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Acculturation stress and social support for young refugees in regional areas

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss acculturation stress and social capital experienced by Congolese young refugees in regional Australia. Seventy percent of Australia's humanitarian entrants are young people; many settle in regional areas. However, the perspectives of young refugees in regional areas have received little attention. Qualitative in-depth interviewing and photo elicitation methods were conducted with sixteen Congolese young people. Findings revealed that these young people experienced unique acculturation stress including language problems, a lack of employment opportunities and difficulties accessing further education, impacting on their integration into Australian society. However, they relied on a range of social support from their friends, family, their ethnic community and the wider regional community to cope with these issues. This social support helped to strengthen their social capital and enhance their wellbeing.

1. Introduction

Drawing on qualitative interviews and the photo elicitation method with sixteen young refugees in a regional Australian town, this paper explores the experiences of young Congolese refugees in regional Australia and the influence that social capital has on their wellbeing. In particular, we examine acculturation stress and difficulties that prevented these young people to integrate into Australian society with ease. We also look at social support that can better assist them to deal with acculturation stress. Our research questions include: 1. What are the contributing factors that lead to acculturation stress among young Congolese refugee people who settled in regional Australia?; 2. What is the role of social capital in helping these young people to deal with their acculturation stress?

The year 2013 marked the first time since World War II that the number of forcibly displaced people in the world exceeded fifty million (United Nations [UN], 2014). A substantial proportion of these people were refugees. They fled their homeland for the sake of their own or their family's safety (Lloyd, Kennan, Thompson, & Qayyum, 2013). Since then, millions more refugees have sought protection in countries other than their own, creating what is now referred to as a global refugee crisis (UN, 2015). Australia's recently announced response to this crisis is to accept an additional 12,000 refugees, on top of the 13,750 refugees that the country takes in annually (Department of Immigration and Border Protection [DIPB], 2015a,b). Merit is seen in the idea of settling a proportion of these refugees in regional areas of Australia (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2014; Refugee Council

of Australia [RCOA], 2015).

The regional resettlement of refugees has been a policy of the Australian government since 2004. This policy has involved the formal and informal settlement of newly arrived refugees in regional towns as opposed to metropolitan cities (DIBP, 2015a,b; DSS, 2014; Lloyd et al., 2013; RCOA, 2015). Regional Australia is currently home to approximately 15% of Australia's refugees (Hugo, 2011; Refugee Health Network, 2015).

The literature surrounding the effects of regional resettlement for refugees has been mixed. From some perspectives, the regional resettlement of refugees is seen as a 'win-win' situation (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005). The combination of low diversity, an aging population, and the exodus of young people to metropolitan cities has stifled the economic and social prosperity of some Australian regional towns (Piper, 2009). The settlement of refugees in regional Australia has the potential to reverse this trend by addressing job shortages, increasing diversity, and revitalising country towns (Queensland Council of Social Services [QCOSS], 2014). Hugo (2011) argues that regional centres offer refugees unique opportunities that are not otherwise available in urban areas. These include affordable housing, smaller communities and a rural lifestyle. However, numerous organisations have raised concerns that without sufficient planning, regional resettlement policies can leave refugees disadvantaged. A number of studies have revealed that refugees face immense difficulty when looking for meaningful work in regional areas (Australian Multicultural Education Services [AMES], 2011; Piper, 2007, 2008, 2009; QCOSS, 2014; Taylor & Stanovic, 2005). Employment is thought to fast track the integration process and lead to

greater self-reliance for refugees, however concerns have been raised regarding the limited employment opportunities available for refugees in regional areas (Ager & Strang, 2004; Mcdonald-Wilmsen, Gifford, Webster, Wiseman, & Casey, 2009). Another concern is with the health services available to refugees in regional areas. Qualitative studies conducted by Correa-Velez, Barnett, Gifford, and Sackey (2011), Sypek, Clugston, and Phillips (2008), and Vasey and Manderson (2012) highlighted the structural disadvantages faced by regional towns when accessing health services. Their studies revealed that these disadvantages are amplified for refugees who typically have complex health needs.

Concerns have also been raised regarding the number of refugees of similar ethnicities settling in the same regional areas. This is often referred to in the literature as a critical mass (AMES, 2015; Taylor & Stanovic, 2005). Studies conducted by AMES (2011), QCOSS (2014), and Taylor and Stanovic (2005) revealed that a critical mass of ethnically similar refugees settling in the same regional town is crucial in order to consolidate settlement, enhance the provision of services, and provide in-kind social support.

