Housing pathways for African refugees in Australia: towards an understanding of African refugee housing issues

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Abstract
African migration to Australia has increased significantly since 2000 due to political unrest and civil wars on the African continent. Recent studies of African migrants have focused on employment, mental health and education issues with modest or no reference to how housing problems matter for durable settlement of African refugees, or the relation of housing to health and education. Housing affordability is a major concern for all Australians but especially for the newly emerging African community. Our paper discusses new research underway into the predicament of African refugees as Australia faces a profound decline in housing affordability. The research seeks to explore the current and future housing needs of African refugees in relation to family size, transport, work, health, education, community integration and income. Most African refugees come from low socio-economic status backgrounds and many depend on social security payments. In many cases their ambitions for suitable housing are untenable. Our paper discusses the salience of communicative planning theory and a case study methodology to engage with African refugee settlement experiences. We are seeking a sociological understanding of African housing issues to inform creative policy options for settlement planning.

Key words
African refugees, housing, settlement, communicative action theory, planning
The current debate in academic circles and in the public sphere about the recent housing crisis in Australia frames this study. Accessing suitable and decent housing has become difficult for many Australians. The crisis in affordable housing is one of a number of competing factors confronting the newly emerging African refugee community in South Australia. The majority of recently arrived refugees and temporary protection visa holders have reported frustration in the housing market and experienced difficulties in obtaining suitable housing because of discrimination, unemployment and low socioeconomic status (Fozdar and Torezani 2008, Beer and Foley 2003). A recent Migrant Information Centre report (2007) clearly indicates that obtaining suitable housing for recently arrived refugees is an essential aspect for successful settlement and integration into the wider Australian community. Nevertheless, the report recognizes challenges such as lack of proficiency in English, and limited financial and human capital impact on the capacity of African migrants to obtain housing.

Our research at the University of South Australia seeks to offer a better understanding of African refugee housing dilemmas. We will be consulting with key informants including, real estate agents, community, and government agencies working with African refugees. The involvement of such institutions will be substantive and will provide an insight into the collaborative approach required to tackle the housing crisis and community integration issues amongst African refugee groups. The research will also involve direct consultation with African refugees over a four-month period. South Australia provides a useful research locale because it is one of the states in Australia that has received a substantial number of African refugees over the last few years.
The research aim

Our aim is to empirically explore the housing pathways and experiences of African refugees in the Australian housing market. Our research will identify and examine the challenges experienced by African refugees in relation to the housing market in South Australia. The conceptual framework for our research to understand African housing issues draws on communicative planning theory and the literature on the forms of capital. Our research is intended to develop a sociological understanding of African housing and settlement issues and to offer policy makers alternative housing options for African refugees.

This research aims to pose broad questions, which when addressed will provide an understanding of African refugees’ housing conditions in terms of their social and human capital and in relation to gender, age, socioeconomic status, experience, skills and education.

Communicative planning theory

Our research employs communicative planning theory, a theoretical concept that focuses on how political communities, public institutions, and individual groups within society exchange and debate views and arrive at a logical and conclusive solution (Healey 1999). In sequence with communicative planning theory this research draws on Habermas’ theory of communicative action. We are aiming to engage African refugees in a discussion of their experiences and their interpretations of housing conditions in relation to bureaucratic decisions and how communicative tensions might affect them. The research has chosen communicative planning theory because communicative action enables an exploration of uncertainty amongst the African refugees with regards to housing from their perspective and the possibility of identifying emancipatory processes (Lee 2007). Our aim is to seek a consensus on how best to address tensions between organizations that mediate between African migrants and affordable housing and community members. Nevertheless, we concur
with Lee who recognizes that ‘reaching consensus (understanding) is a risky mechanism for linking interactions’ (Lee 2007: 282).

As described by Lee, ‘communicative interaction requires the help of another or others, through the acceptance of a plan of action and through the obligation for continued future interaction’ (2007: 282). The key approach to communicative action for Lee lies in the dialectic and ethical right to raise concerns and problems ‘through a communicatively produced consensus, especially within democratic political orders’ (Lee 2007: 285). The change dynamic, Lee suggests, requires reaching understanding and agreement with others through equal respect, empathy and concern (Lee 2007: 285). In this sense, Habermas’ theory of communicative action offers a clear explanation of ‘intersubjectively’ collective social order on the basis of ‘action which explains not only how social order but the nature of the individual-society relationship as well’ (Cooke cited in Lee 2007: 56). Healey (1999: 116) states ‘Communicative planning theory provides a normative approach, grounded in observations of planning practice, to the design of interactive governance processes and the ethics of experts involved in such processes’. In this sense, interpretive or communicative planning theory might offer policy insights into how to address barriers to affordable housing for African migrants ‘through learning how to collaborate, a richer and more broadly based understanding and awareness of locality relations and conflicts can develop, through which collective approaches to resolving conflicts may emerge’ (Healey 1999:116).

