Reframing the ‘refugee experience’:

The case of African youth in Brisbane

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Abstract

Much of the existing research on refugee resettlement describes young refugees as victims and passive “by-products” of the hardships endured during the pre-settlement phase. The resulting policy and programs that such framing informs tend to adopt resettlement strategies using a ‘deficit model’. The ‘refugee experience’, the model argues, produces young people defined by the lack of social and practical resources necessary for successful resettlement.

This paper expands on a growing body of research which suggests that young refugees, contrary to common assumptions of the deficit model, use pre-settlement experiences to accumulate social and practical resources which they can deploy and utilise upon settlement. Using data from 30 in-depth interviews with young African refugees in Brisbane, our findings illustrate how skills developed in the refugee camp become a critical resource in preparing young refugees, albeit within a different context, to meet settlement challenges in Australia. The paper concludes with a brief discussion on research and policy implications; specifically, how researchers and policy makers may reframe the understanding of the ‘refugee experience.’

Keywords: Refugee youth, Settlement, Integration, Australia, Policy

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Introduction

As a result of increased internal civil and military strife and the subsequent displacement of people throughout Africa, the number of refugees settling in Australia under the humanitarian visa program has grown exponentially in the past ten years (ABS 2006). This new refugee cohort, with the majority arriving since 2002, represents a remarkably young demographic, with the average age of Sudanese entrants a mere twenty-three years (ABS 2006). This sizeable influx, combined with this group’s unique demographic profile is compounded by the high incidence of trauma and protracted displacement (Tempany 2009) which provides further challenges for service providers and policy makers seeking to aid their resettlement and social integration.

The research which informs the development and implementation of policy and programs for refugees has historically been framed within a deficit paradigm. Traditionally, the deficit paradigm focuses on identifying the needs, problems or deficiencies which prevent a given population from achieving desired outcomes. These factors are then employed as the foundation from which initiatives are designed to counter or ameliorate said deficiencies. As it relates specifically to settlement and integration, policies and programs framed within a deficit paradigm model rely on an identification of the key factors which characterise the ‘refugee experience’ and hinder social mobility and integration. These factors have been documented in several recent studies which highlight the prevalence of mental illness (Casimiro, et al. 2007; Fazel 2009, Narchal 2007, Tempany 2009), lack of English language skills (Couch and Olliff 2005) and unfamiliarity with Australian social and institutional processes (Francis and Cornfoot
2007a), resulting in high levels of social isolation (McMichael and Manderson 2004), high
unemployment and low educational attainment (ABS 2006).

Relying upon empirical research which consistently demonstrates how African refugees are
arguably failing to engage upon settlement, placing them at increased risk of further
marginalisation and social isolation and in response to several recent events which have
heightened public concern regarding African refugees in Australia (see ABC news 2010, 2011)
policy makers continue to grapple with appropriate settlement interventions.

We recognize that it is critical to appreciate the implications of pre-settlement experience for the
capacity to engage in the settlement context. The value of the psychological (see Berry 1997;
Sonderegger and Barrett 2004; Tempany 2009) and sociological (Colic-Peisker 2009; Khawaja,
et al. 2008; Mcmichael and Manderson 2004; Westoby 2009) literatures on these issues cannot
be understated. And yet, as many young Africans continue to struggle upon settlement and, as
research demonstrates, are failing to meet employment and educational aspirations, it is worth
considering how a paradigm shift with regards to our understanding of the ‘refugee experience’
may better serve policy and settlement programs and ultimately create better outcomes for young
refugees.

This paper suggests that young refugees, contrary to common assumptions of the deficit model,
use pre-settlement experiences to accumulate resources which they can deploy and utilise upon
settlement. Specifically, these findings demonstrate that social and practical skills acquired in the
pre-settlement phase may prove to be highly valuable assets to young people upon settlement, if
recognised by service providers and cultivated accordingly. Indeed, by abandoning the use of
the deficit model and perceptions of the ‘refugee experience’ as overwhelmingly negative, policy and program may then capitalise on the strengths, skills and attributes developed prior to migration, affirming them as the foundation for aiding successful settlement and social integration.

