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Displaced Selves: Older African Adults in Forced Migration

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Ageing as a refugee in an unsettled life situation increases the need for identity management due to dramatic life changes. This qualitative study, influenced by phenomenology, focuses on the stories of older adults in protracted intra-African refugee situations and the continuity and discontinuity of their identities. In line with identity process theory, we portray identities as situationally accomplished through the interplay of how one defines oneself internally and how others define one from the outside. The data, analysed by using abductive thematic analysis, consist of five semi-structured interviews with refugees in protracted refugee situations in Nairobi. We argue that older age combined with protracted migratory experiences resulted in the study participants possessing a wide array of experiences, including many losses. These, including their pre-migratory experiences, formed a large repertoire of intra-psychic, interpersonal and intergroup coping strategies to rely on when reworking their identities.

Keywords: continuity, discontinuity, identity, forced migration, older adult, intra-African refugees

Introduction

Of the estimated number of 281 million international migrants in 2020, 12% are older adults, aged 65 or above ([Migration Data Portal 2021](#)). Despite the vast number of older adults in voluntary or forced migration, this group has only recently attracted the attention of researchers ([Ciobanu and Hunter 2017](#)). While ageing as such is a stage of life that may require reworking of anyone's identity, especially during the onset of frailty or disability ([Barrett and Gumber 2020](#)), ageing as a refugee in an unsettled life situation increases the need for identity management due to the dramatic life changes often involved in traumatic experiences ([Shirazi and Caynan 2016](#)). Being a refugee involves a movement

which, while the drivers can be various, involves force, compulsion, or coercion as the immediate reason for displacement ([International Organization for Migration 2017](#)).

The place of living, circumstances, or the material and social environment in general are the grounds for everyday life, and these day-to-day experiences can either support or undermine an individual's acknowledged identity or identities ([Kellaher et al. 2004](#)). We understand 'identity' to be similar to [Giddens's \(1991: 53\)](#) definition of self-identity: 'the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography'. He emphasizes continuity across time and space but also notes that individuals can reinterpret their identities as times and places change. Identities are situationally accomplished through the interplay of how one defines oneself internally and how others define one from the outside ([Machat-From 2017](#)). This study focuses on continuity and discontinuity of identities that are recounted by older adults living in protracted intra-African refugee situations.

The majority of research on older African refugees has been done outside that continent (e.g. [Abu et al. 2019](#); [Madi et al. 2019](#)). Research on intra-African refugees focuses predominantly on mental health and trauma (e.g. [Ng et al. 2020](#); [Mwanamwambwa and Pillay 2022](#)) or on coping strategies and managing as a refugee (e.g. [Tegenbos and Büscher 2017](#); [Tippens 2017, 2020](#); [Bhagat 2020](#)). Studies that connect advanced age and identity of older refugees indicate that forced migration can continue to shape an individual's sense of self and attachment to relevant social categories for decades ([Jaspal 2015](#)). If older adult refugees do not master the local language and live in fragmented families under an unfamiliar societal structure, they may struggle to develop a clear vision of their role in a community in a foreign country ([Nielsen et al. 2017](#)).

Forced migration does not entirely dismantle identities, but it does impose change upon them. [Jetten et al. \(2018\)](#) studied ageing well as a migrant in a foreign land, emphasizing the importance of social groups as the basis for self-definition. Social groups provide people with a sense of grounding and belonging and can provide various identities and psychological resources that support people in adjusting to their new life situations. In South African context, [Tewolde \(2021\)](#) found that Eritrean refugees of various ages on one hand had to hide their self-identities by modifying their appearances and having recourse to isolation to avoid xenophobia and, on the other, had enforced South African identities. This was done by learning the local language to pass as South Africans and avoid detection as foreigners. While there are a few studies on identities of refugees in protracted refugee situations (e.g. [Abdi 2005](#); [Byrne 2016](#)), we did not find any focusing on older adults.

