

REVIEW

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# Lives 'on hold' in Europe: an explorative review of literature on youth aspirations and futures in situations of migration and mobility

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## Abstract

This explorative literature review aims to examine the content and methodologies of recent empirical studies on the aspirations of youth in situations of migration in Europe. The search yielded 30 peer-reviewed social science publications in English for the period 2010–2022, including both intra-European migrants ages 10–24 and youth with backgrounds from outside Europe. Contextual analysis was used to analyse the content of the reviewed studies, while a typology developed by Beckert and Suckert was used to examine features of the future appearing in the studies' research aims, methodology and findings. The analysis broadly situated the studies within constructivist traditions, occupying a mid-position between deterministic and agency-oriented epistemologies. All the features of the future listed by Beckert and Suckert were found in the material, but the categories '*Temporal configurations of the future*' and '*Space of the future*' showed greater complexities. Participants in the studies lived in different European countries and the study samples comprised a wide range of ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and status of residence. Nevertheless, barriers linked to participants' position as migrants were tangible, while the ability these young people had to envisage the future was strongly affected by uncertainties linked to migration policy and administrative decisions on their status. A mismatch could notably be observed between youth aspirations and the opportunities offered by their life situation, which led to delays in life projects and the inability to plan ahead.

## Critical relevance statement

By an analysis of social studies research on aspirations of youth in situations of migration in various European countries, this review highlights the need to consider implications for youth aspirations and life trajectories in both policy and practice

## Key points

- Young people in situations of migration have high aspirations but confront substantial barriers
- Uncertainties prevent youth from long-term planning and realising life projects
- Current policies create conditions that are not consistent with European values and ambitions

**Keywords** Youth, Aspirations, Futures, Temporality, Migration

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## Introduction

The present explorative literature review focuses on the specific topic of youth aspirations in the context of migration, and the epistemological angles from which the topic has been researched. Over the past 15 years, the European project of a shared overarching identity to which the diversity of local identities, cultures and aspirations can contribute (see Nicolaidis [1]; Risse [2]), has given way to right wing populisms and polarisations [3, 4]. Visions of open borders have been replaced by increasingly securitised regimes [5]. Equally concerning is the erosion and drifting of European ideals of democracy, pluralism, and respect of human rights [6]. At the same time, it would be simplistic to conflate challenges to European cohesion and visions with effects of what has been called the refugee ‘crisis’ [7]. We are living in times that are not only characterised by rapid change but also complex and multidimensional existential uncertainties that affect our ability to envision the future, both as individuals and as European societies. The abrupt changes that can be observed regarding migration are linked to crises in other arenas, while young people’s mobility and aspirations for the future will have implications for how European societies evolve over the coming decades.

Although issues of migration have come to occupy an important place in European policy and public debates [8, 9], an overview is still lacking at the intersection of youth, migration and futures. How newcomer youth perceive their future in society and the futures to which they aspire have consequences for the strategies they adopt in studies, choice of career path and integration. Extended periods in limbo and uncertain futures can in the longer term affect their faith in institutions, their understanding of democracy and the extent and manner of their civic engagement. But the ways in which newcomer perceptions of the future are researched also has consequences, to the extent that methodological approaches and research questions shape the knowledge that can inform policy and practices in migration or education.

For students from disadvantaged groups, education and employment aspirations may represent prospects for their families and communities to escape hardships and historical constraints [10, 11]. Nevertheless, Goring et al. [12] caution that framing young people’s perceptions of their future as limited to aspirational trajectories of education and employment does not do justice to the complexity of how youth see themselves in the world today. They argue that this framing rather corresponds to a reduction of human life to value in economic production systems. This literature review will therefore cover both research on education and employment, as well as studies that deal with other topics.

## Conceptualising futures

The ways we understand, perceive, conceptualise and represent the future play a fundamental role, both in human societies and in individual lives. They underpin our notions of causality and responsibility—that something we do or that happens will have an effect, in a moral, practical or scientific sense—and involve strong emotions that drive our actions and affect our well-being, such as fear and hope, anxiety or confidence (see Goring et al. [12], Rubin and Kaivo-Oja [13]). Futures are also closely linked to power and agency. Clearer understanding of constraints and options could inform more responsible policy [14] or enable marginalised groups to act more effectively, based on their capacity to ‘read the world’ [15]. While social elites mobilise considerable resources in shaping futures [16], the capacity to imagine alternative futures [13, 17–19] can also open pathways to empowerment for groups in situations of disadvantage.

