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Skilled refugees, employment and social inclusion: a Perth case study of three communities

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Abstract

The social inclusion of refugees in their host country is largely determined by their success in the labour market, and this affects many other aspects of life including social networks, income and general wellbeing. Using data from an ARC-funded study of the effects of 'visible difference' on refugee employment, this paper explores several dimensions of disadvantage that refugees in Western Australia face, and their impact on social inclusion. Five specific issues are discussed: employment outcomes; refugees in the secondary labour market; employers' explanations for inequitable outcomes and discriminatory practices in recruitment processes; perceptions of employment assistance services; and the effects of these phenomena on refugees' overall life satisfaction. Our data show a massive loss of occupational status among refugees, which is not only disadvantaging for the refugees but is also an economic and social loss to the Australian community. Data come from a survey of 150 refugees from three broad groups: ex-Yugoslav, Middle Eastern and African, as well as 40 interviews with employers and recruitment agents, four focus groups and nine follow up interviews with key informants.

Introduction

This paper summarises the main findings of the sociological research project *Refugees and employment: the effect of visible difference on discrimination* which sought to understand, from the point of view of refugees, employers and employment service providers, issues around employment for refugees who were, in the Australian context, 'visible different' to various degree.

Employment is an important pathway to social inclusion of refugees, as it enables them to develop local social networks and cultural skills vital for integration, as well as a standard of living which will support successful settlement. In fact, employment has been identified as the single most important aspect of migrant resettlement (Ager 1999; Iredale et al. 1996) and stable employment and income is at the top of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees list of essential indicators of

successful resettlement (UNHCR 2004). Yet refugees resettled in Western countries have much higher rates of unemployment than either the resident population or other immigrants, and when employed, they are likely to experience underemployment, loss of occupational status, and isolation from the mainstream community through working in immigrant employment niches¹. Unemployment and downward mobility adversely affect other aspects of settlement: family life (through disturbing gender and inter-generational relations), social networks (through a lack of opportunities to mix with mainstream society), feeling of belonging (through social isolation) and, consequently, people's general well-being and life satisfaction — all factors linked to social inclusion. Poor employment outcomes also represent a loss of human capital for the host country.

This paper explores a number of issues identified in a study of refugee employment. Five specific issues are discussed: employment outcomes generally and perceptions of discrimination; refugees in the secondary labour market; employers' explanations for inequitable outcomes and discriminatory practices in recruitment processes; perceptions of employment assistance services; and the effects of these factors on refugees' life satisfaction. We conclude with a discussion of policy implications from the findings which go to the heart of question of social inclusion (and exclusion) of refugees.

Methodology

During data collection in 2004, six bilingual interviewers conducted 150 structured, questionnaire-based² face-to-face interviews with refugees from three regions: ex-Yugoslavs (mainly Bosnians), people from Middle Eastern backgrounds (mainly Iraqis) and Africans (mainly Somalis and Ethiopians) who had settled in Australia in the late 1990s and 2000s. These refugee groupings reflect the composition of the Australian humanitarian intake over the past fifteen years — Iraqis and Bosnians predominated in the 1990s, while Africans comprise 70-80 % of the refugee intake in the 2000s (DIMIA 2005) — and also represent different degrees of racial and cultural visibility in the Australian social context. We hypothesised that these different degrees of 'visible difference'

might have differential impacts on the degree of social inclusion or exclusion faced.

Participants were of working age and either employed or looking for work, and with a high school, trade or professional education — all had at least 12 years of schooling. All participants self-assessed their English as being either 'good', 'very good' or 'fluent'. This educated sample was snowballed to be purposive rather than representative of the communities involved and was selected to ensure that lack of human capital (poor English and/or lack of skills) could not be used as an explanation for poor employment outcomes. We also conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with employers and employment agencies, four focus groups and nine follow up interviews with key informants.

Characteristics of the refugee sample are shown in Table 1 below (for more details see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2005).

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N=150)

	Range	Ex-Yugoslavs	Africans	Middle East	Total
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Age ^A	1-5	3.10 (.64)	2.64 (.76)	2.70 (.58)	2.99 (.77)
Gender	%	F = 58 %	F = 28 %	F = 28 %	F = 38%
Education ^B	1-4	2.80 (.57)	3.16 (.58)	3.18 (.44)	3.05 (.56)
Length of residence ^C	years	7.78 (2.10)	7.24 (3.04)	6.54 (4.30)	7.19 (3.15)

^A The age scale: 1= under 20; 2 = 21-35; 3 = 36-50; 4 = 51-65; 5= over 66

^B The education level scale: 1≤ 10 years; 2 = trade or 12 years; 3 = diploma or degree; 4 = postgraduate qualification

^C Medians (years): ex-Yugoslavs *Mdn* = 8.00, Africans *Mdn* = 7.00, Middle Easterners *Mdn* = 5.00

Employment among skilled refugees

In our sample, 42.7per cent of respondents were employed full-time, and 28 per cent unemployed. Table 2 below indicates the employment status of our respondents at the time of survey.

