Community context matters: Acculturation and underemployment of Russian-speaking refugees ☆

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated underemployment among a sample of Russian-speaking refugee adults in the U.S. resettled in two communities that differ in ethnic density. Community context, acculturation, and their interaction related to underemployment. Descriptively, residents of the dense ethnic community had higher Russian and lower American acculturation, greater social integration into co-ethnic networks, lower perceived support from American friends, were more likely to have fellow Russians help them find a job, and less likely to find the job independently. Predictively, living in the dense community and lower levels of American acculturation positively associated with underemployment, while Russian acculturation was unrelated to underemployment. In addition, significant interactions suggested that American acculturation was beneficial for reducing underemployment in the dispersed community but was associated with increased underemployment in the dense community, while greater Russian acculturation was associated with increased underemployment in the dispersed community only. The present study demonstrated context specificity in the relationship between acculturation and underemployment and reaffirmed the value of an ecological approach to conceptualizing acculturative experiences and their relationships to adaptation outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Globally, unemployment and underemployment of immigrants and refugees is common (Mace, Atkins, Fletcher, & Carr, 2005; Sinacore, Mikhail, Kassan, & Lerner, 2009). An investigation of factors contributing to underemployment is important not only because of its economic consequences for individuals, families, and communities (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Gans, 2009; McGuinness, 2006; Painter, 2014; Sienkiewicz, Mauceri, Howell, & Bibeau, 2013), but also because its effects on family functioning (Jones, Trickett, & Birman, 2012) and subjective well-being have been found to be "not far short of those associated with unemployment" (George, Chaze, Fuller-Thomson, & Brennenstuhl, 2012), including increased rates of depression, anxiety, alcohol abuse, social withdrawal, suicide, and mental hospitalization (Reid, 2012).

The present study investigates the role of ethnic community, acculturation, and individual factors in predicting underemployment among a group of Russian-speaking refugees in the United States living in two communities differing

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in ethnic density. We explore descriptive differences between the two communities with respect to acculturation and social integration and test both main effect and interactive hypotheses about the relationships among community context, acculturation, and underemployment.

1.1. Underemployment

In this study we focus on underemployment, defined as the degree to which individuals' education, skills, work experiences, and abilities are underutilized or not utilized by their current jobs (Guerrero & Rothstein, 2012). While numerous studies either focus solely on unemployment (Beiser, 2009; Beiser & Hou, 2006) or view unemployment and underemployment as aspects of the same phenomenon (Guo, 2013), considerably less attention has been directed to underemployment specifically, even though underemployment rates among immigrants in the U.S. are estimated to be over fifty percent (Terrazas, 2011). Indeed, in most advanced economies, immigrants are more likely than the native-born to be underemployed and overeducated for their jobs (Wang & Lysenko, 2014), particularly when they are highly educated and skilled (Mace et al., 2005; Sinacore et al., 2009).

A number of factors affecting both unemployment and underemployment have been identified in the literature (Aycan & Berry, 1996; De Jong & Madamba, 2001; Wang & Lysenko, 2014). First, differences in occupational accreditation and education in countries of origin and the host country affect the ability of skilled workers to find jobs at the commensurate level of education and training (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Painter, 2014). Second, foreign-trained job candidates may be required to take occupation-specific tests, which can be demanding, expensive, and culturally biased (Gans, 2009). Third, limited language skills provide perhaps the greatest barrier to employment comparable to that in the country of origin (Beiser, 2009; Hatami & Weber, 2013; Yost & Lucas, 2001). Further, many language courses do not concentrate on industry-specific technical language and are not aimed at promoting social interactions and partnerships with potential employers (Derwing & Munro, 2013; Derwing & Waugh, 2012; McHugh & Challinor, 2011). Fourth, many professions require work experience in the host country as the final step in the certification process, a difficult barrier to overcome (Somerville & Walsworth, 2009). Fifth, lack of social connections, professional networks, as well as limited skills and experiences with job searching and interview processes, place immigrants at a further disadvantage (Reid, 2012). In addition, some of the macro, structural, and contextual barriers include policies of the receiving country, labor market conditions, demand for specific kinds of labor, regional and local economy, and discrimination (Beiser & Hou, 2006; Guo, 2013; Potocky-Tripodi, 2001; Reid, 2012; Smith, 2008; Shuval & Bernstein, 1997).

1.2. Russian-speaking refugees

This study focuses on Russian-speaking refugees in the U.S. These refugees are highly educated, primarily European and urban in origin, with high human capital, and are particularly susceptible to underemployment (Vinokurov, Birman, & Trickett, 2000). Prior to immigration, most lived in large cities, completed a university education, and were employed as professionals (Tress, 1998; Vinokurov et al., 2000; Vinokurov & Trickett, 2015). Their high pre-arrival occupational and educational attainment is complemented by relatively high reserves of social capital, mostly in the form of relatives and friends already resettled. Job status is particularly important for this population because of its strong link to their overall sense of identity and reputation in the community (Jones et al., 2012; Vinokurov et al., 2000).

The vast majority of Russian-speaking refugees in the U.S. are Jewish and have benefitted from the resources of the refugee resettlement system, including ESL courses and job placement efforts provided through American Jewish agencies and communities. Consistent with U.S. resettlement policies, refugees were expected to accept jobs found by agency staff within 4–8 months after arrival, even when these jobs were not a good match for their interests and skills (Potocky-Tripodi, 2001, 2003). In addition, refugees were expected to participate in English language classes, and may have had access to job training opportunities. After this initial resettlement period, they may have also taken advantage of additional educational opportunities to learn English, develop job skills, and obtain U.S. degrees, certificates or licenses. In addition, some found jobs through informal resources within their ethnic community (Gold, 1994).

However, in spite of relatively high human and social capital, and formal and informal assistance with finding employment, the majority of Russian-speaking refugees have experienced difficulty fitting into the labor market because of a limited knowledge of English and non-transferable skills and credentials (Maydell-Stevens, Masgoret, & Ward, 2007; Tress, 1998; Vinokurov et al., 2000; Yost & Lucas, 2001). Russian-speaking immigrants and refugees were reported to be less likely than other immigrant groups to assume menial jobs, likely as a result of their high education and professional status, high expectations, and because the concept of upward mobility is not well understood (Race & Masini, 1996). Thus, one study reported the underemployment rate for this group at about 50 percent (Vinokurov et al., 2000).

1.3. Community ethnic density and underemployment

Ethnic composition of community is an important factor influencing processes of potential relevance to underemployment (Allen & Turner, 2005; Xie & Gough, 2011). Community ethnic density refers to the proximal presence of other members of the linguistic and/or cultural group and is manifested by the structural presence of some degree of "institutional completeness" (Zhou, 2004) involving a variety of organizations, enterprises, and business entities with both employers and employees