

YOUNG SUDANESE MEN EXPERIENCES OF RACISM IN MELBOURNE

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INTRODUCTION

Young refugee men from Southern Sudan have reported experiencing racist treatment from the police and other agencies. This confirms a consistent pattern of African men's experiences in their settlement in Australia. The study is part of my PhD that examines the role of the intersection of gender, age, culture and class in the determination of health inequalities among young refugee men. The research involved interviews with 29 young men, 10 service providers and two focus groups with young men and with fathers of young men.

Literature indicates that racism has a significant impact on health due to stress and has both physiological and social consequences. At the physiological level, stress has adverse effects on our health and at the social level it reduces our chances in accessing vital resources such as employment, education, housing and recreational amenities. Discrimination and subsequent stress effects depends on other factors including previous experiences, personal resilience and availability of social support.

For the Southern Sudanese young men, the previous experiences include being refugees and a marginalised nationality in Sudan. As young people, they also experience other disadvantages in society in terms of various restrictions and generally low incomes. Young Sudanese men also explained that, in their culture, it is common to travel in groups. However, here they often get harassed by the police for being in groups and wearing hip-hop street fashion. The full impact of racism, therefore, needs to be appreciated in the context of the intersection of refugee background, age, gender, culture and class.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Much of the documented early history of Sudan is about Northern Sudan, which was called Nubia in ancient times, and is a rich account of an advanced civilization that was well linked to the outside world. Much of the history over the last six decades of modern Sudan, in contrast, is dominated by chaotic military coups, counter-coups and poor governance. It has also got a dark chapter of the long-lasting conflict between the Arab/Muslim dominated government and Animist/Christian Africans in the South. In May 2004, a deal between the government and the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) was signed, ending 20 years of brutal civil war that resulted in the deaths of 2 million people. Since 2005 there has been peace in the South but at the same time another conflict has erupted in the Darfur region with more than 300,000 killed and two million displaced.

Southern Sudan still faces many problems despite the peace agreement. In 2003, only 26 per cent of children were enrolled in primary schools in the south and the legacy of many years where children were forced into slavery or drafted into the armies are still being felt (The Third World Institute, 2005). The children and young people have been subjected to a lot of human rights abuse and suffered a lot of physical and emotional deprivation. Many have been separated from their parents, relatives and friends.

Migration to Australia

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC, 2007, p.4) has reported that since 1996-97 about 20,000 people born in Sudan have settled in Australia and the Sudan was the leading source of Humanitarian entrants since 2003-04. Another estimated 2200 ethnic Sudanese but born in countries of asylum such as Kenya and Egypt are not shown so adding this figure boosts the Sudanese immigrants to 22,200. Since the rough estimate is that 10 percent of the Sudanese immigrants are from the north then the population of South Sudanese arriving since 1996-97 is about 20,000 or 0.1 per cent of the population. The government information also indicates that 98 per cent of the Sudanese come under Humanitarian program and Special Humanitarian Program [SHP], which requires sponsorship by an Australian resident or organisation. The numbers arriving before 1996 is relatively small and included some skilled immigrants.

Victoria is the main destination (36 %), followed by New South Wales (24 %) and a smaller proportion of the Sudanese has settled in Queensland (DIAC, 2007, p.7). The capital cities take most of the Sudanese immigrants with Melbourne and Sydney taking up 54 per cent between them. Some of the Sudanese people have settled in regional centres such as: Shepparton and Warrnambool in Victoria; Toowoomba in Queensland; and Hunter and Darling Downs in New South Wales. A few have also settled in the other capital cities like Perth, Adelaide, Hobart and Darwin. Nsubuga-Kyobe (2004) has identified settlement problems for refugees in regional areas including: education and English language issues; intergenerational conflict and cultural gaps; unemployment, access to employment services and benefit payments; accommodation problems; understanding the system; and isolation and alienation.