We also asked respondents whether their current work was at, above, or below, their qualification level. A significant proportion of respondents worked below their skill level (80 per cent of ex-Yugoslavs, 44 per cent of Africans and 24 per cent of Middle Eastern participants) and only a minority worked at the appropriate

level (24 per cent across the three groups). None held jobs above their formal qualifications levels³.

Table 2. Current employment status (%; N=150)

	Ex-Yugoslav	African	Middle East.	Total
Unemployed	14.0	32.0	38.0	28.0
Less than 10 hrs p/w	6.0	2.0	4.0	4.0
11 - 20 hrs p/w	18.0	10.0	10.0	12.7
21 – 30 hours p/w	8.0	18.0	6.0	10.7
Employed full-time	52.0	36.0	40.0	42.7
No response	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0

The results indicate a massive loss of occupational status among our respondents, many of whom were relegated to unattractive jobs in the secondary labour market (see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; 2007). This not only disadvantages them economically and socially, but also represents a waste of skills, some of which are currently in short supply in Australia — for example there are doctors and engineers driving taxis, and teachers and lawyers cleaning offices. These negative outcomes were partly the result of lack of skill recognition, refugees' lack of familiarity with Australian job-seeking and employment practices, and discrimination on the basis of race, religion and ethnic origin. Sixty-two per cent of respondents reported experiencing difficulties in finding work in Australia, with Middle Easterners the most likely to report difficulty (78 per cent), followed by Ex-Yugoslavs (58 per cent) and Africans (52 per cent). The most frequently quoted difficulties included requirements for local work experience (62 per cent), or local referees (41 per cent) and problems with recognition of qualifications (31 per cent). Lack of transport and breaks in working life were less important.

Discrimination in the labour market

Participants often reported discrimination as a barrier to employment. Around half of respondents reported experiencing discrimination in the job market, most commonly because of accent (32 per cent), followed by name, language ability, and

appearance (21-23 per cent), with a smaller proportion identifying religious practice as a cause of discrimination. Language ability was a particular problem for ex-Yugoslavs, but was barely an issue for Africans and people from the Middle East. It is difficult to know the extent to which this is simply a difference in attribution by respondents, or a real difference in discrimination. For Africans and Middle Easterners appearance was significantly more important than for ex-Yugoslavs — ‘visible difference’ being an obvious point of concern.

Individual stories of discrimination were provided in response to the open ended questions in the refugee survey. Of 150 respondents 78 commented that they had been discriminated against in the workplace and/or while looking for work, and these comments were spread evenly between the three groups. A content analysis indicated the following themes as most significant: non-recognition of qualifications; lack of local experience; lack of recognition of overseas experience; lack of local referees; accent and language ability; stereotyping; inappropriate workplace practices which stigmatise particular ethnic groups or individuals and produce the need for migrants to doubly prove themselves; the perception of a lack of will by employers to recognise skills and abilities and help migrant workers; and outright racism in interactions with the public in workplaces (most often in taxi driving). The accounts reveal both overt and covert discrimination, and personal as well as structural discrimination. Quotes below are illustrative.

I felt that employers do not trust I have abilities. Simply they do not want to try or help. It hurts all the time. (Bosnian woman in her 40s)

I was made uncomfortable in very subtle ways. I was shunned by colleagues, reported for small things and for tasks that I am not in any way responsible. I was even called names by colleagues. (Somali man in his 60s)

In one occasion, I applied for a factory job and was turned down because I was told my Islamic traditional dress was not appropriate for this kind of job. (Somali woman under 20)

When I applied for jobs many times, I was asked to change my name if I want to get the job. Sometimes I was asked in the interview if I pray five times a day, which [should not be] part of the interview. (Somali man in his 40s)

Occupational niches

Given that the data presented above indicate that refugees face difficulties gaining employment appropriate to their qualifications, it is perhaps not surprising that we found refugees concentrated in particular employment niches. Many Australians will have had the experience of being driven in a taxi by a highly-skilled non-English-speaking-background immigrant. Refugees in our sample tended to be concentrated in low-skilled service 'niches' such as cleaning, transport (especially taxi-driving) security and aged care, as well as in building industry. The labour market segment staffed by immigrants, especially those assigned a subordinate position in society on the basis of race, ethnicity and 'culture', is a well-documented reality of virtually all developed society (for more details see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006).

