

Understanding the Vulnerability of African Immigrant

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Abstract

Immigrants from Africa constitute a highly diverse and rapidly growing group settling in Australia. The prospects of a better life, finding peace and escaping war, conflicts, economic hardship and grinding poverty have attracted many Africans to Australia. Using qualitative research method, this paper suggests that the difficulties and the barriers experienced by African immigrants in their efforts towards full socioeconomic participation in Australia signify a level of African vulnerability that demands a particular attention and assistance. The paper proposes that what the African immigrant would be interested in is a more consciously heightened awareness and understanding on the part of the mainstream Australian society, of the various barriers and challenges they face in Australia. This paper recommends that targeted policies advocating for greater African immigrants' inclusion, economic participation and equity need to be developed.

Introduction

A vulnerable group is a population at a higher risk of facing difficulties that can lead to social and economic disadvantage, such as social exclusion, poverty, unemployment or underemployment. Generally, immigrants are a vulnerable group and have a shared story of experiencing greater challenges in their host countries. As Dion (2010) observes, among the many challenges that confront some newly arrived immigrants, as well as those who have lived in the receiving society for some time is the possibility of experiencing discrimination because of where they came from and who they are, as seen by others through the lens of group labels—ethnicity, race, religion, language. According to Dion (2010, p. 648), “to be an immigrant is to be potentially vulnerable.”

The term ‘vulnerability’ has a common place meaning. Generally, it is associated with poverty, powerlessness, weakness; limited capacity, susceptible to injury (Delica-Willison and Willison 2004, Wisner et al. 2004). In the social sciences, the term has been employed by large number of scholars to refer to disadvantaged conditions, such as the existence of ethnic and social discrimination, high rates of unemployment and underemployment, and the absence of opportunities of varying degrees (Bankoff 2004, Cardona 2004). As a social concept, vulnerability places emphasis on what renders people or communities unequal; society's social order and the relative position of advantage or disadvantage that a particular group occupies within it (Bankoff 2004, p. 29). Vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of immigrants. It is not inherent to racial characteristics of immigrants or to their ethnic or countries of origins. Instead, immigrants' vulnerability is embedded in complex social relations and processes and should not to be confused with the causes of immigration (Bustamante 2002, Hilhorst and Bankoff 2004). Thus, the vulnerability ascribed to an

immigrant in this paper is “a condition of powerlessness” in which an immigrant is socially placed in the society, the economy, and the culture of his/her host country (Bustamante 2007, p. 166).

Heikkilä (2005) has pointed the many sources of immigrants’ vulnerability to include skin colour, gender, language and culture. Many of these, according to Heikkilä (2005), ultimately can lead to the social and cultural labelling of immigrants as ‘others’ that often are reinforced by legal structural forces that block access to the economic and social rights available to citizens of a country (p. 488). Thus, the labelling of immigrants as ‘others’ can be a social process which in turn contributes to spatial vulnerabilities (Heikkilä 2005).

Immigrants’ vulnerability may not just be physical. Immigrants’ vulnerability has both a ‘structural’ and ‘cultural’ dimension. According to Bustamante (2002, p. 339) the structural dimension of an immigrant’s vulnerability derives from the existence of a power structure which in any given society allocates more power to some than others. While, the cultural dimension of an immigrant’s vulnerability derives from the set of cultural elements (stereotypes, prejudices, racism, xenophobia, ignorance and institutional discrimination) which are used to justify the power differentials between nationals and immigrants. For this reason, how immigrants are prejudiced, stereotyped, constructed, viewed or labelled as the ‘other’ in the society by the mainstream dominant group can have far-reaching consequences on many aspects of their day-to-day living in the society. This can vary from difficulty in securing a job to being differentially treated or discriminated against and to unemployment, underemployment or occupational downgrading with a huge impact on their labour market success and progression opportunities. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to make the case towards understanding the vulnerability of African immigrants in Australia.

The African Visibility and Vulnerability

The African born population in Australia are very diverse. One of their most important defining characteristics is their visibility in terms of difference. In Colic-Peisker’s (2009, p. 176) definition, visibility refers to “the ethnic characteristics that make immigrants distinct in the Australian (Western, English-speaking) social context and among a predominantly white population. This can be based on race (skin colour, physical and facial features), or accent and publicly observable cultural differences, such as attire (often to do with religion, e.g. Muslim hijab).” The relevance of visibility for settlement is that it often marks out immigrants for differential and sometimes discriminatory treatment in the workforce and other societal domains of the host country. As Hebbani and McNamara (2010, p. 9) observe, any misunderstandings brought about through a lack of knowledge or misrepresentation of immigrants’ visibility in terms of difference may result in discrimination, marginalisation, unemployment, reduced well-being and low life satisfaction for immigrants. For example, Colic-Peisker (2009, p. 187) found that visibility made refugees from Africa in Australia as well as other refugees vulnerable to street discrimination and labour market discrimination. It can be argued then that the African visibility can be an important factor that leads further to African immigrants’ vulnerability.