Age at migration is important in determining how well someone settles in Australia. Young people in general seem to make up a significant part of immigrants to Australia. Center for Multicultural Youth Issues [CMYI] has noted that between 1 July 2002 and 30 June 2007 a total of 49,364 young people (12-25 years old) settled in Victoria (CMYI, 2007, p.2). The report also indicates that young people under the age of 30 make up 71.5 percent of the humanitarian program. In 2006/7 there was total of 276 young people from Sudan that were settled in Victoria constituting (25%) of the total and were the largest single group of young people (CMYI, 2007b, p.1). Refugee men have difficult issues in their settlement. In addition to bodily developmental tasks which are compounded by their refugee experience, they also face issues of cultural dislocation, loss of established networks and practical demands of settlement (CMYI, 2007, p.3). These problems are made harder by low incomes and difficulties in finding employment.

Literature review

The experience of discrimination by African immigrants in Australia has been noted by the major studies on African settlement in Australia (Batrouney, 1991; Udo-Ekpo, 1999; Cox, Cooper & Adepoju, 1999; Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002). While the focus of this study is on young men from Southern Sudan, these other studies have focused on Africans or Black Africans in general. Batrouney (199, p.xvi) found clear evidence of prevalence of discrimination in employment, social life, the media and in accommodation provision. Udo-Ekpo found that most Africans interviewed reported

experiencing racial discrimination in Australia. The African community leaders also informed Udo-Ekpo that government policies failed to take into account Africans' special needs and their disadvantaged position in the Australian society.

Similar findings on racial discrimination were reported by Cox et al. (1999, p.49). Most of the discrimination was reported to be in employment, accommodation, public transport, education and the legal system and police services. Government services were rated as the least discriminatory. Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock (2002, p.194) confirmed the continued existence of racial discrimination experienced by the Africans in employment, accommodation and in dealings with the police.

The direct impact of racial discrimination on the individual and community is through denial of access to material and service provision. Indirectly the effect is through stress with implications on health and well-being. I would agree with the observation that 'an adequate understanding of racism is fundamental to an understanding of ethnic inequalities in health' (Nazroo, 2006, p.240). Taylor (2004, p.13) has stated that in Australia racism at school and elsewhere has been identified as a health issue for young refugees and that it led to depression. Taylor also noted that racist violence was significantly detrimental for those who had previously escaped violence, which is the case with most refugees. Discrimination implies the experiencing of social environment as negative or hostile. Brunner and Marmot (2006, p.28) have asserted that negative social and psychological circumstances can do long-term damage to physical and mental health. In these psychological circumstances they have cited chronic anxiety, insecurity, low self-esteem, social isolation, and lack of control over work. Williams, Neighbors and Jackson (2003) have argued that 'subjective experience of racial bias may be a neglected determinant of health and a contributor to racial disparities in health' (p.206). It is these implications on health that this research considers the continued experiences racial discrimination in Australia as a major concern.

THE RESEARCH

The overall research reviews how factors such as gender, class and race might intersect to influence the disparities in health between young Sudanese men and the

general Australian community. It is a qualitative research study that takes an Afrocentric and Ubuntu approach. This approach is based on a paradigm that puts traditional African knowledge and cultural values at the centre of its analysis. Interviews were conducted with 10 service providers and 29 young men from Southern Sudan. Further interviews were conducted with two focus groups, one with young men and with fathers of the same background.

Table 1. Age of Young Men individual Participants

Age	Number of Participants
Under 18	3
18- 20	15
21 - 23	10
24-25	1
Total	29

Table 2 Country of Asylum

Country	Number of Participants
Kenya	14
Egypt	10
Uganda	4
Other	1
Total	29

Table 3. Service Providers

Participant position	Number of Participants
Refugee Nurse	2
General Practitioners	3
Welfare program coordinator	2
Youth Worker	1
Counsellor advocate	2
Total	10

THE ROLE OF THE POLICE IN RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

There were strong feelings expressed about the police going out of their way to target young men from Sudan based on the racial profiles they had developed. The tensions arising from problems with the police have led to unnecessary stress on the part of those who would be going about their daily lives like any other citizen. Majok [names chaged] expressed his stress and frustrations at being stopped every time he is driving, simply because he is black:

Being stopped randomly by police, you try to go somewhere and you get stopped four or five times in one hour and you haven't done anything. You know, they say, "oh random breath test". Or they just want to check what you have in your car or what you have in your trunks. Asking those kind of stupid questions, you know. You can't go anywhere without [being] worried that you are going to get stopped for something ... they see there is someone black in the car and they flash their lights at you. (Majok).