The context of this study is intra-African migration because, of the 41 million international migrants moving within, from, or to Africa, 80% have no intention of leaving that continent ([Achieng and El Fadil 2020](#)). The data consist of interviews with older refugees living in Nairobi, Kenya, who at present and during their past have been in protracted refugee situations and thus been forced to continuously renegotiate their identities. Kenya has nearly a million migrants, about half of whom are refugees. About 5 per cent of migrants in Kenya are 65 years or older

([Migration Data Portal 2021](#)). This article focuses on older refugees aged 50 years and older. That age threshold reflects notions of ageing in Kenya, since old age is not only chronological age but also connotes certain physical attributes, reproductive experiences, and community roles ([Ezeh *et al.* 2006](#)) also referred to as social age ([Clark-Kazak 2013](#)).

Influenced by phenomenological approaches that emphasize human experience and knowledge production based on it ([Creswell and Cheryl 2016](#)), this study draws on intra-African older adult refugees' accounts of their forced migration experiences. The aim is to determine the change and stability in the identities of these older adults as experienced during their long refugee journeys. Each had fled several times during their lives. What kinds of identities have they left in the past, and what are the new identities they have gained or tried to gain during the protracted refugee situation? What kinds of identities do they portray as internal and self-defined as opposed to those defined from the outside? The focus is on the continuity and discontinuity of identities in advanced age, a potentially challenging life stage.

We proceed by defining and discussing the concept of identity in the context of displacement before describing the study context and the collection and analysis of data. We then present the results of the analysis and finish with conclusions regarding the identities of older African refugees living in Nairobi.

Identities in Protracted Refugee Situations

Identity process theory (IPT; [Breakwell 1986](#); [Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010](#)) provides an integrative theory of identity threat and coping. This theory offers a framework for understanding the interrelations between displacement (forced migration) at older ages and identity. IPT proposes that identity construction is guided by several identity principles that specify the desired end states for identity. It is argued that the individual needs to perceive appropriate levels of self-continuity across time, experiences of uniqueness and differentiation from relevant others, competence and control over one's life and future, feelings of personal worth, experiences of meaningful life and purpose, belonging to meaningful social groups and compatibility and coherence between one's different identities ([Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010](#)). The theory holds that individuals who cannot perceive appropriate levels of these principles are facing a threat to their identities; thus, people usually try to maintain and accommodate those identity elements (e.g. being Congolese or belonging to a certain ethnic group) which match well with their identity aspects while avoiding elements that negatively affect those aspects. IPT suggests that when these principles are impeded, for instance by changes in one's social context, identity is threatened, and individuals will engage in strategies for coping with the threat. A coping strategy is defined as 'any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity' ([Breakwell 1986](#): 78).

Although it is possible that all or most of these identity principles may be threatened because of forced migration, this study considers the principle that may be most obviously threatened by forced protracted migration, which is self-

continuity across time. A protracted refugee situation may mean repeated forced migration or inability to settle down, for example, when stuck in a refugee camp or unable to get a residence permit (Abdi 2005; Frydenlund *et al.* 2017). A key tenet of IPT suggests that the individual will seek to minimize and alleviate identity threat by employing various techniques: engaging in intra-psychic coping strategies that function at the level of the individual; engaging in interpersonal strategies, which involve interaction with other individuals; and intergroup strategies, which refer to group-level behaviour (Breakwell 1986). These reflect the notion of internally and externally defined or given identities (Machat-From 2017). One of the gerontological theories on ageing also emphasizes continuity by suggesting that by making adaptive choices, people can maintain a consistent sense of self in later life (Atchley 1989, 1999). Older adults would thus have to recourse in the present to practices and identities that worked well for them during the past. However, this does not mean that they would not be able to seek new ways to cope with identity threats.

Even a protracted refugee situation may function as a basis for an identity. Similar life experiences, shared refugee status and shared perceptions of similarity between refugees of the same origin and difference from local residents may all contribute the creation of a new, shared identity (Byrne 2016). For example, refugees in protracted refugee situations may converge their national identities around relatively neutral identities, not aligning with either home or host country. This may be motivated by long-term interaction with refugee camp workers who represent identities that are less territorially based (Frydenlund *et al.* 2017).

