



Settlement and employment experiences of South Sudanese people from refugee backgrounds in Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

This article critically examines the settlement experiences of South Sudanese people from refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne, Australia, with a particular focus on unemployment and barriers to employment. Drawing on extensive primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 South Sudanese Australians, the article demonstrates how unemployment features centrally in participants' narratives and appreciation of their settlement in Australia. Participants relate unemployment to issues such as social isolation, family breakdown, and intergenerational conflict, and foreground discrimination as a key barrier to employment. We reflect on these findings by discussing suggestions for future policy and practice in the area of refugee settlement and employment.

Introduction

The forced migration of people from South Sudan to Australia started in the 1990s due to an extended civil war between North Sudan and Southern Sudan. As a result of that war, over 30,000 Sudanese arrived in Australia and many of them have since obtained their Australian citizenship (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2007). The largest number of humanitarian entrants from Sudan arrived between 2000 and 2006, often after spending several years in refugee camps.

This article examines the settlement experiences of South Sudanese people in the Australian city of Melbourne with a particular focus on the difficulties they experience in relation to access to the labour market. The term 'settlement' is used to refer to the ability of newly arrived refugees to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and political activities without having to rescind their cultural identity. Settlement is meant to be the final stage for refugees to 'integrate' into Australian society. Yet, this process is neither linear nor straightforward. There are many challenges faced by people from refugee backgrounds as part of the settlement process, such as learning a new language, finding employment, understanding the health system and the culture of the host country, planning for family reunification, and dealing with discrimination. Navigating life in a new country may, therefore, be riddled with social issues that constrain individual and community wellbeing (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011).

Settlement involves a two-way process by which settling persons become part of the social, institutional and cultural fabric of society through mutual adaptation and support (Valtonen, 2004). The concept of settlement also directs attention to the societal and institutional context within which it is embedded (Valtonen, 2004), including the need for the wider community or 'host' society to make adaptations to accommodate the new arrivals and facilitate their settlement, for example through reducing or eliminating barriers to social and economic participation (Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2010a & 2012) or providing basic support services to enable new arrivals to develop social connections and economic independence (Bennett & Adriel, 2014; DIAC, 2012; Olliff & Couch, 2005). The settlement process involves a range of factors and processes such as housing, employment, education, health care, income support and family reunion. Moreover, it relates to less tangible factors which play a vital role in the settlement process including being able to feel safe and secure and develop a sense of belonging; restoring a sense of self-worth; restoring a sense of dignity; regaining a sense of control over one's life; and processing grief over the loss of self and country (DIAC, 2012; RCOA, 2010a).

There is a growing body of research documenting the settlement experiences and aspirations of people from refugee backgrounds, and South Sudanese in particular, in Australia (e.g. Atem, 2011; Losoncz, 2011; Lucas, Jamali, & Edgar, 2011; Marete, 2011; Marlowe, 2011; Marlowe, Harris, & Lyons, 2013; Robinson, 2011; Wille, 2011). The existing research indicates that settlement experiences among recently arrived people from refugee backgrounds are significantly affected by their (in)ability to access paid employment, and highlights the need to tackle

barriers to economic participation in order to promote the social inclusion of people from refugee backgrounds in Australian society (Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009; Correa-Velez, Spaaij, & Upham, 2013). In this article, we aim to contribute to this debate by exploring the settlement and unemployment experiences of South Sudanese people from refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne. The article is structured as follows: we review the existing literature on refugee settlement and employment experiences; next, we discuss the methods used to investigate these issues and present the results of the study. The final part of the paper draws together and reflects on the main findings.

Unemployment and settlement among refugees in Australia

Access to meaningful employment is critical for successful settlement. Employment is not just a source of income to meet basic needs, but also contributes to psychological and social wellbeing. Being employed assists in enhancing self-esteem and provides a sense of independence and economic self-sufficiency (see, for example, Correa-Velez et al., 2013). If refugees have the opportunity to obtain meaningful employment, they are better able to settle successfully and contribute positively to society by participating in work and education as well as supporting education for their children and young people (Abur, 2012; Humphrey & Steven, 1984; Refugee Resettlement Working Group, 1994). Indeed, according to the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2008), earning capacity positively influences "the ability to 'purchase' many of the other resources required to rebuild life in a new country, among them, housing, health care and education" (p. 3).