Academic traditions treating these questions can be traced to early philosophers and political scientists, but as a modern research field, ‘futures studies’ did not start to emerge until after the second world war [20]. The diversity of approaches in this growing field has also given rise to theoretical and empirical work that aims to clarify how different strands of research within the field relate to each other. Based on a review of the literature across various disciplines which he uses to analyse a survey with researchers, Minkkinen [21] has thus proposed a categorisation of functionally differentiated theories in future studies. He identifies five broad categories and positions them along two main axes. The first axis concerns whether the theorist primarily aims to analyse a state of affairs or to influence it, while the second concerns where the theory stands on the spectrum ranging from positivism to constructivism:

1. Theories for rigorous forecasting—analytical and positivist
2. Theories for effectively representing futures (scenario planning, explorative or possibilistic)—analytical, in the mid-range of the positivist/constructivist epistemological spectrum
3. Theories for making sense of anticipatory processes (social imaginaries, expectations, hope, anticipation)—analytical and constructivist
4. Theories for effectively pursuing desired futures (planning, transitions, transformation, pioneering future-makers)—influencing and in the positivist or mid-range of the epistemological spectrum
5. Radical epistemological critiques (poststructuralist, feminist, postcolonial)—influencing and constructivist

At the positivist end of the epistemological spectrum considered by Minkkinen [21], theories assume that

reality can be objectively represented, while at the constructivist end of the spectrum, problems in representing social reality are highlighted. These categories are distinguished by their aims and consequently by the functions that the methodological approaches underpinned by the theories can perform within the wider field of future studies. At the same time, there also exist theoretical strands at the intersection of these broad categories. For instance, Polak [22] argues that ‘images of the future’ can comprise both elements of aspirations and expectations, regardless of whether these are realistic or imaginary, and that these images will steer decision-making and actions. This theoretical stance can thus be understood as serving to make sense of anticipatory processes but can also serve as a point of departure for emancipatory processes aiming at effectively pursuing desired futures or for policy decisions [13, 23]. Importantly, not only the theoretical point of departure but also the understanding of the cultural context and the methodology—including research focus, selection of participants, data collection and interpretation—will influence outcomes of empirical studies [24].

Futures theories have various degrees of abstraction or claims to generality, and they can emanate from or be oriented towards applications connected to particular disciplines or research challenges. Historical overviews and analyses such as Son [20], Ahlqvist and Rhisiart [25] or Beckert and Suckert [26] show that the theories and their applications are intended for actors with different interests. These include governments and public authorities, industry and corporations or academics. Tools drawing on futures theories are used by international organisations such as the IPCC or the UN agencies (see, e.g. van der Esch et al. [27]) as well as by the larger non-governmental organisations and charities. However, certain technologies associated with futures methodologies, such as AI in forecasting and automated decision-making, have now become pervasive in our societies and are no longer restricted to large commissioning bodies.

The significant commercial and political interests at stake mean that futures theories, methodologies and research findings are not neutral, but contested [14]. Social science is often conducted on or on behalf of the individuals and groups that are concerned [28], rather than by or together with them. Also in futures research, marginalised groups tend to have little opportunities to define problems, actively participate in, critically assess, or directly benefit from research findings [18, 25, 29, 30].

### **The epistemology of futures in research on youth and migration**

To examine how sociologists have worked with perceptions of the future, Beckert and Suckert [26] conducted a literature review of 571 English language empirical

studies from the 1950s onwards. Their analysis of these publications resulted in a typology of seventeen different types of features of the perceived future that these studies had focused on. Beckert and Suckert examine the methodologies used in the different studies and also make an inventory of topics, noting, among other findings, that from the 2010s onwards, studies on migration start to appear. These constituted approximately 5% of the literature they reviewed, with a smaller proportion intersecting with youth.

Beckert and Suckert then proceed to discuss their findings against the background of major movements and trends in sociology, such as pragmatism or post-modernism. In this respect, their analysis to some extent rejoins the main axes of Minkkinen’s [21] categorisation. Beckert and Suckert [26] thus point to historical movements that lean towards a more deterministic and fatalistic stance, while others emphasise agency or societal utopias of progress. The focus of the studies they examined also varies between centring individual characteristics from a psychological or sociological perspective, looking at group dynamics and interaction, or considering wider social and political structures.

In the present literature review, our analysis will draw on Beckert and Suckert’s categorisation and analysis, although the publications reviewed here are not limited to sociology. Our aim is to thereby allow a discussion of epistemologies underpinning the studies and contribute to a discussion on how research in this field may relate to current social and political developments in Europe.

### **Current issues in research on youth and migration**

Futures studies relating to youth and migration can be seen as a subfield of both youth or migration studies. While futures studies on migration only start to appear from the 2010s onwards [26], the field of youth futures develops from the 1990s, notably with the seminal work of Rubin [13, 23, 31]. Rubin’s early work is situated in the context of discussions concerning challenges of ‘late-modernity’, rationalities of choice, and societal trends of individualisation, while stressing the need for shared collective visions and ethics. Her later research further explores the tensions and contradictions in images of the future held by youth and their teachers, with regard to the discrepancies between hopes for personal futures, fears regarding global developments and widening inequalities (see, e.g., Rubin [31]). In a study using workshops with university students as a participatory approach in constructing shared images of a desired future, Guillo [24] thus found that participants expressed greater optimism regarding their personal futures, than regarding the futures they anticipated for their countries or globally. This finding is in line with observations by Rubin [23, 31],

as well as earlier research on youth images of the future. Despite a growing number of publications in the field, in their 2022 study of Finnish youth images of technology futures, Rasa and Laherto [32] nevertheless observe that research in education still largely lacks a futures-oriented perspective.