Although it is not necessarily non-territoriality, liminality is also present in protracted refugee situations. This means that older adults must include the instability of recurring forced migration as part of their lives and identities, and it takes place at the same time as the ageing process alone may cause disruptions in people's social roles, such as retiring or suffering the death of a spouse (Breheny and Griffiths 2017). When this is added to the sudden losses caused by displacement, people are likely to encounter difficulties in establishing the psychological threat of a unifying past, present, and future. Moreover, the potential uncertainties associated with living displaced are greater at older ages since securing employment and realizing other goals may be more difficult than at younger ages.

Study Context, Data Collection, and Analysis

The context of this research is Nairobi, Kenya, where the number of refugees has been on the rise given decades of unrest in neighbouring countries like Somalia, Ethiopia, Congo, and Rwanda. The interview data were collected outside refugee camps in Nairobi, as recent data show that half the world's refugees live outside refugee camps, in slums, and shanty towns inside and around bigger cities in host countries (Madi *et al.* 2019). Nairobi has 4.4 million inhabitants and hosts about 80,000 registered asylum seekers from neighbouring countries (UNHCR Kenya 2021). One of the largest slums in the world is in Nairobi, where 70% of residents live in slums and informal settlements, and approximately 22% of the city's

residents live in poverty (APHRC 2014). Older adults living in slums often have weak support networks, ill health, poor access to health facilities, and a lack of pension support (Wilunda *et al.* 2015). While Kenya's Dadaab and Kakuma camps offer basic assistance and services for the refugees, Nairobi promises a more dynamic socio-economic and cultural environment and the opportunity for onward movement, not only by means of resettlement but also through migration to southern Africa and more distant locations (Tegenbos and Büscher 2017).

In this context, the data collection commenced as the first author made a field trip to Nairobi in 2018 to become familiar with the location and inquire about the possibility of carrying out research with urban refugees. Before this, the research plan was assessed and approved in the university ethics committee. Several non-governmental and church organizations were visited, as was the community of refugee representatives that comprise a faith-based organization and non-governmental organization's social service workers who focus on urban refugees in the field. They helped the researcher to distribute forms explaining the study and to search for volunteer participants in two areas of Nairobi with high numbers of migrants. We sought individuals who identified themselves as asylum seekers or refugees and were aged 50 years or above and living in Nairobi. If they were interested in participating in the study, they allowed the community refugee representatives to give their contact information to the researcher. Of the 20 interested participants, 15 reported for open-ended interviews. All participants signed an informed consent form, save one who could not read or write and gave consent orally, which was audio-recorded.

The interviews took place between November 2020 and February 2021 in three of Nairobi's low-income neighbourhoods with high concentrations of refugees: Kawangware, with refugees mostly from South Sudan and Congo, and Umoja and Kayole, with refugees mainly from Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda. The researcher adhered to the main guiding principle of 'do no harm' as guided by the international statement on social work ethical practices (IASSW 2015). The topic is sensitive, as it poses a possible threat to the people involved in the research (Lee 1993: 4). First, there is the threat of other members of the community and workers recognizing the individuals, which might compromise their privacy. Second, immigration officials might be interested in these individuals and their stories; thus, a failure to hide the informants' identities might result in unwelcome repercussions. Third, the current public discussion in Kenya presents urban migrants in particular as a security threat and as living in places where extremist movements recruit members (e.g. Mwangi 2021), and poorly presented or contextualized research findings might further fuel the negative attitudes and policies towards refugees (Jacobsen and Landau 2003).

There is also an ethical dilemma in furthering researchers' careers based on the stories of these individuals. Therefore, research should be reciprocal for refugee participants and/or communities (Mackenzie *et al.* 2007). However, this type of reciprocal relationship with the researcher brings about other ethical considerations, such as increased power imbalances between informants and researcher (see

Pittaway *et al.* 2010). In order to balance the benefit gained from the study, participants received a gift card worth about 25 euros for completing the interview, which was seen as one way to help alleviate the subjection of study participants (see Grady 2019). It should be noted that participants were informed about the payment only after their interviews were completed.