**Forms of capital and communities**

Recent studies on refugees and migrants indicate that the human capital of refugees and migrants plays a vital role in the progression of economic integration in their country of asylum (Faist 2000). Nevertheless, it is not possible to provide an explicit and complete
exploration of African refugees’ housing situation without some insight into their social capital status. Social capital refers to help, support, establishment and maintenance of uninterrupted operations of social ties, as well as the representations of refugees and migrants that exist in their host country (Faist 2000). In this sense, Adler and Kwon (2002: 23) define social capital as ‘the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor.’. Other definitions of social capital position social relations as being embedded in social networks (e.g. Burt 1997; Cohen and Prusak 2000; Schuller et al. 2000). Moreover there is an important distinction in this literature between ‘bonding’ social capital and ‘bridging’ social capital. Bonding social capital refers to horizontal linkages or the dense network ties, trust and shared codes that exist in close-knit communities. Coleman (1990) referred to bonding social capital when he discussed its capacity to create safe neighbourhoods and social cohesion. Bourdieu (1986) identified ownership of ‘cultural social capital' as an asset that enables elite groups to maintain class boundaries. In contrast, bridging social capital refers to social networks that bridge social boundaries such as those presented by differences in class, ethnicity and culture. Granovetter (1973) discussed bridging social capital when he described how weak social network ties between people with different class status had a higher utility for people seeking employment than strong ties within an homogenous community. Granovetter’s argument was that people of higher class status who are more likely to be in employment and in positions of influence often have greater knowledge of job opportunities than persons from a working class community where many may be out of work or employed in roles where they have less knowledge of labour market opportunities. New refugee communities commonly lack bridging social capital precisely because of their newness. Few people in a newly arrived refugee community have had time to form networks with persons of influence. Woolcock
and Szreter (Woolcock 1998; Szreter and Woolcock 2004) make a further distinction between bridging linkages among or within communities and bridging to persons who can provide access to resources in the wider economy. Woolcock refers to the term ‘linking social capital’ to designate this type of bridging to networks rich in resources that are external to the community.

In this sense, Woolcock is also talking about linkages to service providers, which may include social services, employment services, banks, credit agencies, real estate agencies and other agencies that are salient to obtaining housing. As migrants who have predominantly arrived as refugees from developing countries the relationship of Africans with service providers is critical to understanding their housing experience in Australia and addressing ancillary issues such as poverty. The economist Jeffrey Sachs (2005) suggests that from a macro-economic perspective, linking social capital helps reduce poverty. Moreover he argues that the macro-economic evidence is in accordance with the results of micro-economic studies on social capital and well-being.

Whilst social capital is important in understanding the matters of concern to our research some studies suggest that its effectiveness depends on whether certain factors are present or absent. Beugelsdijk and Smulders (2004) drew on data from the European Values Survey to examine the relationship between a form of bridging social capital and economic success. Their research suggests that for bridging to be effective several factors have to be present. According to Beugelsdijk and Smulders (2004) bridging within a community through participation in voluntary organisations, creates trust and restrains powerful individuals from pursuing their interest at the expense of the community thereby enhancing equitable economic outcomes. In contrast, a review of the literature on community development
projects by Mansuri and Rao (2004) found minimal evidence of a relationship between participation in community projects and desirable social outcomes. Community development projects were often dominated by community elites. The more inequality between the community and its more powerful elements, the worse the outcome. Mansuri and Rao’s (2004) study points to a need for a careful unpacking of the role social capital plays in access to affordable housing for Africans in Australia and ancillary issues.