Youth is a period that involves major transitions in identity, societal roles and life circumstances. It is a period of being, but also very much of 'becoming' [33–35], with trajectories that do not follow a clear linear progression (see Furlong [36]), in contexts of substantial uncertainty and inequalities that impact autonomy and agency [37, 38]. The uncertainty surrounding the future that young people in situations of migration experience has social and economic consequences and can have a substantial impact on their health and wellbeing. In a study on young refugees' resilience strategies, Sleijpen et al. [39] thus found that although traumatic experiences in the country of origin or during flight played a role for their mental health, the most important issue the refugee youth expressed was uncertainty connected to obtaining refugee status. The experiences of the uncertain waiting period also continued to affect those who had obtained a resident permit. Factors for health were autonomy, success at school and peer support. Besides school environment and peer support, Marley and Mauki [40] further note the importance for resilience of a socially inclusive climate in the wider society and also observe that older children tended to display more psychological and emotional disturbances.

Youth in situations of migration may remain in a country with or without legal standing, migrate within or beyond Europe, return to their countries of origin, move elsewhere, or re-migrate following deportation. Research suggests that a sense of wellbeing is derived from feeling in control of current and past aspects of life and having a firm sense of belonging and projected self within a future trajectory. Scholarly work similarly highlights that young people in situations of migration actively strive to secure futures they can control [41]. Triandafyllidou [42] analyses how the long-term temporary—and often precarious and uncertain—nature of employment and residence is created by immigration policies for different categories of migrants and employment sectors. Among other effects, this may lead to exploitative employment practices and strong dependence on arbitrary decisions of employers or administrators. Triandafyllidou also distinguishes between the very different position of those who migrate voluntarily—and who can more freely decide to move elsewhere—compared to those who are forced into migration, with assigned spatial and temporal spaces. Despite coercive policies and other barriers (see Lee et al. [43]), the literature on work migration points to an entrepreneurial spirit and persistence in searching for

solutions under precarious circumstances. Similar resilience and initiative are observed in the field of education.

Migrant youth face disadvantages that are equal to or worse than other marginalised groups, making access to education a challenge. Basic needs such as food, housing and healthcare must be met before educational needs are addressed. Other barriers include language acquisition, trauma, interrupted education due to exile and unrecognised previous qualifications [44]. Nevertheless, studies in various contexts suggest that young refugees show strong resilience, positive future expectations and high motivation at school, which Lynnebakke and Pastoor [45] examine within the concept of educational resilience—'the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences'. Lynnebakke and Pastoor understand both resilience and outcomes as produced in continuous interaction between individuals and features of their environment. This apparent paradox between positive future expectations and challenging circumstances has been theoretically explained in diverse manners, including 'immigrant optimism', 'dual frame of reference', 'blocked opportunities', 'information deficit' or 'ethnic capital' [45].

The vision young people have of their possible positions in society, in relation to what careers and employment possibilities will exist in the future, influences their motivation to invest in upper secondary education and to pursue career paths that require post-secondary qualifications [46, 47]. Teachers are often not well prepared to teach diverse classrooms, but formal education is important for newcomer youth, particularly in the case of refugees [48]. Furthermore, research suggests that teacher expectations have a significant impact on educational achievement [49–51]. Additionally, parents' educational aspirations play a role for their children's academic achievement, and this appears to be enabled by transmitting their own positive expectations [52], rather than by concrete actions to support their children's studies [53].

Within the broader category of youth in situations of mobility or with migration backgrounds, refugees and forcibly displaced youth occupy a special position, due to protections afforded (in principle) by international law, and due to the fact that their initial displacement was not freely chosen. Conditions vary, depending on whether the host country is located in low-income countries, compared to contexts in Europe, that could potentially offer better resources and prospects. Nevertheless, numerous issues faced by refugee youth globally are cross-cutting, such as a general situation of marginalisation, uncertainty and precarity, implications of the language(s) they invest in, interrupted education trajectories and often also numerous successive displacements



[54]. Among the approaches that have been proposed to address both issues of interrupted education and adaptation to new circumstances, Morrice [55] discusses potentials and challenges in enhancing opportunities for lifelong education.

Young people in situations of migration have dreams and aspirations for their future lives; at the same time, they navigate the opportunities and constraints of their present circumstances, renegotiate relations with family or childhood friends, form new friendships, experiment identities, seize the day and look for ways to enjoy the moment. However, as pointed out by Harris, Baldassar and Robertson [56], much of the literature on youth migration and young migrants concerns education and employment, while comparatively less attention is devoted to how mobility affects opportunities to establish and maintain social relationships, form deeper friendships or engage in romantic ties. A possible interpretation of what could be called an 'instrumentalisation' of young lives in research on youth and migration could be the influence national and regional policies have—not only on conditions for migration and transitions to adulthood that appear in the literature—but also on research funding and agendas that enable and motivate the studies that are undertaken (see also Goring et al. [12]).