The semi-structured (Brinkmann 2014) interviews included three main questions: 1. What was your life like in your country when growing up and during your adulthood? 2. Please talk about your forced migration journey; 3. Could you tell us what your life is like now, here in Nairobi? While each main question was followed up with more specific questions as appropriate, all interviews were conducted as natural conversations to evoke authenticity (Grbich 2013). The interviews were conducted in Kiswahili or English by the first author who is a native speaker of both languages, which the participants also spoke without problems. Interviews were audio-recorded, with the most central parts transcribed into a general form of English and anonymized by the first author. Interviews lasted between 30 to 150 minutes. Scanned informed consent documents and audio files were uploaded to a password-secured device without an internet connection to which only the first author had access.

Five interviews have been selected for analysis in this study since their stories were the only ones of protracted refugeeism. Our study focuses on reoccurring identity negotiations that continuous displacements demanded from the participants. The five interviewees are four men aged between 56 and 65 originally from Congo, Rwanda, or Sudan and one 50-year-old woman from Rwanda. Each study participant had a complicated journey that included several forced displacements within or outside their countries of origin. Before turning to the actual analysis, we briefly describe each journey (Table 1), omitting detailed locations of their origin to protect the participants' privacy. For reasons of space, we keep information on the journeys to a minimum.

The thematic analysis of the data includes reading the data closely and selecting relevant passages for closer analysis, based on IPT theory and previous studies on identity building of refugees. The unit of analysis is an identity-relevant utterance in the interview data.

The thematic analysis is reflective, meaning that no coding book or frame was used. Instead, emphasis was on the coherent interpretation of the data relying on IPT (see Braun and Clarke 2021). One of the leading ideas of the analysis is that identity is defined not only by who individuals are and with whom and how they identify but also by who they want to be, how they wish to be seen by others and how they actually are seen by others (Douglas 2009). This is especially important in a protracted refugee situation, as continuous displacement requires rebuilding one's identity. This is not to say that common identity markers such as ancestry, place of birth, residence, length of residence, childhood experiences, education, name, mother tongue, physical appearance including clothing and commitment to place are also not important (see Kiely *et al.* 2001), but here we focus on issues of continuity and discontinuity of participant identities. They also guided us to the themes in the data that are topics that capture something important in relation to

Table 1

Central Characteristics of Study Participants Referred to by Codes in the Text

Interviewee code	Age at the time of interview	Gender	Country of origin	Refugee journey started	Time of arrival in Kenya	Brief summary of the refugee journey
RWF-50	50	Female	Rwanda	1994	1999	She fled at the age of 26, separated from her husband. She lived through several refugee camps in Tanzania, was deported back to own county against her wish only to again escape police persecution and to flee through Tanzania to Kenya, where she was reunited with her husband.
CoM-56	56	Male	Congo	1993	2000	Married political refugee from Congo, moved to Uganda, returned to Congo, was displaced again and through Uganda moved to Kenya where he was reunited with his family.
CoM-59	59	Male	Congo	1993	2015	He fled ethnic hostilities, settled in Rwanda, and got married until the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 forced him to flee to Kenya.
SuM-62	62	Male	Sudan	1970	2009	He is married and has a university education. He was displaced at the age of 12 by civil war and lived in Israel, Saudi Arabia, Uganda, Somalia, and Kenya.
RwM-65	65	Male	Rwanda	1998	2002	He is married and has a university education. A political refugee who fled to Kenya through Tanzania.

the research question (Braun and Clarke 2006). We acknowledge the meaning-making of individuals while using theories on identity and earlier studies to contextualize the narrated experiences and to reflect the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings (see Braun and Clarke 2006). The interpretation of the results is a combination of data, theories of identity, and studies on refugee identity. The approach is thus abductive (Robson and McCartan 2011). To ensure the trustworthiness of the results, both researchers selected the data for analysis and analysed the data individually, then the results were discussed and agreed on in cooperation (see Elo *et al.* 2014).