Unemployment can be an equally impactful experience that, if left unresolved, is likely to negatively influence settlement, health, and wellbeing (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012; Blustein, 2008; Fozdar & Torezani, 2008; Paul & Moser, 2009; Taylor, 2004). Based on the International Labour Organization's standard definition, the category 'unemployed' is comprised of those individuals who are without paid work, available for work and seeking work. The social impact of unemployment can be long-lasting. For example, the lack or loss of income by parents can damage the economic and educational prospects of the next generation (Dieckhoff & Gash, 2011).

Unemployment is a major concern for refugees and other non-English speaking migrants in Australia. The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) (2013) has argued that people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds face higher levels of

unemployment and greater barriers to employment than the general population, causing social and economic stresses among community groups and families. Youth are likely to become disengaged and feel disenfranchised when faced with structural unemployment, while family relationships often deteriorate as a result of financial pressures (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, 2008). More specifically, a recent Australian Survey Research (2011) report found that humanitarian entrants are the most likely to be unemployed, with only around 40 per cent of humanitarian entrants securing a job of some type within four years of arriving in Australia (Australian Survey Research, 2011). The report further shows that non-participation in education was one of the main causes of humanitarian entrants' sustained unemployment due to their relatively low educational attainment. However, the report failed to recognise that many humanitarian entrants ideally want to work or study to support their families in Australia as well as overseas. The issue of employment was identified as one of the many areas of refugee settlement that need further investigation (Australian Survey Research, 2011).

Recent academic research supports these findings. Correa-Velez, Spaaij and Upham's (2013) mixed methods research with 233 men from refugee backgrounds living in Queensland reported high levels of unemployment and major barriers to securing employment. They found that 'despite the significance of decent work for participants' sense of belonging, 56 per cent were unemployed at the first interview, while several others reported job insecurity and/or dissatisfaction.' (p. 180). Most of those working were employed in low-skilled and low-paid occupations and many of those who completed tertiary degrees at Australian educational institutions were still unable to find jobs (Correa-Velez et al., 2013). In a similar vein, a study of the educational and employment outcomes of a group of 173 recently-arrived adult African men from refugee backgrounds who settled in Southeast Queensland found high levels of unemployment and significant barriers to securing work in Australia, including discrimination, requirements for Australian work experience and referees, and the necessity of having a car (Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009). Very few had been successful in obtaining recognition in Australia of their previous skills and qualifications (cf. Codrington, Iqbal, & Segal, 2011). These findings largely support earlier studies conducted by Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006; 2007a) which reported the existence of a segmented labour market in which 'racially and culturally visible migrants are allocated the bottom jobs regardless of their human capital' (2006, p. 203). Unemployment was an important indicator of economic exclusion, with 63 per cent of participants

in Correa-Velez et al.'s (2013) study having a weekly income below the poverty line at the first interview.

In this article, we explore how South Sudanese people from refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne experience these issues of settlement and unemployment. The next section discusses the research methods used to elicit their experiences.

Methods

The qualitative research upon which this paper draws comprised a series of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with a total of 20 South Sudanese Australians living in Melbourne which took place during the second half of 2014. Eleven males and nine females were interviewed, with ages ranging from 18 to 64 years. Participants had been living in Australia between two and 14 years at the time of their interview. Interviewees were invited to share their experiences and views in relation to settlement and, specifically, employment. The lead researcher and first author here, William Abur, met with prospective participants to provide relevant information on the research, highlighting the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw consent. Interviewees were then asked to sign a consent form. All interviews were conducted in private rooms in public libraries and community centres, at a time that was convenient to participants. Each interview lasted one hour on average. Pseudonyms of the participants were adopted and used in the presented findings to avoid identification. The study was granted full ethics approval from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee on 7 August 2014.