## Methods

This review aims not only to produce generative knowledge relevant to the research area but also to contribute to the research base for youth and migration policy and practice. Steps undertaken for the review include specification of inclusion and exclusion criteria; use of information sources to search for relevant research publications, as well as review, coding and categorisation of the selected research; and presentation and discussion of the review findings.

### Eligibility criteria

Searches were conducted in Scopus, Social Science Premium Collection, Social Science Citation Index, EBSCO, ERIC, ProQuest and PsycINFO. Secondary sources included OneSearch and Google Scholar. The following combination of keywords was used for search of relevant literature: future\* OR aspiration\* OR expectation\* OR anticipat\* OR imagin\* OR hope\* OR dream\* AND adolescent\* OR youth OR teenage\* OR young adult\* AND immigrant\* OR migrant\* OR newcomer\* OR newly arrived.

The following inclusion criteria were applied in the selection of publications yielded in the searches: (a) social science publications; (b) relevant to understanding future aspirations of youth with migrant or refugee background; (c) empirical studies, or reviews, meta-analyses and critical analyses based on and summarizing empirical

research; (d) the case or sample is located in Europe; (e) peer-reviewed publications in indexed research journals; (f) written in English; (g) published 2010–2022.

For the purposes of this review, Europe was delimited to EU and EFTA countries, including the UK as former EU member. Following UN definitions, adolescents and youth were here limited to the age range 10–24, and publications exclusively focusing younger or older individuals were excluded, while relevant publications with at least some respondents from our age range were included. Similarly, we included publications that compared youth with migrant background to youth with no migrant background.

Titles and abstracts of the articles were read to confirm the relevance of the literature yielded by the search terms. Publications were excluded when (a) the focus of the publication did not cover the research aim (e.g. where the term 'future' appeared to explain use of findings for future research, rather than referring to young migrants' and refugees' future aspirations) and (b) the focus did not correspond to the scope of this review (e.g. concerning youth outside Europe, or with only superficial mention of youth aspirations). Full-text publications were read where the title and abstract were not sufficient to determine whether the publication met inclusion and exclusion criteria. After application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, the search yielded 30 publications, relevant to the research questions.

### Reliability and risk of bias

To enhance the reliability of the review, only peer-reviewed articles published in indexed research journals were selected. However, one PhD dissertation [57] was also included. Both authors developed the keywords and conducted the search of databases to reduce the risk for mistakes or bias. The selection and analysis of the sample was also developed by joint discussions.

### Synthesis of results

All articles were thoroughly reviewed and initially categorised according the following parameters: the writer and year of publication, the country and context where the research was conducted, the sample, the methodology used and the key themes. Contextual analysis [58] was used to identify main categories across studies that describe the phenomenon under investigation, namely young migrants' future aspirations in Europe based on peer-reviewed social science publications in the period 2010–2022. Contextual analysis is a methodology that advocates an open approach to the examined material. This approach is analytic, aiming both at the delimitation of main aspects of the phenomenon as a whole and as dependent of their contexts.

In a second step, research aims and findings in the material were classified according to Beckert and Suckert's [26] typology of futures epistemologies in sociological studies. In situating the reviewed studies with respect to Beckert and Suckert's typology, no effort was made to avoid overlap, and the studies were coded for all features found in the material. The studies were first read and classified independently by each author. Results were then compared and discussed in an iterative process until agreement was reached.

## Results

### Contextual analysis

By comparisons between the reviewed research articles, similarities and differences were discerned. The studies were consequently grouped (see Table 1) under the following overarching categories that had been identified in the material: 1. Policy discourses and young migrants/refugees' high aspirations and resilience; 2. Effects of residential segregation and regional inequalities within countries; 3. Construction of youth aspirations and expectations; 4. Fluid mobilities; 5. Coping with limbo and broken mobilities; 6. In between cultural and personal aspirations; 7. Constructing and reconstructing masculinities.

The studies grouped under category 1 discussed young people's experiences interpreted against the background of constraints and hardships inflicted by migration policy. In category 2, it appeared that many of the issues relating to cross-border migration resembled those affecting youth opportunities and migration within countries. These included not only unequal opportunities to study and to access aspired future careers but also young people's ties to family, friends and place. In category 3, different factors influencing the construction of aspirations were focused. These could, for instance, be related to discourses and expectations in families, communities and socioeconomic backgrounds or experiences at school. Category 4 focused on intra-European migrants. These studies concerned young adults who had voluntarily decided to migrate, although the move in many cases was motivated by economic crises in the country of origin. By contrast, studies in category 5 concerned refugee youth, in situations of forced displacement, whose aspirations were strongly affected by their status and the asylum process. Studies in category 6 highlighted young people's efforts to find their way and formulate their goals in a space of tension between their personal interests and culturally set expectations. Finally, the publications grouped under category 7 focused on the ways self and aspired life trajectories could be envisaged among youth and young adult men in situations marked by migration.