Findings: Discontinued and Continued Identities

The analysis resulted in three main categories of identity that were present in each story: namely, national identity, refugee status as an identity, and adult identities. We present and discuss them in this order.

National identities

The national identities of the study participants as Congolese, Rwandan, or Sudanese were all affected by their forced displacement. National identity is socially constructed by people who see themselves as part of an imagined group (see Machat-From 2017). It can also refer to both a personal identity arising from membership in a national political community and to the identity of a community that is in some way distinguishable from another community (Moran 2011). National identity involves ‘ethnic cores, myths, memories, religious beliefs, language, connections with territory, and political values’ (Moran 2011: 2155).

Forced migration challenges national identities (Abdi 2005; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010), and protracted refugee situations are likely to interrupt national identities several times (Frydenlund *et al.* 2017); this was true of our interviewees, who had all been forced to flee several times by the time they reached their 50th year. We demonstrate here how their national identities were challenged internally and externally and that it is possible to trace both continuity and discontinuity in their national identities at various stages of displacement. A Congolese man narrating his forced migration journey lamented:

I felt that all my education had gone to the drain since I could neither assist my family nor my country. Its pains my guts when the thing I pursued with passion and dreamed to help farmers better, all went to waste because of war. I hate war, it’s the worst thing for humanity. Look; now we belong to nowhere, not here, not our country; I have no passport or identity card from any country. (CoM-56)

As a Congolese national, he echoes the internal feeling of not belonging anywhere, as war discontinued his national identity and his ability to serve his country. Referring to humanity, it almost seems that he portrays war as challenging the ability of people to even be included in humankind, to relate to themselves as humans, to belong to the social category of humans. Humanity has been posited

as one type of identity. It has been claimed that due to the wide scope of human identity, it would not clash with other identities (Nickerson and Louis 2008). In this excerpt, the interviewee indicates that war and possibly those involved in waging it could challenge human identity. This could also be seen to question whether a complete identity can exist if membership in humanity is lost; without a human identity, national identity would also cease to exist. What he has concretely lost are the artefacts that prove his national identity to external bodies, such as a passport or identity card. By his reference to ‘any country’, he could mean any of the three countries where he has resided: Congo, Uganda, and Kenya.

However, formal documents may not be the only requirements that refugees encounter when trying to enforce and maintain their national identities. Another participant reported that he was not recognized as a Congolese national due to his ethnic resemblance to neighbouring nationals.

People from the other tribes claimed that we were not Congolese because of our physical looks and that we must relocate to Rwanda. We insisted that we were native Congolese. However, we started escaping due to the intense tribal clashes. (CoM-59)

The national identities of this man, his family, and members of the tribe were being questioned, even though they internally felt certain about being Congolese. Earlier in his story, he mentioned that this was already happening during his childhood and that he needed to attend school outside his home region in Congo. In a way, there was continuity in that his national identity was already being questioned early in his life, and a new layer of discontinuity was added when the clashes in Congo started in 1994, leading him to flee. Ethnic-political boundaries at times fuel wars, and dehumanizing stereotypes about members of another group may be developed to assist in viewing them as enemies (Niwa *et al.* 2016)—creating externally defined identities.

These examples portray how discontinuity in a national identity may take place. Next, we show how, in line with the IPT, individuals attempt to accommodate and rebuild those identity elements that are important to them and avoid those elements that could jeopardize the identities they are seeking (Breakwell 1986). Interviewees expressed how, in the midst of forced migration, their coping strategy was to seek Congolese elements in foreign countries to maintain the continuity of their national identities.