What has become a major issue in this area of police harassment is a contest on the correct use of the public space. Such places as the Noble Park train station where the young men and women like to meet have led to conflict with the police and with other young people. Young men in this research are of the opinion that they are being denied the use of public spaces on racist basis. Deng described how Sudanese men are denied a chance to live according to their African culture, which is communal in nature and felt the police need to learn this:

They see a group of Sudanese together and they think they are a gang. In Sudan we all walk in a group, it is a cultural thing. We walk in a group and this is how we socialise together. In Australia it is different, that is one thing people really have to understand here. Seeing it is a multicultural country, they have to let people stay the way they are. But yeah, incidents happen. Police will just stop a group of Sudanese youth and ask them questions. (Deng)

The young men emphasised their perception of the class and racist nature of police harassment they experience. They argued that young white men in better off suburbs do not get harassed when they get together. Williams et al. (2003, p.204) have inferred from literature that the association between perceptions of discrimination and health is not only that it affects mental health but perceptions of discrimination might ultimately affect physical disease processes. It should therefore be taken seriously when young Sudanese men feel that they are targeted on the basis of race, culture, gender, class, place of residence and age. Paul expressed this sense of being targeted in this manner by the police in the young men's focus group:

The most people who get arrested would be at Noble Park. Why? ... Because we hang around there, drinking. If you go ... [to] Fountain Gate ... you will see a lot of white people drinking, doing whatever, smoking and everything. The cops will come and won't do anything. They will just look at them and then walk off. And when the cops come to Noble Park and they see the way we are dressed ... they will think we are smoking and drinking and after that we will go and start fighting and kill somebody out there. So after that they will come and start asking us where we are going, what we are doing and why we are doing that. And then after that one of them might come and hit someone. (Paul).

These experiences confirm the findings in much of the available literature on African and young people in general which suggests that young people are discriminated against by the law enforcement agencies. There is a general but unfounded perception that young people in general pose a threat to public safety in public places (Bessant, Sercombe & Watts, 1998, p.222). The police also acknowledge that there are elements of discrimination against black people among police personnel who hold negative stereotypes such as black men are violent towards their spouses (Nsubuga-Kyobe & Dimock, 2002, p.141). Young African men's attributes may also make them vulnerable to police harassment. These attributes include cultural practices of congregating together in public places, negative attitude towards legal authorities due to their past refugee experiences, family conflicts due to changed social and cultural environment and high rates of unemployment leaving them idle, frustrated and easily provoked by the over policing they are subjected to. The refugee experience of forced

migration means that they have been forced to leave their communities, which traditionally would offer them guidance, protection and conflict mediation and which they are now devoid of, leaving them as vulnerable and isolated individuals.

DISCRIMINATION IN HOUSING AND ACCOMMODATION

We are going through a time in Australia when accessing housing is a major problem for anyone entering that market. For young refugee men and their families the problem is made worse by discrimination as indicated by health and welfare workers as well as the young men interviewed in this research. Participants pointed out that discrimination and housing-related problems are a source of stress for immigrants like the Sudanese. A health worker pointed out that the refugee immigrants are housed in inappropriate housing that could be stressful and potentially harmful to their health:

I think something that is not directly impacting on their health but [does indirectly], is finding accommodation for these large families. ... While it does not directly impact on health, when you look at wellbeing which is a broad topic, then it does have some implications there. Inappropriate housing is a big problem. I think that what happens is that most real estate [agents] will not give them [appropriate properties] ... or they tend to end up in the run down houses. (Refugee Nurse).