### Analysis of futures epistemologies

Features of the future investigated in the reviewed studies to a large extent matched categories identified by Beckert and Suckert [26], above all representing the categories *Space of the future*, *Effect on future orientations*, *Construction process of future orientations*, *Stability of the future*, *Futurebased identity*, *Agency about the future*, and *Politics of expectations*.

The future was in some sense associated with particular geographical locations (*Space of the future*) for all the reviewed publications, which follows from our research purpose and the selection of publications for review. However, the manners in which space and temporalities related to each other differed in the various studies, and multiple locations were often involved. In several cases, imagined future locations might be an indetermined 'somewhere else', rather than a specific place. Three quarters of the studies examined factors that have an impact on the way the future is imagined (*Effect on future orientations*), and more than four fifths investigated the processes the future is constructed in, including discourses, interactions and tools (*Construction process of future orientations*).

Two thirds of the studies were in one way or another concerned with whether and how perceptions of the future change over time (*Stability of the future*) and used different methods to look at change. These included not only reinterviews, longitudinal studies with multiple sets of surveys, multiple or extended field visits, and pre- and post-assessments, but also biographical interviews or questions that concerned present and past aspirations. Unsurprisingly, considering that we selected studies that included adolescents or young adults, a large majority of the publications dealt with identity construction (*Futurebased identity*). Other elements of research focus concerned agency about the future and politics of expectations.

The research focus and epistemology of the reviewed studies thus broadly places them in Minkkinen's [21] analytical/constructivist category of *Theories for making sense of anticipatory processes*. The studies also occupy a mid-position with respect to Beckert and Suckert's [26] discussion of more deterministic versus agency-oriented epistemologies. Most of the reviewed studies acknowledged societal constraints and tried to identify factors in the background or circumstances, but at the same time a large portion were concerned with the subjective meaning this had for the young people and the ways in which they attempted to retain agency. The studies did not draw on methodologies for forecasting or planning traditions described by Minkkinen [21], and none of the reviewed studies explicitly drew on literature from futures studies. However, their research questions and presentation of

**Table 1** Review findings

Author(s)	Context	Methods	Key themes
<b>Category 1: Policy discourses and young migrants/refugees' high aspirations and resilience</b>			
Allsopp et al. (2015) [59]	Young immigrants in adulthood transition in Britain	Critical review	Time, immigrant control, young people's agency and determination to secure their future, contested rights and entitlements
Gateley (2015) [44]	Young refugees in UK	Qualitative ethnographically oriented approach, based on semi-structured interviews and observations	Importance of supportive structures for transition to higher education
Allsopp and Chase (2019) [41]	Unaccompanied minors in the European Union	Critical review	Policy, political bias towards return, impacts on adulthood transitions and willingness to take risks
Dänge (2022) [60]	Young refugees in Denmark	Qualitative longitudinal study, photovoice and in-depth interviews	The resilience of young refugees, effects of extended uncertainty on future aspirations
Esaiasson et al. (2022) [61]	Asylum seekers in Sweden	Quantitative data by use of repeated surveys	"Acceptance" leads to positive attitudes to personal lives and host country, "rejection" and "in limbo" are connected with negative attitudes
<b>Category 2: Effects of residential segregation and regional inequalities within countries</b>			
Lindgren (2010) [57]	Young refugees from segregated disadvantaged areas in Sweden	Life history interviews with small samples of refugee youth from disadvantaged segregated areas	High aspirations, utopian diaspora biography, social, temporal and spatial dynamics of the biography
Ledwith and Reilly (2014) [62]	Youth living in different areas near Galway, Ireland	Survey data collected from over 500 students and 230 parents from Galway city and urban-rural fringe	Effects of residential and school segregation on educational achievement, capital and aspirations
Meyer (2018) [63]	Adolescents in Altenburger Land, a rural district in Germany	Case study, fieldwork, 21 focus group conversations	Social relations, family expectations, personal emotions and opportunities for work and education relate to outmigration
<b>Category 3: Construction of youth aspirations and expectations</b>			
Vervliet et al. (2015) [64]	Afghan unaccompanied refugee minors in Belgium	Semi-structured questions, self-report questionnaire, quantitative and qualitative analysis	Comparing aspirations before departure and on arrival
Eide and Hauge (2020) [65]	Young refugees in upper secondary schools in Norway	Qualitative, ethnographically oriented approach, based on semi-structured interviews and observations	Psychosocial transitions, dissonance between the demands of the educational system and student aspirations
Lynnebakke and Pastoor (2020) [45]	Youth with refugee background in Norway	Semi-structured interviews	High educational aspirations, temporal aspects as different stages of the refugee experience
Rodan and Huijsmans (2020) [66]	Highly educated young Portuguese post-austerity migrants in London	Qualitative study using ethnography and narrative discursive analysis	Generation discourse, narrative construction of subjectivities and aspirations
Katartzi (2021) [67]	Youth with migrant background in Greece	Qualitative study using narrative discursive analysis of in-depth interviews	Aspirations, transnational habitus, generational aspirations
Sprong and Devitt (2022) [68]	Adolescents enrolled in school in Ireland	Longitudinal study, survey of large cohort, quantitative analysis	Significance of national context for educational and occupational expectations
Vitus (2022) [69]	Students at upper secondary school with refugee background in Denmark	Qualitative study using interviews	Differing ways and motivations in envisioning the future