Congolese people love living together as a community in churches. Hence, identifying my countrymen was pretty easy. Besides, the Congo churches are very conspicuous and very easy to trace. (CoM-56)

He identifies the Congolese church as a central representation of the national identity shared by Congolese people. This, according to him, is something that is internalized and emotionally strongly felt as ‘love’ by the Congolese and, due to the visible nature of Congolese churches, is readily recognized by those who have newly arrived in a country. It may be that non-Congolese can also identify that aspect of Congolese identity. These churches in Kenya assist in reconstructing and

supporting the continuity of the national identities of Congolese. Religion is a uniting factor and an important aspect of continuity after flight. The church is a meeting point, an information hub, and a place to mobilize support for Congolese in Kenya (Tippens 2017). Religion and migration may be in a close relationship not only because they are an intergroup coping strategy due to the practical help offered through churches but also because forced migration induces trauma and psychological distress that may be alleviated by religion. The church in this case is an intra-psychic coping strategy and something that helps people rebuild old identities or create new ones (Ng *et al.* 2020). Religion is also frequently used as an identity marker and can play an important role in ethnic identity (Ali 2011), even taking precedence over other aspects of self-identification (Amini 2009).

Refugee identities

In addition to shared religion, the fact of being in a similar situation as an intra-African refugee can be the basis of an identity (see Abdi 2005; Frydenlund *et al.* 2017). In forced migration and especially in protracted refugee situations, individuals need to repeatedly adjust to changing environments, interpersonal relations, and the new places they encounter (cf. Bradbury 1997). A Rwandan woman described her displacement when rebels attacked:

It's quite impossible for you to have fled with your family. When fleeing for your life, every second matters. For instance, when I ran, some families had been captured and were headed to be killed. I escaped and found myself with total strangers who were also running for their lives. I was merely six months into marriage life. Moreover, I was two months expectant though I later lost the pregnancy while on the run. (RwF-50)

First, she refers to the discontinuity of family ties that tend to be fragile in conflict situations (e.g. Tippens 2020) and may add to the need to seek support from other individuals, even 'total strangers' in similar situations. Second, the traumatic, sudden, and terrifying identity discontinuity she experienced may enhance her internal feeling of a refugee identity based on shared experiences (see Byrne 2016). She portrays how she was transformed from a newlywed pregnant wife onto a refugee. Also, events like seeing people captured and at risk of death was an external force that transformed these people into refugees, imposing a refugee identity on them. She continued to explain how fragile the refugee identity can be in practice, due to external conditions: 'Unfortunately, those of us who were not physically fit to undertake walking for a long journey waited for fate to determine our destiny' (RwF-50). Older adults, who do not necessarily have the same physical capacities as younger individuals, may be at particular risk in forced migration contexts due to health issues and general fragility (e.g. Barrett and Gumber 2020).

While nobody wants to become a refugee, there are instances in the data where the interviewees recounted seeking refugee status and thus a refugee identity. The reason was that they were able to get some temporary identity documents and

support from the authorities. In Kenya, this means free education for children and monthly support for necessities; at the same time, accepting those benefits, meagre as they are, makes one ineligible for resettlement to other countries ([Kenya Comprehensive Refugee Programme 2019](#)). Some were easily able to register as refugees and obtain a registration number. RWM-65 noted that ‘through the UN we got to Tanzania where we sought refuge’, as if it was a mere formality (which could, in fact, have been the case). However, SuM-62’s wife encountered difficulties in being accepted as a refugee due to her skin colour:

The biggest challenge is that nobody believes us—my wife tried to go to the offices to seek help, but they didn’t believe her because she is white. They thought she had money or family who could help her, while all she had was me and the kids; that and being here. (SuM-62)

He explained having encountered similar problems previously in Somali and Ugandan refugee camps where they had resided. In Kenya, they were finally able to obtain temporary identity papers; several years later, however, their refugee status is still being processed, and they need support in the meantime. Notably, there was a discrepancy between how the wife of the Sudanese male experienced her identity and how others portrayed it in their protracted refugee situation.