The interview questions were designed to capture the participants' lived experiences of settlement and, in particular, the role of employment and unemployment therein. Questions either pertained directly to un/employment (e.g. 'What are your experiences of employment in Australia?'; 'Have there been any barriers to finding work for you or your family members?') or were framed in a more general way (e.g. 'How would you describe your settlement experiences in Australia?'). Most interviews were conducted in English as most of the participants were able and comfortable to share their stories in English. The first author's ability to speak Sudanese Arabic, Dinka and Kiswahili at times aided in translating/paraphrasing content or words in those community languages. The background of the wider South Sudanese community was cautiously considered because of their experiences of forced displacement, political persecution and the trauma of civil wars in South Sudan. The research team adopted an ethnographic approach based on the principles of respecting

people's cultures, integrity, and ethics (Madden, 2010). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview data were coded and analysed using thematic and narrative analysis techniques. In the next section, we discuss the key themes and findings arising from the research.

Findings

During the interviews, participants described their settlement and unemployment experiences eloquently. The findings are presented under the four key themes of overall settlement experiences; benefits of employment; unemployment; and discrimination in relation to the labour market.

Overall settlement experiences

Settlement experiences can broadly range from learning the culture of people in a new country to issues like language, affordable housing, schooling, and lifestyle. Across these various issues, interviewees reported a number of challenges. For example, Joseph, a 23-year-old man who grew up in a refugee camp and resettled in Australia with his mother and siblings nine years prior to the interview, expressed:

Settlement experiences in a new country for us have been not easy. Some have experienced more challenges and struggles than the time we were in refugee camps because there are things you want to do better but you not able to do them because of many barriers around you.

For Joseph, a particularly challenging experience in this regard was his interaction with discriminating others:

Settlement experiences can be bad sometimes when you meet people who have their personal issues with certain ethnic groups. They can try to talk you down because they don't like you or people from your background for some reason. Such people make settlement difficult because you always think, "I don't deserve to be treated like this. I deserve an equal opportunity like others." It is unfortunate that there are people who aim to distract others and deny them opportunities to grow, contribute to Australia society as good citizens.

Garang, a 20-year-old male who had been in Australia for 10 years and was undertaking a university degree at the time of interview, stated:

My experience was difficult. There were many challenging things that we faced in between. My family was struggling to get things right in Australia including learning the language. Yet we were hammered by culture shock, home sick, and social isolation. There were also discrimination attitudes that we faced here and there at different places, at school, and with neighbours.

Learning a new language was one of the commonly heard challenges among this group of South Sudanese Australians. Participants described their difficult experiences learning English when they arrived in Australia:

Learning English was challenging for me because I was not able to express words correctly in English. I always feel scared and not ready to talk because people will correct my English. I was not able to use correct words or was unsure about some words. I felt scared to talk to people and felt like I am not part of this society. (Dut, 24-year-old male, 8 years in Australia)

One of the challenges for settlement is learning English, English is a second or third language for the South Sudanese people. Sometimes it can be so difficult to express yourself well in English and this can be frustrating, especially when there is no one to assist you to learn English. English is so hard for us especially when you choose hard subjects: it can be so difficult for you because no support is available for you as a learner. Lots of people became frustrated with the new challenges; some choose to isolate themselves from the community or groups. This is where depression kicks in and the settlement became so difficult and challenging for you in many ways. (Monique, 30-year-old female, 14 years in Australia)

Benefits of employment

In addition to general questions regarding their settlement experiences, participants who were working or had worked were asked to share their experiences and views on employment. Participants described the variegated benefits of employment including financial benefits, social

connections in the workplace and learning from workplace culture. The following responses are typical of the kinds of experiences described by the interviewees:

Employment is good for me because it gives me a positive life experience, peace and happiness for myself with my job as I was able to do something productive. I was able to sponsor my family and support them to come to Australia through my job. I feel like I was able to contribute back to the community because I was able to pay taxes and support family and relatives. I had a positive relationship with my workmates and manager and I learned lots from them and through my work. I was able also to inspire my friends because they always meet me and say, "You have done a good job at your work and career wise." (Majok, 27-year-old male, 11 years in Australia)