**Table 1** (continued)

Author(s)	Context	Methods	Key themes
<b>Category 4: Fluid mobilities</b>			
Nijhoff and Gordano (2017) [70]	Young adult Polish citizens in the Hague and Spanish citizens in London	In-depth interviews	Intra-European mobility and migrant typologies
King et al. (2018) [71]	Early-career graduates from the Baltic States in London	In-depth interviews	Reasons to move, experiences and future plans
Landolt and Thieme (2018) [72]	Young graduates from Spain in Switzerland	In-depth semi-structured interviews	Strategies to cope with deskilling, migration and life projects
Lulle et al. (2018) [73]	Young EU students and workers in the London region	Interviews and reinterviews	Compares migration motivations and future plans of different groups before and after the Brexit vote
<b>Category 5: Coping with limbo and broken mobilities</b>			
Spiteri (2015) [74]	Minor asylum-seeking migrants attending a vocational college in Malta	Qualitative interview study using phenomenological analysis	Resilience while waiting for and aspiring to a future elsewhere, studies as part of their lifelong education and personal growth
Ottosson et al. (2017) [75]	Accompanied children in asylum process in Sweden	Ethnographic, semi-structured interviews	Tactics of hope in how children shape their everyday lives
Thommessen et al. (2017) [76]	Unaccompanied refugee minors in England	Individual assessments using Personal Construct Theory techniques	Importance of social support and reflective discussions for mental health
Waardenburg et al. (2019) [77]	Young adult refugees living in a reception centre, Netherlands	Semi-structured interviews, informal conversations	The role of sport for feelings of belonging in host society and coping with uncertainty
Vuilleumier (2021) [78]	Illegalised male migrants in transition to adulthood in Switzerland	Qualitative study using biographical analysis and participant observations	Impoverished migrants and autonomy in illegality
<b>Category 6: In between cultural and personal aspirations</b>			
Tørslev et al. (2017) [79]	Young adolescents at a school in Denmark	Ethnographic, photo-elicited interviews, two periods of fieldwork over three years	Factors influencing ethnic minority students' choice of ethnic belonging over personal interests
Meloni (2020) [80]	Unaccompanied young Afghans in the UK	Ethnographic fieldwork, biographical interviews	Migration as a space of freedom and loneliness, tension between family expectations and independence
Takvam Kindt (2022) [81]	Young adult daughters of immigrants attending higher education studies in Norway	Qualitative study using in-depth interviews	Capability of successful occupational integration without full liberation from family expectations
<b>Category 7: Constructing and reconstructing masculinities</b>			
Deuchar et al. (2016) [82]	Young male delinquents in boxing rehabilitation centre in Copenhagen	Ethnographic, semi-structured interviews, life interviews	Process of reconstructing masculinity
Mendoza Pérez and Morgade Salgado (2018) [83]	Unaccompanied minor boys in residential centre in Bilbao	Ethnographic	Identity expression through hair style and clothing
Fathi (2022) [84]	Young male refugees and international students in Cork	Walking interviews, photovoice, narratives	Belonging and masculinity in their real and aspired homes



findings aimed at relevance for policy-makers as well as practitioners (such as educators, psychologists or social workers), rather than being framed as academic epistemological critiques.

### Features of the future represented in findings of the studies

Many of the studies were explorative and aimed to give the youth opportunities to express their own concerns, rather than simply answering pre-defined research questions. If, instead of looking at research focus, we include the types of features of the future that appeared in findings of these studies, all of Beckert and Suckert's [26] categories were represented.

However, with respect to the category *Temporal configuration of the future*, Beckert and Suckert distinguish between linear and circular conceptualisations, corresponding to being stuck in a moment or seeing life as progressing in a linear fashion, respectively. They treat the varying extent of clarity and detailedness of imagined futures as a separate category (*Details of perceived future*). By contrast, in our material, these categories were intertwined. Although many of the young people had longer term aspirations (which would correspond to Beckert and Suckert's notion of a linear temporal configuration), their ability to plan ahead with detail was limited by uncertainties over which they had little control, leading to feelings of being stuck and unable to progress with their life projects. Four main kinds of temporal configuration of the future were found in our material:

#### Waiting

This configuration was associated with situations of large constraints and great uncertainties. In the studies, it could be variously expressed, for instance, as living in 'limbo' or life being 'on hold'. Although this configuration mostly occurred in situations with very little agency, it was also often associated with high aspirations that could stretch into the distant future. Sometimes, these aspirations even extended to the children these young people hoped they might one day have and for whom they hoped to be able to provide a better life than they had themselves.