Besides having external contradictions regarding refugee identity, there were also internal ones. For RWF-50, applying for refugee status was not a matter of course, since her husband resisted the idea:

He really hated being associated with refugees. We were afraid that the refugee camp would be raided like the scenario in Tanzania and that we would be forced to go home. This thought was very terrifying. (RWF-50)

The couple had entered Kenya at different times, both without identity documents. They had terrifying recollections from an earlier time in a Tanzanian refugee camp when they were captured and returned to their country of origin against their will. These past experiences can affect how participants interact with a host community, which can foster secrecy, mistrust, submission, and fear ([Sveaass and Lavik 2000](#)). This again may have repercussions on how people react and relate to external requirements and the pressures on their identities from these communities. These people were balancing old and new intergroup coping strategies in relation to the notion of refugee identity.

Adult identities

Being a father or a wife is a common marker of an adult identity. Others include completing school, obtaining a full-time job, establishing an independent household, and forming a family ([Benson and Furstenberg 2006](#)). Participants’ stories reflected good memories of their family interactions and life before forced migration. Family as a basis of identity can be understood as a group identity, as something related to being a member of a couple or as an individual from a specific family ([Scabini and Manzi 2011](#)). Wars forced them to disperse and

seek asylum in other countries, causing changes in family structures, interactions, and identities.

It is common during refugee journeys for people to become separated from family members. A Rwandan female fled to Tanzania and became separated from her husband. After a while, she was repatriated from the Tanzanian refugee camp where she had stayed. She explained what happened when attempting to return to her marital home:

I was not recognized in that village and was not welcome since I had no husband who was born and belonged there, I was looked at as a stranger and could not stay there. You see, I did not belong to my parents' place since I got married and here, where I was married, I had no one whose wife I was recognized as being. (RwF-50)

Over the course of her life, this interviewee lost the identity based of her biological family when she married her husband and moved away from her childhood village. At the same time, she gained the couple identity of being part of husband and wife and possibly the identity of belonging to her husband's biological family. These identities were lost due to forced migration, and she lacked the means to regain them when she returned to her marital home and village. She did not go into detail as to who chose not to recognize her identity as belonging to the village and her husband's family.

The only interviewee who referred to himself as an older person was a 56-year-old Congolese man. He embraced the discontinuity of the identity that he gave up in order to become an elderly man:

I have already accepted my elderly status. It is time for me to rest and watch my children transition into adulthood and continue where I left off; even if I died today, it would be fine. Nevertheless, I pray that my children will do well in life. My only concern is the comfort of my children. It is disturbing to imagine that my children will not prosper in their endeavour for a productive life. (CoM-56)

He has taken on the identity of a retiree, an explicitly older person, his fathering responsibilities done; he hopes to have done well enough for his children to prosper. His identity as a father and an elderly family man hangs to some extent on the success of his children, which may be difficult to achieve in a protracted refugee situation. This is part of the extra burden on identities when adjusting to the later stages of life as a refugee (Chenoweth and Burdick 2001). The roles and identities in family dynamics may shift from provider, breadwinner, and caregiver to being a burden to the family (Dubus 2018). Embracing the identity of a father who has done his duty when bringing up children can be an intra-psycho coping strategy, permission to let go of fatherly duties. The continuity of his fatherly identity is based on the inter-generational family continuity represented by his children.

As forced migration represents a discontinuity in adult life, individuals seek to rebuild it again in a way somewhat similar to adolescents' transition to adulthood. In their earlier stages of life, they have already stepped into adulthood but lost the

central elements of it when becoming refugees. A male from Congo narrates as follows:

As a refugee, it is not possible to secure a job with the government in the host country. Furthermore, my academic certificates got lost. Hence, there is no evidence that I went to school. Thus, when I arrived in Kenya, I settled for manual labour. (CoM-59)

Internally, he has the identity of an educated man. However, his lost certificates and diplomas mean that others do not recognize that identity. This forced him to do manual work, as accessing the identity of a skilled worker would require formal certification. He did seem to obtain or 'settle for' manual work, so he has been able to continue the other common trait of an adult identity, a provider, although not in the same way or likely to the same extent as before he fled.