Visibility is determined essentially for African immigrants by their visible markers such as race, skin colour, language, accent, name, and other visual cultural or ethnic markers. In terms of appearance, they look different. They have different cultural and religious backgrounds. They come from non-English speaking backgrounds and may have an accent

when speaking English. Racially, they are considered as 'Blacks.' And sadly, this blackness is a problematic marker for the African subject. As Orelus (2012, p. 100) argues, irrespective of their social class and achievement, many individuals base their judgement on the African skin colour when they place an African in the 'violent', 'lazy', 'savage' and 'stupid' box. Unlike other white immigrant groups, the African dark - skinned colour, even within the broader Australian immigrant community, distinguishes them for labelling as 'others' and this labelling has certainly broader and enduring implications for African immigrants' settlement and integration outcomes.

Method

In this study, a qualitative research methodology was utilized to collect and systematically analyse data. Qualitative methodology is well suited for studies investigating how people experience the world and how they make sense of the world (Yardley and Bishop 2009). The qualitative method involves in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews with thirty participants. The study participants consisted of ten African women and twenty African men who have lived in Queensland for more than three years or more. The sample was snowballed to be purposive and indicative of the African immigrant population in South East Queensland rather than be representative.

All interviews followed an interview schedule with focus placed on participants' thoughts and interpretation of their experiences. The interviews were more exploratory and stimulated the narration of experiences that would remain unexpressed within a questionnaire format. All interviews lasted usually for not more than sixty minutes during which participants' responses were probed while encouraging them to provide more details and clarification. The textual data obtained after transcription were imported into NVivo Computer Software program for qualitative data analysis. The thematic approach adopted to analyse and interpret the interview data was useful for finding and identifying common thematic elements across the participants' interviews. Various themes emerged. One important theme that emerged from the data analysis is the theme of vulnerability experienced in differential treatment and difficulty securing jobs. The types of vulnerability faced by African immigrants are reported and examined in more detail in the results section.

Results

Difficulty Securing Jobs

Based on previous research, one expected but still intriguing finding in this study was the experience of great difficulty securing a job and entering into the labour market. This was mentioned by at least twenty eight participants in this study who felt that it is generally difficult for Africans to get a job given their black visibility and the resulting discrimination. They identified the difficulty securing a job as one of the biggest challenges facing African immigrants in Australia. For these participants, finding employment is simply difficult. The following quote from Kevin is an example of this perceived difficulty suggesting African vulnerability:

I have applied for several jobs and got no response. I am also aware of what the expectation is of an immigrant let alone an immigrant with African heritage. It is not an easy thing to get a job. I am more likely to get a job in the factory...

As a consequence, they perceive themselves vulnerable and disadvantaged. For example, according to Harry, one of the participants:

We have a high number of Africans that are not getting jobs now. And these people are looking for any job as longer as they can get money from that but they can't find it...That's one challenge that we have (Harry)

This suggests, as another participant said, “*unemployment rate is high among African Australians*” (Barbara). This concern with unemployment and the difficulties experienced finding employment signifies a level of African vulnerability and underscores an urgent need for attention and assistance.

Barriers and Challenges to Employment

The accounts of participants gathered in the interviews suggest that there are significant barriers and challenges, both structural and interpersonal, which make African immigrants to experience higher difficulties finding employment. Some of the barriers that recurrently emerged in the interview accounts of participants include: racial and skin colour barriers, language barriers, non-recognition of their overseas education and qualification, lack of networks, lack of Australian work experience and discrimination. How participants perceived and addressed some of these barriers will be noted and illustrated in the following paragraphs.