Employment helps you financially and reduces your financial stress because when you are employed, you can earn income and pay bills; buy things that you need for yourself or to support your family members when they need your help. Participation in the workplace is a good way of meeting people with different backgrounds and learning from their cultures, and their stories from their previous work which can be so beneficial for you as a worker. It helps you to understand someone who is serious and someone who is rude to you. Work teaches us to leave your personality issues and collaborate with colleagues in respectful ways. You can meet people who are rude to you or to your race but you learn much how to deal with such rude or racist people in professional ways. (Mayar, 24-year-old male, 9 years in Australia)

The financial benefit is big things in work, getting paid. You help yourself by buying things you need and paying bills. You also become a responsible person because you know that you are contributing to yourself, family, community, and government through paying taxes. When you are working, you learn how to manage your finances and be in charge of your life. If you are not working, you feel like you are dependent on

someone else or government and not contributing. I like to work and contribute to myself and community and in that way, I can feel good about myself. (Glory, 22-year-old female, 11 years in Australia)

Considering the economic and social benefits that the respondents associate with employment, it is striking that many interviewees experienced major and persistent difficulties in obtaining meaningful and secure employment. The next section discusses these experiences.

Unemployment

During the interviews, participants spoke openly and clearly about the difficulties they faced in the Australian labour market. Many of them were unemployed, looking for jobs, or had a history of unemployment in Australia. The participants' narratives revealed that unemployment is a challenging issue for many, even after a considerable time of up to 11 years in Australia. For example, Joseph, who earlier foregrounded the barriers to settlement, lamented the negative impact that unemployment was having on South Sudanese Australians:

Unemployment is not a good thing for people when they are looking for work but don't get it. I know there are many people in the South Sudanese community who are looking for employment. It is unfortunate that people have tried their best to look for work but there is no work for them. This makes their lives miserable in many ways. Unemployment makes people feel depressed, hopeless about future and wonders why they are in a beautiful country like Australia and still suffer so much from being unemployed. Unemployment is distracting the whole community at the moment because people who are not employed tend to be depressed, get involved in heavy drinking which holds them back from achieving their goals of coming here to have a better life. (Joseph, 23-year-old male, 9 years in Australia)

While Joseph focused primarily on the health impacts of unemployment, other respondents also stressed the social cost of unemployment, as reflected in the following comment made by Dut, a 24-year-old male who had been living in Australia for 8 years at the time of interview:

I had a difficult experience in looking for work; you have to register and attend meetings with many agencies to help you. The lack of network and friends in the workplace was a challenge for me because I had no friends that I could contact about work. You rely on Centrelink benefits which are not enough to pay your bills. There is strong competition for work and it is hard to compete with native English speakers, companies easily choose native English speakers over someone with English as a second language.

In a similar vein, Garang expressed:

Unemployment is challenging and it can be like the end of the world for some people who are looking for employment and not able to get work. In modern society, people go to school hoping that they will find employment when they finish school, or even before finishing. Life cannot make sense some times when you are not employed. You cannot make new friends if you are unemployed because you miss out seeing many friends that you would meet at work. (Garang, 20-year-old male, 10 years in Australia)

Some participants explained how their search for decent work had been an ongoing struggle in which they faced stiff competition and often felt undervalued. Sarah is a 28-year-old mother of three children who had been in Australia for 10 years at the time of the interview and had lost her husband in the conflict in South Sudan. Currently unemployed, Sarah spoke of the rejection, frustration and heart break she has experienced during her search for employment:

Unemployment is a difficult thing to live with and especially when you are looking for a job and always get nothing as your application is rejected. It is a heart-breaking time when you apply for a job and sometimes receive no acknowledgement. You begin wondering why they have not even acknowledged the application. What is wrong with the application and my luck? Sometimes you learn to be open to any criticism when you are looking for a job. Sometimes you try to contact people from where you submitted your application. They will tell you your application is a human

resource officer and you will be contacted by the officer in charge, but that never happens.

In a similar vein, 38-year-old Aguto, who had been living in Australia with his wife and children for 10 years, foregrounded the highly competitive nature of the labour market and offered the following advice to his fellow South Sudanese Australians:

I think unemployment is so challenging for those who are looking for work but there is no work. I think they need to prepare themselves by doing studies and work experiences. There is high competition in the job market which demands a high level of experiences or local experiences and qualifications. Sometimes, South Sudanese are rejected for work they applied for because of lack of local experience. My suggestion or advice is that people need to take volunteering roles to get experience and study to meet the needs of qualifications.