**Housing refugees in Australia**

Our research thus far suggests that although refugee studies have grown rapidly over the past decades, they constitute a small field in which researchers struggle to make good the deficit of understanding about refugee housing (Marfleet 2006). Australian society and particularly the African refugee community is increasingly experiencing severe housing affordability issues. Neither the public nor private housing system is able to provide suitable housing for refugees and other disadvantaged minority ethnic groups. To date, there has been no comprehensive research conducted on the housing situation and community integration of African refugees in Australia and especially in South Australia. The majority of African refugees arrived in Australia between 2000 and 2005 as part of the federal government humanitarian program in response to political unrest and civil wars in the African continent. Sudan, for example, the largest country in Africa, has the largest refugee population in Australia followed by Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo, Ethiopia, and Somali. Before reaching Australia, many African refugees spent several years in refugee camps after fleeing their countries of origin. The housing crisis in Australia and especially in the African refugee community is the result of many factors. Among these are issues with obtaining paid employment so as to be able to afford decent housing. African migrants face significant barriers to obtaining paid employment in Australia. Legislation prohibiting discrimination
has not eliminated both personal and institutional discrimination in the employment market for African migrants from refugee backgrounds. Recent studies suggest that African migrants are concentrated in pockets of ‘niche’ employment in the secondary labor market, have low income levels and lack opportunities for advancement (Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2005).

A lack of capacity to afford decent housing is compounded by a shortage of suitable housing for African families. A study by the Refugee Young People and Housing Issues Working Group (RYPHI, 2002: 13) refers to a ‘…general shortage of public housing stock, private sector discrimination and the difficulties experienced by newly arrived communities in advocating for their needs’. The report suggests that refugees are particularly vulnerable and marginalised compared to other segments of the Australian population and are experiencing a wide range of disadvantages within the housing cycle.

What is missing in studies of existing housing arrangements is an understanding of the economic, social, ethnic, and cultural needs of African refugees (RYPHI 2002). Community agencies working with humanitarian entrants have argued that housing has become the number one pressing issue confronting refugee groups (Housing Crisis Committee for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities 2008). According to Beer and Foley (2003) social institutions should attend to the needs of disadvantaged immigrants as part of a broader plan to address social exclusion. This perspective is similarly shared by migrant and refugees agencies and social commentators who argue there has been a lack of attention to refugee housing from both local and federal governments (Flanagan 2007).
One of the solutions suggested by Flanagan (2007) is to increase funding in relation to housing, education and training specifically for the successful settlement of refugees. This however, does not sufficiently address the exclusion faced by the African refugees in the housing market and does not tackle discrimination by landlords. First and foremost, it is necessary to examine the relationship between African refugees and real estate agents and their interactions. A recent report indicates that a Sudanese family applied for more than a dozen different rental properties but was rejected every time according to Agencies Supporting Housing for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ASHRA 2007). It is argued that landlords prefer to accept applications from applicants who have a long history in the private rental market, an employment history and previous references from real estate or landlords. According to ASHRA (2007) this makes it difficult for recently arrived refugees to compete in the private rental market. Jay Weatherill, the South Australian Minister for Housing was recently quoted as saying that ‘single mothers, Aboriginal people and new arrivals were among those who felt they had been discriminated against’ in the housing market (The Advertiser, 2007:14). ASHRA (2007: 1) reports that ‘low income earners, those without secure and affordable accommodation, and those with a health issue naturally are hardest hit’. Many African refugees fall squarely into these social categories.

Recent reports (Moscaritolo 2008) indicate that African refugees are particularly at risk of experiencing an ongoing crisis in housing affordability. In Canberra, eighteen Sudanese refugees were recently reported to be living in a two-bedroom house, a situation of concern for most of the refugee settlement agencies (Crawshaw 2007). The community agencies and many social commentators have argued that newly arrived African refugees are discriminated against in the housing sector because of their large families, lack of rental history and because many come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. There is little doubt that the community
faces significant social issues. Indeed the former Immigration minister Kevin Andrews (2007) claimed last year that African refugees were experiencing difficulties in integrating into the Australian community and proposed a temporary ban on the entry of African refugees. The Minister’s statement was made in the context of a Federal election and his government had a history of making political capital from refusing entry to refugees. Hawa and Khadija (2000: 17) argue that African peoples face a long road to being truly accepted in Australia for who they are and to feel accepted into Australian society because their Australianness is immediately questioned and challenged. A recent study by Fozdar and Torezani (2008) of African migrants health and well-being in Western Australia came to similar conclusions.