Racial and Skin Colour Barriers: Several participants felt that their employment outcomes were affected by a combination of their race, skin colour and other factors such as name. For these participants, their racial and skin colour differences in Australia present considerable barriers and limitations. For example, some participants considered the skin colour as “*a big factor in securing job*” (Josh) because it “*does affect how people judge*” them (William). There are also some participants who felt that applying for a job with an African name is a disadvantage. For example, according to Kevin “*You are more likely to get a job interview if you have a Caucasian name.*”

Language and Educational Barriers: Limited English language proficiency was recognized by several participants as presenting additional challenges to Africans in the labour market. For example, in this statement, “*if you don't speak really good English, you have a problem*” (Thomas). Limited English language is seen as a significant barrier to “*getting a job*” (Brian). For instance, Patrick explained:

Somebody, whose, English is a second language competing with someone who is born here, went to school here, English is a first language and finish degrees with honours; it will be hard to compete against them. That is a barrier itself. It has forbid a lot of people getting employments in what they have studied.

Non-Recognition of Overseas Education and Qualification: Participants mentioned the failure to have their overseas qualifications recognised as one of the reasons for their difficult experiences finding employment. For example, according to Bruno:

Most of the Africans don't get the job they want...because their previous qualifications are not recognizable here. I give example with myself. I had to retrain myself. Yes, I agree social work in Africa is different from social work in Australia.

Lack of Australian Work Experience: Another barrier as reported by participants is the demand for Australian work experience by employers. According to Tanya, “*Most Australian employers will always ask for Australian experience.*” This frustrated some participants. For instance, expressing her frustrations, Margaret said:

Some jobs I thought I was qualified sometimes I found it was different; I don't have the local experience. I found myself competing with people with local experience

The demand for Australian work experience by employers can affect African immigrants' employment outcomes.

Lack of Mainstream Social Networks: Several participants also explained that their difficult experience in job search was not only because of their lack of Australian work experience or because of their lack of skills, but because of their lack of mainstream social networks. For example, Bruno lamented: “*we don't have job networks, anybody who can really support us.*” Participants felt that it is “*a challenge to get a job*” (Daniel) because “*it has come down to who do you know and where do you know them*” (Tim). Indeed, a lack of social networks is more likely to impede any immigrants' efforts to find stable high-paying jobs.

Employment Discrimination: A considerable number of participants have a perception that there is discrimination in the labour market and that the prejudice amongst employers resulting from stereotypes about Africans perpetuated by mainstream media can be a major barrier to the employment outcomes of African immigrants. This is because for participants, their blackness together with media portrayals affects how people judge them. For instance, according to Morris, “*The media damage things for us. Our value is knocked down by the media.*” The media always tries, as Tanya says, “*To get the negative things than sharing the positives from*” Africa. Often, what people get in the media is “*the story that typifies Africans*” (Aaron). The stereotypes perpetuated by the mainstream media can be a major barrier to the employment outcomes of African immigrants.

Discussion

This paper is part of a broader study to understand the settlement experiences of Africans in Australia. This paper contributes to the literature on Africans in Australia and to the growing body of work on African immigrant integration in Western nations. By studying African immigrants, this study adds important insights to the debate on the effects of visibility in terms of difference deriving from race, skin colour and ethnic origins on African immigrants' vulnerability and employment outcomes in Australia, and provides evidence for the existence of barriers that may negatively affect their labour market integration, inclusion and participation. Thus, this paper adds important insights to the debate on the economic participation of African immigrants in Australia. More importantly, this paper sheds light on the experience of African immigrants in Australia.

In terms of their vulnerability, the experiences of African immigrants, particularly, in the labour market is important to discussion of their inclusion or exclusion in the Australian society, because their place in the labour market determines whether they live at the margins or fringes of the society or somewhere in between. Not only do people centre much of their lives on employment, the fact is, entry into the labour market is one of the primary indicators of immigrants' settlement success and it is often one of the significant and major concerns of most immigrants. This is particularly true for well-educated and skilled African immigrants, who have immigrated to Australia in search of better economic success in positions where their human capital can be utilized. But it applies also to all other African arrivals, be they refugees, semi-skilled or unskilled arrivals as employment is a crucial part of immigrants' integration into wider society (see Brooks 1996, Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997, Henderson 2004,

Ager and Strang 2008, Colic-Peisker 2009) and through employment as well, immigrants can earn money, gain status and a sense of job satisfaction (Heikkilä 2005).