Within their stories about unemployment and the challenges of gaining meaningful employment, participants repeatedly foregrounded experiences of labour market discrimination. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Discrimination in employment

Many interviewees believed that subtle forms of discrimination in the labour market and in the workplace continued to exist in spite of anti-discrimination legislation. Some reported that they had experienced first-hand what they considered to be unfair treatment either in the workplace or in the process of seeking employment, allegedly because of their backgrounds as Africans and as refugees. Some participants who had encountered discrimination did not hesitate to relate their experiences and opinions. Hinting at the effects of ‘visible difference’ on employment outcomes (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007a), Abiol, a 28-year-old female who had been in Australia for 11 years, stated:

Racism and discrimination are high in employment. People from the African community or with dark skins are more likely to be discriminated in employment. For example, you can be told straight when you are looking for work that you have no

local experience. How would someone get local experience when you are not given a chance to voluntarily work with the company?

In a similar vein, Sarah reflected:

There is always pressure and expectations that you have to treat customers with respect. Some people can try to put you down but you can only try your best to be polite and remain disciplined and positive. But it is clearly unfair to treat people in a cruel manner because of their backgrounds or colour of skin. (Sarah, 28-year-old female, 10 years in Australia)

When asked to give a specific example of discrimination experienced in the labour market, Sarah responded:

Racism comes when people ask you during an interview or even when you are just socialising with people. They ask, "Where did you come from?" and if you say you come from South Sudan/Sudan, the next question is, "Where did you learn English?" These kinds of questions are annoying because people just prejudge that you have no English and you are not supposed to be here meeting me. I think the image of the South Sudanese community has been badly portrayed by the media because of young people. However, young people are young people everywhere; it doesn't matter whether you are a young person from America, Africa or Australia. They still have issues of young people. It is not fair when the whole community has been judged and labelled as bad because of a few people who are struggling with social issues. I feel that is racism and discrimination because I would like to be judged as an individual and not as the community I come from.

Like Abiol and Sarah, some participants felt that their inability to gain unemployment was attributable in part to how employers judged their physical appearance or skin colour. For example, 25-year-old Rebecca, who had been in Australia with her family for 12 years, recounted her experience when she was invited for an interview:

I know this through my own experiences in looking for the jobs in Australia. I have been left out several times because of small things that should not hold me back, but because of my background as an African person, I was not able to get the job. Your physical appearance is a problem sometimes, especially when you are looking for work. People can deny you because of your physical appearance. One time, I applied for a job and was invited for an interview. I went and waited at the reception for the interview. A lady who was doing the interview calls my names out and I responded. When she saw me, she said, "Oh!" and paused. I was, like, what was that pause about? It is because of my physical appearance of being black. I noticed the change in her face, felt uncomfortable and she felt uncomfortable with me. I straightaway knew that I was not going to get this job and it was true; I have not got it.

Mading, a 25-year-old male who had been living in Australia for 10 years, gave two specific examples of discrimination experienced in the workplace:

There are racism and discrimination in the workplace; this is still an issue in Australia. I have faced this in different ways. I remember at my work, I was told by one guy, "Hi mate, you should not wear black cloth because you are black." This is an example of how racist people behave. When I reported him, he claimed that he was talking about a safety issue and he refused to attend a meeting with me. He claimed that migrants and refugee people "should learn our ways".

I was abused by a drunken customer in public who said, "Go back to where you come from. You are not needed here. This is my country. My grandfather fought for it to keep black people away from this country." I ignored her because she was drunk but one my colleagues did not like the way this particular customer was behaving. There was general discomfort from people who were listening to what she saying. She was later asked to leave.