#### Stuck in the moment

Constraints and uncertainties could also lead to blocking out thoughts about the future. Depending on the situation and the individual, this could take the form of investing in doing the 'right thing', something that these young people believed would give them a better chance, although the concrete pathway to progress was unclear and key decisions were not in their own hands. Inversely, they might sink into depression, hopelessness, drifting

and disengagement, while other coping mechanisms might be simply seizing any opportunity to have fun in the moment.

#### Out of phase

Both for young people waiting for decisions on their status and for those who had some form of permits, migration had often led to deskilling, losing time and energy coping with bureaucratic hurdles and consequent delays in their life projects. For unaccompanied minors, it might also involve a sense of injustice in losing childhood and carrying responsibilities that did not match their age. This configuration was associated with a disconnect between the phase in life and material circumstances that they found themselves in and their own aspired life trajectories or those implied in social expectations. While aspirations and thoughts about the future were prominent in their narratives, uncertainties and lack of agency over many aspects in their situation made it difficult to plan ahead in detail.

#### Uncertain but confident

This configuration appeared both for intra-European and extra-European migrants. Young refugees living in situations of great precarity refused to consider a worst-case scenario, even in circumstances when negative outcomes were highly likely, because this would prevent them from being able to live or act constructively. By contrast, those who had European passports were less worried about the future—especially if they had jobs with high income or the possibility of obtaining qualifications that would enable well-paid jobs with decent work conditions. Nevertheless, uncertainties in economic or political developments also prevented these young people from making detailed plans or moving ahead with major life decisions.

Overall, despite differences in residence status, social, economic and cultural capital, age or national contexts, on the one hand, the studies thus revealed a disconnect between the aspirations of the young people and their actual situation or likely future prospects. On the other, regardless of whether their aspirations were professional or linked to life projects such as having a family of their own, the uncertainties and constraints linked to their migrant background prevented them from being able to plan ahead concretely, beyond a relatively limited time frame.

### Discussion

Unsurprisingly, some differences could be noted between refugee youth, who do not have the option of return and intra-European youth who migrate for work, studies or

self-development. Above all, freedom of movement gave Europeans many more choices, although they also faced bureaucratic and social barriers. A small number of the European migrants had well-paid high-status employment and prospects of international jobs if they wished [71]. Others felt that cultural opportunities or independence from their families outweighed the downsides of their migrant status [66]. Overall, however, as for youth with countries of origin outside Europe, the situation of intra-European migrants reported in these studies was characterised by loss of cultural and social capital, deskilling and workplace exploitation. Low quality of life made them reluctant to consider raising a family, social relations with ethnic majority residents were limited, while financial precarity or uncertainties in political developments made it difficult for them to plan ahead.

Across both refugee youth and intra-European migrants, personal projects were prominent among the aspirations expressed. These included long-term projects of education or vocational training, getting a job that offered financial independence, a home, finding or reuniting with a romantic partner, having a family and being able to offer a better life to their children. Some of the migrants with tertiary education aspired to eventually find work that corresponded to their qualifications, while others had resigned themselves to the prospect that this was not likely to happen. Being able to help others who suffered hardship was a relatively frequent element in the aspirations of refugee youth, and those who obtained asylum expressed a desire to make positive contributions to the country that had received them (see Esaiasson et al. [61]). Some expressed the aspiration of helping the society in countries of origin, while family reunion or reunion with partners appeared among the aspirations of both unaccompanied minors and students. Short-term aspirations were finding friends, learning the language, improving skills, having a body [82], hairstyle or clothing that they felt satisfied with [83], and obtaining asylum or residence.

Although this review focuses on aspirations and ways of envisioning the future, the stories collected in the reviewed studies also showed the need to have fun, do 'normal' things, and enjoy the moment. Some of the respondents in the studies expressed the regret of having lost the carefree time of childhood (see, e.g. Meloni [80]), where they could just do the things they enjoyed and not have to worry about the future. Besides the stress and constraints directly connected to their situation as migrants, as adolescents and young adults, they felt greater pressure from expectations of teachers or family to achieve certain things, to behave in ways that corresponded to the norms of peer-groups [79] and to assume outward characteristics that corresponded to 'identities'

that were available to them. While initially the future had seemed open and full of possibilities, over time, they experienced frustrations both caused by the mismatch between social expectations and their actual situation, and in terms of a mismatch between reality and their personal aspirations. In some cases, both refugees and intra-European migrants therefore tried to hide the truth from others who they thought might judge them (see, e.g. Nijhoff and Gordano [70]).

