First, it is worth noting that the sample size did not allow generalization of the findings to the group of forced migrants. Future research should include a wider sample and should be carried out in different localities of Italy. Second, whilst the format of the qualitative interview allowed participants to underline the aspects of life experiences they perceived as more salient, it limited the space for more complete expression and reflection about identity threats. Specific questions could be added in future studies.

However, the present study is the first, to our knowledge, to analyze the interplay of identity motives in the process of adaptation of forced young adult migrants during their settlement phase, thereby highlighting the role of these motives in the subjective experience of this group.

Note

1　Peer researchers are young migrants involved in different phases of the MIMY project (Nienaber et al. 2020), within which this study has been conducted. They share certain characteristics with the sample (in this case, they are young adult migrants), and at the same time they have research skills, enabling them to establish a link between researchers and participants.

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