When participants encountered discrimination in the workplace or in the process of seeking work, they inevitably felt a sense of rejection and misery and a dent in their confidence. In many cases, they felt vulnerable and

confused about what to do in such a situation. Monique reflected on the impact of labour market discrimination in the following way:

People are concerned about racism and discrimination in the workplace and schools. It is a major issue affecting young people from the South Sudanese or African communities. It is like many young people face bullying at school: South Sudanese young people all face bullying and racism in Australia. It is part of community life now. People with black skins are easily victimised by racists. (Monique, 30-year-old female, 14 years in Australia)

Supporting people from refugee backgrounds to understand their rights in the workplace, and supporting them when they experience discrimination, is fundamental. The importance of empowerment was foregrounded by several participants, indicative of which is the following comment by one participant who described how his colleague mistreated him but also how, through standing up for his rights, the problem was quickly resolved:

One of my colleagues used to undermine my work and treated me badly. She always brought her personal issues from home and behaved aggressively towards me. I tried putting up with her behaviour, ignoring her aggression and discrimination until I stood up for myself. She realised I was going to report the issue to the manager. She became friendly to me and worked with me in a respectful way. This came after I confronted her and told her she didn't need to talk to me this and she needed to respect me as I respected her as a colleague. I said that should she continue in the same way, I would resign and there would be an investigation. (Mading, 25-year-old male, 10 years in Australia)

Another participant highlighted the need for organisational support and procedures to address workplace discrimination:

Sometimes racism and discrimination in the workforce is not the organisation, it is a personal interest of those who have racist behaviours or attitudes learnt from other groups. I think the organisation needed to tighten up its policy to ensure that

those who hold senior positions should not bring their racist behaviour into the workplace. Organisations should integrate a positive culture and cultural understanding to ensure that people from different cultures are given the opportunity to work in the organisation. (Rebecca, 25-year-old female, 12 years in Australia)

The forms of discrimination experienced in the labour market could not be seen in isolation from wider issues of discrimination at the community level. Participants explained how some people, and especially young people, had suffered negative interactions with police which had instilled in them a more generalised fear of discrimination that also extended to the labour market. The negative interactions between young people from South Sudanese backgrounds with police in Melbourne were believed to have created distrust in the community, including a perception that South Sudanese Australians and other African Australians were being racially targeted by law enforcement officers. This caused anxiety in the community, as the following comments suggest:

I am concerned with the ways police interact with young people from the African community while they expect you to integrate successfully in Australia. Police are punitive on young people, they treat them badly even when the young people have done nothing wrong and were just socialising as a group. Police can interview them as if they committed a crime. Such attitudes make it hard for young people to trust and believe that police are there to protect people including them. Many young people from South Sudanese and other community groups believe that police treat them as a gang while they are not, but once they are treated as a gang by the authorities, they turn against the authority and do not trust them anymore. Now many of young people are in prison and this shows the system does not support newly-arrived refugees and migrants to settle better. They can be fuelled by small issues and if they react negatively they will end up facing jail. (Monique, 30-year-old female, 14 years in Australia)

I was involved in an advocacy group because I did not like the police targeting refugee young people; particularly black young people from Africa who are often treated or targeted by police as criminal. Look at me; I am a South Sudanese and I

have never fought in my life but guess what? The police or some people think that all the South Sudanese young people are bad because they fight lots on the streets. This is not true to generalise and treat the whole community as bad people.
(Glory, 22-year-old female, 11 years in Australia)

Discussion and Conclusion

Australia's humanitarian program is reportedly experiencing pressing issues with regard to the integration of new refugee settlers (Australian Survey Research, 2011; RCOA, 2012). There are many settlement initiatives, but it seems that many recently-arrived refugees are often failed by these, including in the area of employment (Correa-Velez et al., 2013). Our results indicate that this is also the case for many of the South Sudanese Australians who participated in this research. Participants not only experienced high levels of unemployment but also reported a range of multi-level barriers which they believed constrained their ability to gain meaningful employment. Furthermore, they expressed that the difficulties they faced in the labour market had a considerable impact on their own settlement experiences and those of their families. Similar to Correa-Velez et al. (2013), our data suggest that respondents' exclusion from production (i.e., unemployment or underemployment) affects their economic exclusion (i.e. low income) and in some cases also their exclusion from social relations (e.g. their ability to engage in clubs or associations), and hence underline the interconnections between different dimensions of social exclusion.