**Research methods**

The findings presented herein are a component of a broader Australian Research Council Linkage project which investigates the extent to which migrant and refugee young people draw upon formal and informal networks to develop a sense of social connectedness and belonging in the host society environment.

Our findings are derived from analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 African young people, male and female, ages 15-23 residing within several Brisbane suburbs. Of the young people interviewed, 22 are of Sudanese origin but identify with various tribal and ethnic backgrounds, three are from Liberia, two are from Ethiopia, two are from Congo and one is from Uganda. Participants were all relatively recent arrivals, having lived between 1 and 8 years in Australia. Most arrived to Australia through family and UNHCR support. Participants varied significantly with regards to time spent in refugee camps, English language ability, education level, employment status and level of intra- and inter-group engagement.

Interviews were semi-structured to cater to the sensitive nature of discussing pre-settlement experiences as history of trauma is common for African humanitarian entrants (Schweitzer et. al

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1 This paper presents data acquired through the ARC Linkage project *Social Networks, Belonging and Active Citizenship Among Migrant Youth in Australia.* (ARC LP0989182). The research team consists of Fethi Mansouri (Deakin University), Zlatko Skrbis (The University of Queensland), Carmel Guera (Centre for Multicultural Youth) and Steve Francis (Australian Red Cross).
2006) and the interview process was respecting of the interviewees’ right of non-disclosure (Anderson and Jack 1991; Bryman 2001; Ghorashi 2007). Research participants were recruited through contacts established in the scoping phase of the project. During this time, consultations were held with representatives of local government and non-government organizations to aid in the design and implementation of the research and recruitment of project participants, ensuring that all project processes were conducted in the most culturally appropriate manner.

In what follows, our argument is structured to elicit the social and practical skills acquired by young people prior to migration which, under the right circumstances, serve to aid in successful settlement and social integration. We then discuss the implications of research findings for policy and program pursuits within the settlement sector.

**Cultivation of social skills**

The role of social ties in facilitating settlement and upward socio-economic mobility has been well documented in the migration, settlement and development literature (see Portes 1983; Woolcock 2000, 2001) and is widely recognised by service providers as playing a critical role in settlement (Francis and Cornfoot 2007b; Olliff 2007). Yet, for recent humanitarian entrants from new and emerging communities, the potential of networks to aid in overcoming settlement barriers is often understood by policy makers and service providers as limited by the impact of pre-migration hardships in defining the settlement experience.

Our research found that despite the often atrocious conditions in refugee camps, many of the young people interviewed perceived camp as a place where tightly knit friendships were fostered, creating a strong sense of solidarity amongst factions of the camp community. Such
networks were also critical for meeting the most basic physical needs like access to food, water and safety as UNHCR support in many camps was, at best, limited. As network participation in refugee camps was an existential necessity, young people developed highly elaborate and sophisticated strategies to navigate group dynamics to meet personal, familial and communal needs in intense and adverse conditions.

These skills were further developed and refined as lack of structured time in camp (resulting from limited schooling and work opportunities) lead young people to engage in expansive peer groups with dynamic memberships. And while for the majority of time peer groups served to occupy ‘free’ time and quell boredom, these same groups also filled a very specific and critical role for young people. Below, a participant explains how the ability to function as a part of group, where each person plays a unique role, was crucial to his physical and emotional wellbeing:

> When we were in the refugee camp you know, the working as a team because you got to be part of a group, you can’t just go out in the bush by yourself. So we building friendships and respect. You need all that to be in a group. Like bird hunting, just to be in a group that you walk with, you need all that. You will not have success if each person does not have a part. *(male, 18 years old, unaccompanied minor, apprentice)*

The mutual reliance and support among camp residents to sustain emotional and physical wellbeing resonated throughout interviews. Not only were young people highly attuned to socialising but they also had a keen ability to employ these skills as a means to acquire scarce and otherwise unattainable resources. This is illustrated by a male participant below, who even at an early age was astutely aware of the need to strategically align himself within communal networks as a means to support individual and familial wellbeing:
In the refugee camp, support is everything. Everyone support each other. And the food was hard there, so everyone has turns and you know, on Monday you ate at that person’s house, Tuesday you eat at that person’s house so it goes around and the load is not on one family all the time. *(male, 17 years old, apprentice)*

Further illustrating these strategic alignments, several young people used network affiliation and individual social skills as a means to manipulate and exploit camp processes. Several interviewees relayed experiences of working in partnership with peer groups to obtain more than their allotted food rations from the UNHCR, which they in turn kept for their families or sold to camp residents at a profit. Again, young people’s ability to coordinate and execute these schemes illustrates the advanced social skill set developed by refugee young people through challenges presented in the refugee camps.