An immigrant who lacks access to employment is vulnerable and will most likely be condemned to poverty and an inferior status. Employment not only provides essential economic self-sufficiency, but it is, as Hebbani and Colic-Peisker (2012, p. 530) have argued, a critical element of self-empowerment and interaction with the broader community, often alleviating many of the acculturative stresses associated with settlement. For this reason, how well African immigrants do in Australia or how well they are integrated can be greatly influenced by their access to employment, and success in the labour market. For example, as Sen (1975) has indicated, lack of employment not only denies income and output to those, immigrants, who are excluded; but it also fails to recognize their productive role as human beings in society but access to employment recognizes and as well helps to overcome the exclusion of immigrants from the labour market. Therefore, success in the labour market meant for most immigrants, successful integration. This is because participation in the labour market not only provides a source of social and economic independence, but also self-fulfilment and a vital means of integration into the wider society (Henderson 2004, p. 10). Sadly, finding employment remains one of the biggest challenges which most participants expressed a wide range of feelings about. The cumulative effects of being on the margins in the labour market, if not checked, could show up for years, well into the second and next generations of African immigrants in Australia. African immigrants are no less members of the Australian society than anyone else.

Researchers have also argued that “race, skin colour and ethnicity” play key roles in employment outcomes of immigrants and may be significant to employers’ decisions (Gómez 2000, Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007, Colic-Peisker 2009, Bell, Kwesiga and Berry, 2010, Hebbani and Colic-Peisker 2012). Participants’ accounts and experiences in this study provide at least some evidence that their visibility deriving from a combination of their different visible markers or characteristics can act as barriers to employment and labour market outcomes. In the job interview settings, as Hebbani and Colic-Peisker (2012, p.543) have noted, the initial uncertainty and bias about Africans can be “triggered by the black Africans’ ‘visible difference’, even before a foreign accent or culturally alien non-verbal clues are displayed.” Based on their visibility, ethnic membership and group belonging, African immigrants are more likely to be labelled and treated differentially as others. Thus, it would be argued that on the basis of their visibility in terms of difference, African immigrants are more likely to experience higher risks of differential treatment or discrimination and exclusion and to have limited opportunities and access to the labour market.

The impacts of the media reported by several participants are also potential barriers to African immigrants’ labour market success. In many cases, it is precisely the media which formulates the public’s position regarding this or that ethnic group. The media has the potential, and, can play an active part in shaping and framing people’s perception of Africans (Bastian et al. 2013). It is more likely, as Andemariam (2007, p.115) has argued that owing to the indifference of the press toward positive news from Africa and to the media’s predilection for sensationalizing and exaggerating the failures of the continent, the largely uninformed public including employers have remained unsympathetic, opinionated, and, to a large extent, prejudiced toward African immigrants. Unfair media representations can lead to the differential treatment of African immigrants in the labour market.

Without a doubt, a person's social network – both the networks of friends and family as well as institutional networks formed through previous employment and schooling is of primary importance in job search. The social network theorist, Granovetter (1995), recognizes social networks as crucial for labour mobility. In his classic study, Granovetter (1975, 1995) contends that the 'weak' social ties (social friends and professional colleagues) are strong (effective) than 'strong' ties (family members) when it comes to job lead information because weak ties by themselves allow for sharing of information regarding job openings. Moreover, systematic analysis of the relationship between race, skin colour, networks and employment has also revealed the ways in which race, skin colour biases and lack of mainstream social networks maintain dark skinned African individuals on the periphery of mainstream labour and business markets (Gilchrist and Kyprianou 2011). Other studies have also shown how some employers rely on strategies that take advantage of the racial homogeneity of social networks to find employees (Walker 2011). Indeed, having mainstream social networks can assist African immigrants in the job search and in finding good-paying jobs with clear means of advancement in the primary market but, a lack of such networks can be a challenge which could place African immigrants at greater vulnerability in job search and which could translate into a lack of job opportunities.

While English language proficiency can be a huge problem for some African immigrants with limited English proficiency, it can still pose a problem for those African immigrants who came with high English proficiency because of their non-Australian accents. Given "the unjust assumptions about insufficient language skills or lower performance levels that are associated with accents" (Turchick-Hakak, Holzinger and Zikic 2010, p.166), some employers may hesitate to employ them due to accents. Although having an accent may be a valid reason for not employing an immigrant in some specific occupations, it must be pointed out, that accents do not remove a job applicants' hidden competence and productivity in some occupations. Therefore, it is a form of differential treatment to judge African immigrants' job applicants based on accents alone without taking into account their job-relevant attributes, skills and characteristics.