Social capital refers to the strength of an individual's social network, and is increasingly being identified as a positive factor in regional resettlement experiences for refugees (AMES, 2011, 2015; Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000; Shepley, 2007; Taylor & Stanovic, 2005). An individual's relationships with their family, friends, ethnic community, and the wider community in which they live can be significant sources of support. Social capital is typically stronger in regional areas compared to cities (Putnam, 2000). The small size and isolated nature of regional towns can lead to a greater level of connection between the host community and the refugees who settle there (AMES, 2015; Putnam, 2000). High levels of social participation, community cohesion, and informal support in regional areas have been found to increase the social capital of refugee communities (AMES, 2015; National Rural Health Alliance [NRHA], 2015; Putnam, 2000). High social capital eases acculturative stress and in turn enhances the wellbeing of refugees (Nathan et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000; Spaaij, 2011).

Social capital is especially important for young refugees, who make up over 70% of Australia's refugee intake (Hugo, 2011). Young refugees often rely on social connections and community support to cope with the stress and pressure that they face upon their arrival in a foreign country (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, & Westoby, 2003; Coventry, Guerra, Mackenzie, & Pinkney, 2002). Despite the increasing number of young refugees settling in regional areas and the importance of social capital among this group, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding this issue.

This paper aims to address this gap in the literature and explore the impact that social capital can have on the wellbeing of young refugees in regional areas. The research on which this article is based took place between June and August in 2015. At the time of writing, the Australian government was in the process of instating Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs). These visas could further promote the regional resettlement of refugees by offering potential long-term residency to refugees currently on bridging visas, if they relocate to regional areas of Australia (DIBP, 2015a,b). The refugees involved in this project were part of a government resettlement project that began in 2005.

2. Theoretical framework

Two theoretical frameworks are used to inform this article. Berry's (2005) acculturation theory provides a context for the cultural changes and challenges experienced by young refugees upon their arrival in regional Australia. Acculturation is the term used to describe a process that involves contact between two cultural groups, which results in changes in both groups. It is a form of 'culture learning' whereby members of each cultural group take on characteristics, values and beliefs from the other (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003, p. 355). Berry

(2005) identifies integration as the preferred acculturation strategy for migrants, which involves the migrant retaining his or her cultural heritage while simultaneously integrating into the new society. It is not easy to incorporate new values and behaviours into one's lifestyle, nor is it easy to dismiss or modify elements of one's original culture (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). It is unsurprising therefore, that resistance and stress are common consequences of acculturation (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). This phenomenon is referred to as acculturative stress and can manifest in the form of a range of adverse health outcomes for immigrants (Berry, 2005, p. 706). The acculturative stress experienced by young refugees in regional areas, and the strategies that they use to integrate into their communities are a key focus of this study.

Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital provides a theoretical lens through which the participants' relationships with their friends, family, ethnic community and the wider regional community in which they live are viewed. Specifically, Putnam's theory of bonding capital is used to explain the importance of establishing strong relationships between ethnic communities in order to provide a sense of belonging for young refugees. Bonding relationships not only provide support for refugees, but also create a strong defence against the assimilation of culture (Ager & Strang, 2004). This paper explores how these bonding relationships can impact the health and wellbeing of young refugees in regional areas.

3. Design and methods

3.1. Research design

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for studies involving vulnerable people (Author, 2007, 2013). A qualitative approach was chosen in order to accommodate for the vulnerabilities faced by the participants, as well as the potential complexity of the collected data (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative methods are appropriate for addressing research questions that have been scarcely researched, making it an appropriate choice for this particular area of research (Author, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

We situate our study within phenomenology, which is a methodological approach that is used to understand, describe and interpret human lived experiences (Carpenter, 2017). Our study sought to explore how the phenomenon of regional resettlement impacts the wellbeing of Congolese young people. By collecting data relating to individual experiences of regional resettlement, a general analysis of how Congolese young people experience the phenomenon was formed (Carpenter, 2017). This research was descriptive and unique to the Congolese experience in Shepparton, as such the findings could not be generalised to other contexts and settings (Liamputtong, 2013). Nevertheless, our findings could be utilised to inform regional resettlement polices in other Australian regional towns.

3.2. Participants

Young refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo who live in a regional Australian town were recruited for this study. This research necessitated a purposive sampling technique. This involved a deliberate selection of specific individuals based on the information they could provide to the study (Author, 2013). People younger than 15 and older than 24 were excluded as they fell outside the United Nations (1981) definition of a young person.

As the participants are regarded as vulnerable people (young people and from refugee background), we pay particular attention to the recruitment process. Participants were recruited via two key stakeholders, the President of an established Congolese Society in the area, and an English language teacher at a local primary school in the town. These contacts were respected members of the regional community and