The development of network-socialisation skills within camp confines has interesting and direct implications for later settlement experiences and integration into Australian society. Despite their often traumatic personal histories and the dramatic shift in context, upon settlement, young people from refugee camp backgrounds are eager to meet new people, participate in local activities and establish new social networks. Not only do these young people have the desire to engage, they have a highly attuned set of social skills which leave them well prepared to do so.

**Development of practical skills**

In addition to the advanced set of social skills developed prior to migration, it is also important to recognise the significance of practical skills fostered in refugee camps. This is ignored in much of the research literature addressing the negative implications of extended time in refugee camp
on settlement. There is considerable consensus emerging from empirical research surrounding refugee settlement and integration suggesting that lack of education, formal job training and English language training diminishes the likelihood for young refugees to succeed in employment and academic ventures in the host country (for discussion see Francis and Cornfoot 2007a). Again, we agree very strongly that deficiencies resulting from pre-settlement context do present significant barriers for young people upon settlement. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that despite the lack of formal training and educational opportunities, young people from refugee camp backgrounds arrive with a strong set of generic practical skills, making them well placed (under the right circumstances and with appropriate support) to deploy these as critical resources upon settlement.

Several participants noted that while there were no clearly defined ‘work opportunities’ available in the refugee camps, it was the responsibility of camp residents (and at times, UNHCR) to ensure that camp facilities were functioning properly. As a result, many young people who spent extended time in camps developed a set of practical skills relating to designing, building and maintaining refugee camp facilities. This is illustrated by a male participant who, now a plumbing apprentice in Australia, developed plumbing skills as a means to acquire water in periods of drought:

No, it was more because when I was back at the camp it was hard to find water and you thirsty and you always see the men, you know, sitting down putting things together and I thought that was amazing how they put the pipes together. I used to watch them and later try it, you know when they not around. Try to get the water from the pipes. So here, now I know the job already very fast. (male, 20 years old, apprentice)
Another participant, now a third year civil engineering student, revealed that despite struggling through mainstream courses in high school, he eventually returned to a skill set established during pre-settlement, refining them in the settlement context and turning them into a career:

Well, I used to spend a lot of time at home and what I do is use pen and paper and I draw a lot. Drawing shapes…When you spend a lot of time alone at home you bring out skills by yourself...and when I get to high school and I had this subject called ‘graphics’ and it’s the only subject where I don’t have to do writing or talking, I thought it was the most interesting thing…. So I thought “this is awesome” it is the right passage for me. Nothing to do with language, talking too much, no reading books and no embarrassment. Just me with me skills. So I do that from then and feel good. (male, 21 years old)

As illustrated by the young participants above, the development of practical skills, whether through direct observation of camp elders or through direct manual labor (and as a result of unique camp circumstances) produced young people with highly developed and easily transferrable practical skills which could be deployed upon settlement.

**Settlement experience**

The stories which emerged from interviews with young African refugees paint a very different picture to deficit model-driven assumptions about the impact of the ‘refugee experience’ for capacity to succeed upon settlement. Subsequently, the policy and programs which this body of research informs typically follows suit, designing and implementing reactive initiatives aimed at countering the detrimental manifestations of these deficits. As already stated, our findings do not dismiss that research, nor do they minimise the important role of existing settlement policy in
aiding successful integration for young refugees who face numerous settlement challenges. Instead, we essentially provide a new lens for conceptualising the ‘refugee experience’, supplementing existing research and offering an alternative – what we call – strength-based paradigm for refugee settlement, positioning skills developed pre-settlement as the central platform for social integration.