In addition, the period African immigrants spent waiting for their qualifications to be recognized can lead them into working in fields or areas outside their expertise. This does not help them in building a strong professional career and networks in the Australian labour market. As Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007, p. 21) observe, being unemployed, underemployed or spending long periods working in jobs that are outside one's field of expertise or below one's level of skill and qualification could lead to a loss of self-esteem, a decline in self- confidence and in morale, sense of disillusionment and can turn them into 'discouraged job seekers. It is also clear that if their previous qualification is not recognized or downgraded and they are reduced to menial works, their downwards mobility will inevitably affect all spheres of life not just their work life but their overall wellbeing (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007, p. 21). Besides, the constant demand for Australian work experience by employers can be "a mechanism for employers with subtle prejudices to rationally justify not hiring immigrants" (Turchick-Hakak, Holzinger and Zikic 2010, p. 169) and can result to differential employment outcomes for Africans with no Australian work experience.

In fact, the experiences of difficulties in finding employment, as reported by several participants, suggest that African immigrants face a range of interpersonal and structural barriers with important implications for their socioeconomic vulnerability and economic performance. These barriers support and extend previous findings, according to which visible

immigrants are unable to secure sustainable employment and tend to suffer a considerably high levels of unemployment (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). Therefore, without any realistic chance of getting or having jobs appropriate to the level of their qualifications, skills and experience, the African immigrants' socioeconomic mobility will be severely restricted, and they may be consigned to, most probably, a lifetime of poverty, with a detrimental impact on their settlement and wellbeing in Australia.

Practical Implications

The findings suggest that the difficulties and barriers to securing jobs signify a level of African vulnerability that demands a particular attention and assistance. Where these barriers are strongest, they can impact not only African immigrants' labour outcomes but also their equal access to other opportunities in the society. These barriers can impede their satisfactory integration that requires the possibility, in ideal conditions, for full social, legal, economic and cultural participation in society and in the labour market through employment. Therefore, the African experience of difficulty when finding employment, and the structural and interpersonal barriers they experience support the interpretation - they are vulnerable and disadvantaged, and within that vulnerability and disadvantage, there are levels of vulnerability and degrees of disadvantage resulting from their 'visible difference' which can lead to further social exclusion, marginalization and inequality.

As Hilhorst and Bankoff (2004) have argued, vulnerability is all about placing people who experience difficulties at the centre of research and policy agendas. This study has implications for policies or programs targeted to visible immigrants' integration and economic participation in Australia. The findings of this study would be of interest to decision and policy-makers and stakeholders in multicultural Australia; and to managers and practitioners working on issues of equity, diversity, anti-discrimination and immigration for development of innovative policy. This study points to the need for programs and policies to target immigrants, especially, African immigrants who migrate to Australia and face barriers to labour market participation in order to reduce their vulnerability. Any policy or program for African immigrants must start from an understanding of who they are and their real-life experiences. Any fundamental solutions involve political change, radical reform of economic system, and the development of policy to include rather than exclude African immigrants as well as other visible immigrants.

Limitations of the Study

This study has attempted to explain the vulnerability of African immigrant in Australia. Its findings contribute to the literature on African integration in Australia. However, it should be noted that by investigating the experiences of this small sample group of African immigrants, the study explore subjective views of participants and offers an emic view of participants' experiences, and thus, its findings cannot be generalized to entire African populations in Australia. Future research with a larger sample size is needed to check whether the current findings are the same or match well with national trends. Moreover, future studies may further this research by examining the economic participation, adaptation and assimilation of other visible immigrants in Australia, thus analysing whether the findings in this study are specific to African immigrants or generic to other visible immigrants in Australia. If the latter case were true, such research studies could motivate new policies or programs targeted

specifically towards the integration, inclusion and participation of new immigrants and visible immigrants in particular in Australia.

Conclusion

A unique contribution of this study is the nuanced understanding it provides about the vulnerability of African immigrants in relation to their difficult experiences finding employment. Critical to understanding African immigrants' vulnerability is an appreciation of the ways the social process in place makes them vulnerable. Undeniably, there are clearly obvious phenotypical differences between African immigrants and mainstream Australians. As contemporary ethnic and racial minority group in Australia different from the Australian Aborigine, this paper proposes that what the African immigrant would be interested in is a more consciously heightened awareness and understanding on the part of the government and the mainstream Australian society, of their vulnerability, the impacts of their labelling and the various barriers and challenges they face in their efforts toward full social and economic participation in society. This paper recommends that targeted policies advocating for greater African immigrants' inclusion, economic participation and equity need to be developed. Without addressing the question of the African vulnerability and their needs to reflect the diversity in contemporary Australia, they will remain vulnerable.

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