**Addressing a gap in the literature**

Our review of the literature suggests that studies of African refugees have tended to focus on employment, health, mental health and education issues with modest or no reference to how housing problems matter for durable settlement of African refugees, or the relationship of housing to work, health and education. Our research will add to existing literature and academic knowledge particularly in the field of urban and regional planning for housing and specifically in regards to the refugees’ housing crisis in South Australia. In addition to the matters discussed above our research will explore the fact that African families are large and that the design of dwellings available to refugee communities in Australia are generally designed for smaller families. Anecdotal research suggests that housing design in Australia has implications for the cohesion of African families, undermines culture, leads to a loss of social capital and other issues.
Thus the research questions are

- What are the housing needs of African refugees in Australia?

Our sub-questions are

- What are African refugees’ understanding and perception of the housing system in Australia?

- What are the barriers and obstacles to obtaining affordable housing in Australia for African refugees?

- How do African refugees address these barriers?

- What are the forms of capital in the African community?

- What is the role of capital for Africans in obtaining affordable housing?

- What are housing pathways options for African refugees?

- Do employment status, language skills and social networks a play a role in obtaining housing?

- Are there barriers to housing in relation to race, class, gender and age?
What role do government and community agencies play?

Does the Australian housing market in terms of housing design, affordability and quality satisfy the needs of the African refugees?

Methodology

Our research will utilise a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative techniques to address and accomplish our aim. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (cited in Ugbe 2006: 53) describe the benefit of using mixed methods by stating that it ‘gives researcher opportunity to utilize induction (i.e discovery of patterns), deduction (testing of theories or hypotheses) and abduction (uncovering and relying on the best of a set of explanation) for understanding the research situation’. This research will contextualise the issues facing the African refugees in the housing sector through the development of ‘inclusive, pluralistic and complementary’ understandings (Ugbe 2006: 53).

In order to effectively investigate the housing experiences of the African refugees in Australia the research will undertake a case study of African refugees in Adelaide, South Australia. South Australia has resettled a large number of African refugees in recent years.

In-depth semi-structured interviews will be the primary means of data collection. The case study will involve 30 semi-structured interviews with purposively selected African migrants from refugee backgrounds. African participants will be recruited through community agencies and the researchers networks. The principal researcher, Paul Atem is a leader of the Sudanese community in South Australia and a former Centrelink social worker and social planner, who has worked extensively with African migrants and community organizations.
We will seek interviews with Africans from four main groups: persons who are in public rental accommodation, persons who are in private rental accommodation, persons who are buying or own their home and persons seeking to make the transition from rental to home ownership.

We also intend to conduct approximately 20 semi-structured interviews with government and community organisations working with African refugees on housing issues. The organisations targeted include but are not limited to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Department of Families and Communities, Housing SA, the Australian Refugee Association, Multicultural Youth SA, the Migrant Resource Centre, Lutheran Community Care, Justice for Refugees, the African Community Council of South Australia and the African Communities Council of South Australia.

Moreover, the researchers will survey 500 African migrants in South Australia. The survey will enable the researchers to obtain quantitative results on African refugees’ experiences. Secondary data collection will include the statistics on African migrants from the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, parliamentary proceedings papers, books, journal articles, local and Commonwealth Government reports and newspaper clippings which are directly pertinent to research question. The research will address the issues related to housing and community integration by using variables such as family size, period of stay in Australia, education, health, employment, transport and location.

Data analysis will focus upon two key areas: housing needs and demand, and social problems facing African refugees in the wider Australian society that have a relationship with housing. Our research will unpack the nature of household demand in relation to family structure and
household size. The analysis will pay particular attention to the forms of capital available to Africans in Australia and the capacity for addressing communicative tensions between the African community, service providers, other key agencies and the design, affordability and quality of housing. Close examination of such factors will offer an effective understanding of African refugees’ housing situation salient to social and urban planning. The analysis will focus on participants’ responses and their experiences in relation to housing.

**Conclusion**

The housing problems faced by African migrants in Australia require alternative approaches to those in existence at present. It is insufficient to talk about contemporary African refugees’ housing crisis purely in terms of increased funding and housing. There is a need for a broader perspective, which addresses the communicative barriers to refugee housing, associated cultural issues and access to forms of capital. It is apparent that African refugees face discrimination related to narrow conceptions of ‘Australianness’, which translate into problems in the labour market, health and education issues, a housing crisis and tensions between the community and mediating social agencies. Our research will address African migrant housing issues and their settlement into the wider Australian community using communicative planning theory and theories of social capital. A close examination of these issues might produce new understandings of African settlement in Australia of interest to academic fields concerned with understanding migrant and refugee experiences. Such fields might include sociology, geography, migration studies, social policy and development studies.
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