The benefits of employment for people with refugee backgrounds are well documented (Hugo, 2014; RCOA, 2010a). This study's findings corroborate these documented benefits. Participants described the value of employment as a way of addressing financial, social and mental health issues, and noted that, in their experience, unemployment, and especially long-term unemployment, could contribute to or exacerbate issues such as lack of disposable income, family breakdown, social isolation and mental health problems. They also indicated their strong desire to engage in employment as a way to enhance their settlement opportunities and outcomes. However, our study also shows that for many respondents these benefits are yet to be fully achieved. In this context, the Refugee Council of Australia (2010) found that "while there is much evidence that humanitarian entrants do achieve positive employment outcomes over a period of time, it is equally important to acknowledge the short term barriers to economic progress encountered by refugees in order that these

can be addressed with appropriate policy and program responses” (p. 4). Our results support this conclusion but also, importantly, indicate that the identified barriers to employment are not necessarily limited to the short term. The majority of our respondents experienced persisting difficulties in gaining paid employment or in career progression, despite having been in Australia for close to, or more than, a decade.

This research sought to elicit the lived experiences of barriers to employment, and to settlement more broadly, among a small sample of South Sudanese Australians. The identified barriers resonate strongly with previous research undertaken with people from refugee backgrounds (Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009; Correa-Velez et al., 2013; Dandya & Pe-Puab, 2015) and newly emerging African communities in Australia (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012). In addition to English language, non-recognition of qualifications and other barriers reported by the participants in this study, experienced discrimination stands out as it echoes existing research which demonstrates how visible difference and perceived discrimination affect refugees’ employment outcomes (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007a; 2007b). The narratives of the South Sudanese Australians interviewed for this study appear to reinforce Colic-Peisker and Tilbury’s (2007b) key finding that ‘discrimination on the basis of race, religion and ethnic origin plays a role in creating unsatisfactory employment outcomes’ (p. 2), in particular through discrimination on the part of employers on the basis of ‘soft skills’ such as Australian cultural knowledge. This labour market discrimination cannot be seen in isolation from discrimination in other societal domains: systematic discrimination appears to have also been meted out against people from refugee backgrounds in other areas, such as the housing sector, with negative impacts on settlement outcomes (Dandya & Pe-Puab, 2015).

The findings of this study have policy implications in the areas of refugee resettlement and employment assistance for people from refugee backgrounds and for South Sudanese Australians in particular. One of the most important implications of this study is the need to tackle barriers to economic participation and discrimination in order to promote the settlement of South Sudanese Australians. The results suggest that a more targeted approach may be required to facilitate their access to the labour market; an approach that goes beyond building South Sudanese Australians’ capacities to also critically reflect on and transform organisational and professional practices (Marlowe, 2014).

Over the past decade, a number of strategies have been proposed and introduced to address the high levels of unemployment and

underemployment among people from refugee backgrounds in Australia (see, for example, Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007b; Correa-Velez et al., 2013; RCOA, 2010b). Some of these strategies, such as the provision of tangible work experience opportunities through traineeships and apprenticeships (see, for example, Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2016), have had proven success in addressing employment barriers for refugees. Another potentially effective, yet currently underutilised, strategy in assisting people from refugee backgrounds to access employment is the provision of professional connection and mentoring programs for job seekers. Other strategies include vocational education and training programs linked with English language learning, streamlining the qualification recognition process, challenging stereotypes and discrimination, promoting diversity awareness among employers, providing greater opportunities for refugees to gain work experience, introducing incentives to undertake volunteer work, among others. However, further research is required to establish the relative effectiveness of each of these approaches (RCOA, 2010b).

There continues to be a pressing need to address discrimination in the Australian labour market through a whole-of-community approach in which refugee communities themselves are also a key partner. This could involve educating employers about workplace diversity and supporting them in developing relevant workplace programs and practices, but also challenging stereotypes and (unconscious) bias and holding employers accountable for discriminatory practices. Recognition of the benefits of diversity in the workforce and promoting the view that many South Sudanese Australians are hard-working and want to work are important elements of this approach. In conjunction, these strategies could contribute to a labour market that better enables people from refugee backgrounds, and South Sudanese Australians in particular, to realise their full potential as productive and valued citizens.

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