While Sudanese young men understand the official policy is against racial discrimination, they know that they experience it in their daily lives. It happens when they apply for accommodation and they believe they are rejected on racist basis or when they are accepted it is in rundown properties or in isolated places that no one else wants. John expressed this sense of being discriminated when applying for jobs or rental properties and felt that the media shares some of the blame:

Although it is not on the government policy that you will be discriminated against because of your race, it happens. It happens on a different basis. It might not be your colour but your colour will tell them something about you. When you go for a job, let me say, my colour will tell them that I was not born in Australia so they will have that connotation that I will not have good

experience in what they want me to do. That will affect their assessment on my interview. They do the same thing in the housing industry. When you go to the real estate, you want to rent a property, they see a guy from Sudan and on top of that there are a lot of things in the media currently, negative things about Sudanese, so it has made it harder to get accepted by those ... real estate agents. (John)

The problem is that housing provision is largely in the private sector except for the limited stock owned by the Department of Housing and the government funded Transitional Housing Management for short term housing. Proof of previous tenancy is required of new tenants in the private sector and when you are a newly arrived refugee you have no chance of having such documents. If you are unemployed or you are a student, it makes it very hard to be accepted for a decent property. Young men from Sudan are then forced to join their friends who might have secured some accommodation. This is good for addressing social isolation but the utility and food bills go up and when they are unable to pay the bills and rent they lose that property as well. A welfare worker discussed how the young men are struggling in their settlement due to discrimination in the housing sector:

We have three young men who have spent almost six months and done so many applications trying to access housing and in the meantime they are also students and trying to study so this has had a huge impact on their ability to study and to just get on with things and to settle themselves because they have looked at several different suburbs and been staying with another group of three young men in a household. ... So you can imagine the ability to study.when you're in that situation you don't know how long it is going to be ...so it causes a significant amount of stress (Welfare Coordinator).

The stress experienced through homelessness has ramifications on virtually all other aspects of life. Apart from studies it is hard to secure employment without stable accommodation. There are also implications on health, health-related behaviours and has an impact on relationships.

There is a significant number of young men who have arrived on their own such as the Lost Boys of Sudan - so called because a large number of them got separated from their parents during the civil war. It is very hard for a single person to rent privately on Centrelink payment so such young men are particularly vulnerable. Those with their families also face a problem in that large families have problems getting appropriate properties. A number of family issues including supporting extended families overseas and intergenerational conflicts have forced an increased number of African young people in Victoria to leave their homes and become homeless (Nsubuga-Kybobe & Dimock, 2002, p.134). While discrimination by real estate agents makes the situation worse, addressing the problem needs a much broader approach.

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment is critical not only for the material welfare but also for identity. It is difficult gaining employment when you have no locally acquired skills and experience. It does seem, however, that while some of the problems are related to skills, racial discrimination plays a role in keeping African men unemployed or underemployed, even when they have got Australian qualifications. James noted in the young men's focus group that even those who are highly qualified are discriminated because of their 'race':

The major problem is here we have people who are highly qualified even people with PhDs, with masters and bachelor degrees advanced diplomas and so forth. These people don't get jobs in a proper way. You may get a job as a factory hand. ... They should provide anyone who has been training in a certain area, they need to work in that area. It is very rare to see a black person working in a highly recognized department. (James).

This is a problem recognised by all the major studies done with the African immigrants. It leads to a lot of frustrations. Many African men traditionally believe that they have to be the head of household and that implies being the provider. Unemployment undermines that masculine role. Social security helps to keep absolute poverty at bay; however, the men suffer low self-esteem and poor mental health. Even

for young men without families, lack of money to live the lifestyle of their peers can be stressful. Health and welfare workers in this research identified that young Sudanese men are under enormous stress as they often cannot pay their bills and at the same time live at a standard that would be considered reasonable in Australia. A refugee nurse discussed the experiences of stress by Sudanese young men attempting to balance paying for essentials and living at standard of the community they are in:

I've seen young men very stressed about how they're going to, ... stay in the accommodation that they are living in due to financial issues. ... [They are trying to] manage their accommodation, pay for a car, I guess get a computer. ... There is a lot of stress around financial things for them ... to really feel, I suppose, that they are able to do what other Australian young men can do. (Refugee Nurse2).