Not all participants were as successful with their intergroup coping strategies. Attaining the provider part of an adult identity seemed to cause severe identity struggles for this man from Congo:

As a man, your self-esteem is depleted to the lowest level. My mind was unsettled the entire time. Afterwards, family conflict crept in as I slowly but surely lost the moral authority to lead my family. When as a man you are not in a position to provide for your family, your authority becomes questionable and eventually you are deprived of it. (CoM-56)

Not being able to provide for his family appears not only to be a practical problem of getting by but also to have affected this interviewee's internal notion of an adult identity. It has lowered his morale and led to conflict within the family and he seems to have no inter-psycho coping strategies to overcome this difficulty. The role of male breadwinner is a common construct in many countries (Bernard 1994: 119), and the discontinued provider identity diminished this man's authority in his family, adding another layer to the discontinuity of his adult identity. Tippens (2020) describes this kind of situation as infantilization; older adult refugees are being assisted with things that they used to manage perfectly well by themselves. This man could still be a provider if he were not in a protracted refugee situation.

Conclusions

This study has highlighted the continuity and discontinuity of identities present in the stories of older intra-African refugees living in Nairobi. Nationality, refugee status, and being an adult are all central bases for identities during displacement, and it was possible to find both continuity and discontinuity in these identities. Since we focused on older adults, the study participants had possessed several identities at earlier stages of their lives relating to nationality, religion, education, employment, and family roles. Younger refugees and those with shorter refugee journeys may have a narrower repertoire of identities or fewer coping strategies to rely on when reworking their identities. Identity is intertwined in many layers of

life and can arise from various sources, such as history, geography, biology, media, religion, and personal experiences (Castells 1997: 7). For example, earlier connections to church and religion were grounds for both intra-psychic and inter-group coping strategies and helped the study participants to readjust their identities and to connect their past and present experiences—thus increasing identity continuity. Being an older adult and thus more experienced may have assisted some participants in maintaining at least some continuity in their identities.

Moreover, some had been in refugee camps and chose not to live in a camp in Kenya due to these earlier experiences. This was shown to cause repercussions for the process of registering as refugees and on their refugee identities. Similarly, some had high levels of education which would have helped in finding work, even if it was not the kind of work they could do if they still possessed their educational and identity documents. On the other hand, as older adults, they were not offered support for getting an education and beginning a career. As older refugees, they are not a target group for education programmes (e.g. Tobias 2006). In this way, older refugees are externally defined as non-students.

The lack of something can also be part of identity formation. The study participants spoke movingly about losing members of their families to acts of extreme violence or as a result of being forced to migrate. In particular, the participants spoke about losing parts of their identity as parents, the disruption, and loss of resources such as homes and documents, along with their tribes and important life projects such as careers. These layers of loss have been referred to as ‘loss spirals’ (Betancourt *et al.* 2015: 116) and having experienced similar loss spirals can be part of building a refugee identity (Byrne 2016). Losses force individuals to rely on intra-psychic coping strategies of either trying to change the situation or accepting what is happening and building their identities on what is left and what can be achieved. The participants in this study accepted that they were getting old, retiring, settling for manual jobs, and gaining refugee status as part of their identities.

The limitations of this study include a small number of participants and not including Somalian and Ethiopian refugees, of whom there are many in Kenya. The language selection of Kiswahili and English was another limitation on study participants. There is need for more studies on older adult refugees and intra-African refugees at large as well as these groups residing in camps.

Refugee identity has been understood as what forcefully displaced people are and what they are made of (Hadjiyanni 2002: 9). This reductive view must be questioned because being a refugee is only one aspect of people’s identities and is mainly imposed by others, although it can form part of an internal identity. Those working with refugees need to view them not only as victims but also as resourceful individuals. Refugees need the choice to cherish or downplay their refugee identity, whichever seems appropriate: there is more than a refugee identity present in the lives of the study participants. These people show, despite being in prolonged refugee situations, skills, and resources in negotiating their identities and being able to modify them in various ways by resisting some (e.g. refugee identity) and working hard to achieve others, such as adult provider.

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