As illustrated in the stories above, the refugee camp provided a medium for engagement in networks, allowing refugee youth to develop and hone social skills, thus enabling them to meet necessary physical and emotional needs. Additionally, it was in refugee camp that young people established practical skills that serve individual, familial and communal interests. In recognising these strengths and attributes, the basic understanding of the refugee experience shifts, acknowledging that despite the adversities experienced within the pre-settlement context; young refugees are, in many ways, well positioned to thrive upon settlement as they are keen to replicate pre-migration networks and deploy existing skill sets.

This desire for engagement was expressed through all interviews. Indeed, for many young people, their first order of business upon settlement was the formation of new peer groups:

So we stay in their house for a week, picked up on things. Got used to it and got bored. So we be like “where the kids at?” “we ready to play now” and we want to see what’s going on. (male, 21 years old, TAFE student)

In addition to the desire to cultivate new peer networks, young people routinely expressed a genuine desire to learn, grow and succeed upon settlement. This was illustrated by one participant, who after spending eleven years in refugee camp was eager and highly motivated to achieve his goals in Australia:
Yeah, at first really excited and you want to start school, and you got goals and you want to study and when you finish study, you know, you going to find a good job and then you going to send some money back and help some people. You know that’s the plan and then you know, you get some ups and downs. But you know, you have that motivation that you want to do good things when you come to Australia. (*male, 18 years old, apprentice*)

As illustrated above, young participants were intrinsically motivated and highly driven to succeed upon settlement. And yet, despite this strong desire to engage and become socially mobile, young refugees face settlement barriers which, despite their strong social and practical skill set, thwart ability to fulfill early aspirations, often leading to social withdrawal and anti-social behavior. This paper does not have the scope to untangle the numerous social (e.g. negative public discourse, lack of government support) and practical (e.g. language, transport, unrecognized credentials) factors which to which this phenomena may be attributed (for discussion see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2008; Francis and Cornfoot 2007a; Dunn et al. 2011). However, these factors are important, as they provide the context necessary to make informed commentary with regards to the notion of ‘reframing’ our understanding of the refugee experience and implications for policy and programming.

**Practical implications for settlement policy and services**

As a means of utilising these research findings to progress policy revisions, we now turn to how the skills and attributes identified herein contribute to the understanding of the refugee
experience and lastly, discuss the implications for refugee policy and program design and implementation.

In terms of theory and conceptualisation, the notion of a ‘reframing’ or ‘paradigm shift’ with regards to the ‘refugee experience’, has several potential benefits. Most importantly, employing a strength-based (as opposed to a deficit) model, shifts the theoretical balance of power to the young people themselves, using existing skill sets as a starting point for integration and upward mobility and framing young people as active agents in their settlement pathways (Herbert 2005; Marrow 2009). In practice however, the notion of ‘reframing’ and the implications for policy and programming within the existing model are more complex.

This research, broadly stated, offers two suggestions. First, by providing ‘space’ for network development between refugees (and refugees and the broader Australian public), service providers could more effectively capitalise on young people’s existing social skills and ability to meet settlement needs through network synergies. Second, while it is critical to acknowledge the social resources young refugees have at their disposal, it is also worth investigating how practical skills developed in refugee camps may serve to ease migratory transitions and assist in meeting settlement challenges (i.e. gaining employment, navigating education pathways, etc). It is worth considering how social and practical skills may be better identified by service providers to assist in settlement, education and employment transitions. Using existing skill sets as the starting point for conceptualising how host countries understand the ‘refugee experience’ and how policy and programs respond, will add an important element to future debates surrounding refugees and policy and program intervention.
Conclusion

Findings from this research suggest that reconceptualising the ‘refugee experience’ from a deficit to strength-based model will have significant implications for a new trajectory of policy and program pursuits. While the incidence of trauma, fracturing of family networks, lack of education, and the many other challenges facing new refugees were prevalent throughout interviews, this research demonstrates how young refugees, despite these adversities, developed a set of skills prior to arrival which prepared them (or had the potential to prepare them) to meet challenges upon settlement. As such, we suggest that running parallel to the emphasis on hardships which characterises the majority of literature, the development of social and practical skills is an equally viable and integral part of the ‘refugee experience’ deserving of recognition. By elucidating these skills and attributes, we suggest that young people, given the opportunity, are well placed to deploy resources and thrive in the settlement context.
References