Stress and subsequent health problems is one outcome of discrimination. The other potential outcome is alienation from the hostile society. This can lead to anti-social behaviour and a chain reaction of greater rejection and discrimination that the indigenous communities in this country know of too well.

ADDRESSING ISSUES OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Young Sudanese men on the whole expressed that they are happy to be in Australia despite the problems they encounter. The negatives are counterbalanced by the positives as Rees and Pease (2006) also found in a study of refugee settlement, safety and wellbeing. Udo-Ekpo (1999) also concludes that African immigrants in Australia are happy to be in Australia despite the many problems they face. These problems include racist taunts in public places like pubs and streets. Racial discrimination, however, cannot be taken lightly as it has serious consequences on the victims and those reporting happiness may not be the same ones who have been traumatised by racism. Udo-Ekpo (1999, p. 20) has documented that some Africans have reported racist attacks at work and social circles in Melbourne which in some cases led to severe stress and clinical depression. Clearly the Equal Opportunities legislations have not always provided sufficient protection.

The Sudanese-born community are estimated at only about 23,000 people in Australia yet in 2007 the then Minister for Immigration, Kevin Andrews singled them out for failing to integrate. Many community leaders and welfare workers disagreed with that claim (Nader & Cooke, 2008). Racial discrimination in Australia has a long history and the 'White Australia Policy' that kept non-Europeans out of Australia was only abolished in mid 1970s. There is host of legislations against racial discrimination but most ethnic communities report that they experience some form of discrimination. Most Australians acknowledge that there is a problem of racism in Australian society (Dunn, Forrest & McDonald, 2004). This acknowledgement is regarded as a good starting point for addressing the problem.

There is a need to review why the legislation has not been effective in ending racial discrimination. At the same time, more effort could be put into education of both immigrant and host communities about each other to increase levels of acceptance. An intersectional approach that recognises that gender, race, class and age intersect and exacerbate or ameliorate the way racial discrimination is experienced. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] supports this approach as well and recognises the importance of an intersectionality analysis. HREOC (2001, p.2) argues that aspects of identity are indivisible and looking at race and gender in isolation from each other, for example, results in concrete disadvantage. There is need also to recognise that the community loses when the human rights of sections of the society are violated and their potential contribution to the society underutilised.

CONCLUSION

Young men from Sudan and other Africans indicate that they are still happy to be in Australia despite the problems encountered. They appreciate the security and opportunities available especially in education. There is need for more research with an intersectional approach because Sudanese young men do not experience racism and other disadvantages in the same way because other factors as levels of education, length of stay in Australia, language skills, education and family unit structure play important roles.

A conference on African resettlement in Australia has recommended that a national policy on strategies for refugee youth settlement should be developed in consultation with African youth and the African communities as well as better information provision for African refugee immigrants and more research on young African immigrants issues (Conference Report, 2007). Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock (2002, p. 147) stressed the need to be sensitive to the African cultural issues particularly the importance and vulnerability of the family and African social workers or social workers with an appreciation of African cultural values be recruited to work with African youth.

Understanding the fundamental African values is the key to assisting African people. The Ubuntu philosophy emphasises that we are people through other people, meaning that African people realize their potential through being connected to other people rather than just individual achievements. To work with African people it is therefore important to appreciate the role of dialogue, extended family, community, spirituality and reciprocity.

The experiences of young Sudanese men in this study confirm what other studies have argued that African people in general are subjected to racism in Australia. This study, however, differs from the other studies in emphasising that research needs to take an intersectional approach to discover the intersecting issues that lead to the vulnerability of the young men to racial discrimination. Understanding and supporting families to support young men within the families, for example, would reduce the chances of them leaving home and coming into services that are not equipped to support them. Understanding African culture and communal approach to life would also lessen the tension between African people and the service providers and law enforcement agencies.