The reviewed studies were consistent with literature in youth and childhood studies that emphasise the socially constructed nature of concepts such as childhood, adolescence or adulthood. The life stories of refugee participants pointed to children and minors assuming responsibilities often associated with adulthood. Legally determined cut-off ages for protection or support of minors did not correspond to the actual ability to manage independently of young people in situations of precarity and disadvantage associated with migration (see also Sirriyeh and Raghallaigh [85]). Similarly, with respect to the notion of transition into adulthood, several of the reviewed studies confirmed that a number of milestones perceived as markers of 'real' adulthood (such as a stable home, income, settling down, marriage, children, choice of career) were delayed through various barriers, constraints and uncertainties of the migratory experience.

Besides opening the question of whether existing conditions in European countries will ever allow such aspirations to materialise, delays in achieving aspirations for adulthood also underline the need to cover a sufficiently wide age range in studies on youth aspirations. Findings in the reviewed studies suggest that there are indeed differences between younger individuals—who were more often concerned with making friends and with their parents—and older youth, who were to a greater extent thinking about a family of their own. However, these and other elements in youth aspirations appeared across all age groups. In other words, aspirations seemed to be above all a function of individual trajectories, personalities and life circumstances, as well as deriving from different cultural scripts, rather than following a schema of biological age.

Many of the reviewed studies highlighted the 'resilience' and resourcefulness of migrant youth or attempted to identify areas of 'agency' in contexts that severely restrained their scope of action. The framing of these studies is understandable, in order to avoid a dehumanising 'victim' discourse of passive young people in need of support and who would not be capable of contributing to host societies. A victim discourse also clashes with the self-esteem, self-image and real capabilities of migrant youth. However, there is a risk that the counter discourse of resilience, high aspirations, overcoming hardships and

maintaining agency can normalise repressive policies. Such a discourse can mask the high price paid for survival or generate an impression that these young people are somehow inherently stronger and therefore not in need of support, rights or protections.

The picture that emerges across the different contexts of these studies is of youth who mainly aspire to have a 'normal life', who put in the effort to learn the language, adapt and study hard, trying to do everything 'right', yet are met with an arbitrary system that is rigged against them. Effects of the extreme uncertainty they try to cope with are not limited to the period of waiting for a residence permit but leaves persistent anxiety, aggravated by decisions to periodically review permits, the necessity to stay employed with a particular employer, earn income above a certain threshold or, in the case of Denmark, revoked residency and forced returns [60].

Through the reviewed studies, we learn that these young people avoid thinking or talking about painful moments in the past and that they similarly avoid thinking about any possible negative future scenarios, clinging to hope and daydreams of the future life that they aspire to, to forget the challenges they are facing in their current reality. Often, they are lonely and feel isolated, since without a clear future in the place they are staying, they have difficulties in forming deeper bonds with the people around them, while peers are not interested in bonding with migrants who may not stay for long (see, e.g. Ottosson et al. [75]). For some, being stuck in limbo means that they devote themselves fully to study. Others drift, while yet others lose all initiative or power to act, sinking into depression.

While the present review has focused on youth in situations of migration, findings should be interpreted against the background of current youth perspectives more generally. Thus, issues of precarious and low-paid employment and unaffordable housing, combined with major uncertainties regarding the future, are likely to impact a large segment of youth in Europe, regardless of their migration status. A 2021 UNICEF survey [86] found that while youth globally were more optimistic about the future than their elders, the majority of youth in Europe did not believe that they would have a better life than their parents. Such statistics might indicate that worries among European youth have increased over the past decade, compared to earlier studies by Rubin [13, 23, 31] which already pointed to impacts of inequality. Importantly, the same UNICEF survey found that 40% of youth globally identify as 'global citizens', suggesting that a transnational dimension of young people's lives today is not limited to a personal experience of migration.

## Conclusions

All the features of the future identified by Beckert and Suckert [26] were represented in the reviewed empirical studies, either as part of research aims and methodology or in the studies' findings and the narratives of young migrants that the studies contained. However, rather than a dichotomy between circular and linear temporal configurations of the future, more complex relationships appeared in our material between aspirations, agency, uncertain future developments in migration policy or decisions on their residence status and the ability to envisage details of the future.

Both the findings of the reviewed studies and our analysis point to a fundamental mismatch between young migrants' aspirations and the opportunities that their life circumstances offered. This mismatch was apparent regardless of whether the studies concerned young asylum seekers waiting for decisions on their status or young intra-European migrants with tertiary degrees. Some gains through the migratory experience were occasionally reported, such as the opportunity to learn a new language or better chances of employment than in the European country they had migrated from. Nevertheless, even in these cases, concretely planning ahead for the long term was rendered impossible by uncertainties, barriers and constraints linked to their migrant status, and important life choices were delayed.

Overall, the findings suggest that policies of the past decade in the European countries where these studies were conducted have led to highly unfavourable conditions for young people with a migrant background, where precarity and uncertainty pose substantial barriers to integration, as well as to the realisation of their aspirations.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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