Industrial and domestic cleaning was the most significant labour market niche for ex-Yugoslavs who arrived in the 1990s. Employers we spoke to confirmed a heavy presence of ex-Yugoslav and Middle Eastern refugees in industrial cleaning in Western Australia. Needless to say, these are poorly paid and insecure jobs. Africans were concentrated in food processing, the security industry and aged care. Aged care is a booming industry, but not one that offers attractive jobs. The security industry was described as 'dangerous': *'We [Africans] can have these jobs because Australians do not want them'*, commented an African man. A focus group we ran with employment officers from Migrant Resource Centres also identified cleaning, aged care, security and taxi driving as current niches for non-English-speaking background (NESB) immigrants in the labour market.

Our findings contradict Australian research which argues that there are 'no separate labour market segments for NESB immigrants' (Adhikari 1999:203) and confirm 'high and sustained levels of occupational segregation, particularly amongst migrants from NES countries' (Wood 1990:2; Ho and Alcorso 2004; Collins 1991). Our data indicate that there is a segmented labour market,

where racially and culturally visible migrants, especially those from refugee backgrounds, are allocated bottom jobs (as opposed to 'top jobs') regardless of their human capital (formal qualifications, skills and experience). Similar findings on labour market segmentation have been reported from overseas research into immigrant employment by Lamba (2003) and Bauder (2003) in Canada and Rydgren (2004) in Sweden.

After several years in a low-skilled job, educational skills are likely to degenerate and the likelihood of reaching one's previous occupation level decreases. In addition, being trapped in a low-skilled job means that networking with peers, crucial for keeping one's professional skills up to date, as well as for learning about better job opportunities, is almost impossible.

Employers' perceptions of barriers

Despite the perception of discrimination by around the half the sample of skilled refugees, and their concentration in jobs below their educational credentials, potential employers seemed unaware of the difficulties refugees face in the employment market. Employers we interviewed almost universally denied the existence of discrimination in the Australian workplace. A general presumption was that outright racial discrimination no longer occurs within the context of a modern multicultural nation. American and European research shows, however, that developed Western societies moved from 'blatant' prejudice and discrimination towards 'subtle' prejudice and discrimination which 'slips in under the norm, unrecognized as prejudice' (Pettigrew 1998:84) and that 'new norms of nondiscrimination are followed when there is surveillance or obvious cost for discrimination' but [...] 'many whites have not as yet internalized these norms' (Pettigrew 1985:342). Admittedly, the situation may have improved somewhat over the past two decades since this argument was made, but it is beyond doubt that subtle discrimination is still at work.

Most interviewed employers emphasised that the market 'naturally' works against discrimination (for an academic version of this argument see Becker 1957; Evans and Kelley 1991). In other words, employers follow their business interests and employ the person best skilled for the position, regardless of the person's 'non-

essential' characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, age etc. Their assumption was that the market is generally 'blind to ethnicity' and people who come from different ethnic and racial backgrounds are treated like everyone else. However, employers did recognize that new migrants and refugees might face difficulty finding work due to a lack of communication skills, local experience and cultural understandings of the interview process and interaction generally, and because their overseas qualifications and experience were not recognised, or due to the individual prejudice of (other) employers.

The interviewed employers were creative in accounting for what might appear to be racial discrimination, which took the form of denials of responsibility for that discrimination, (Essed 1991; Billig 1991; Wetherell and Potter 1992; van Dijk 1987), and deflecting responsibility onto other factors. Analysis of the employer interviews indicates several strategies by which the question of potential discrimination was deflected (see Tilbury and Colic-Peisker 2006). Employers argued that if discrimination occurred it was for the sake of their clients or customers to whom they were ultimately responsible. For example, if customers did not like to see a receptionist in the Muslim *hijab*, the firm could not employ such a person. Some suggested that the visibly and culturally different simply did not have job-relevant characteristics including communication abilities, or 'cultural knowledge', or that they would not 'fit in' with other staff (what Constable et al. 2004 call the 'tea-room mentality'). This was often stated in general terms, as a 'soft skill' related to 'Australian-ness' (for a US study of the phenomenon see Moss and Tilly 1996). 'Ability to fit in' with the existing team of workers or work environment was identified both by employers and by the refugees as a significant, yet invisible, barrier to appropriate employment.

Some employers transferred the discrimination to the market or to the 'wider community' by arguing that they recruited staff according to what the 'market' or 'community' demanded. Finally, some suggested that it was the migrants' fault that they could not get jobs, due to 'personality differences', 'bad attitudes' such as 'lack of gratitude' or being 'too proud' of their country of origin, being 'too enthusiastic' or not enthusiastic enough, exaggerating their abilities or 'not selling themselves enough', or simply because

they lacked an understanding of Australian work culture (including racist jokes).

While such formulations tend to reinforce stereotypes attached to the visibly and culturally different migrant groups, and the trouble caused by employing them, most employers did seem sympathetic to the notion that refugees, like other disadvantaged groups such as Indigenous peoples or people with disabilities, should be given special training and employment opportunities. They felt unable to initiate such programs themselves however, but most felt their actions were reasonable and did not breach their obligations under the current anti-discrimination legislation.

Clearly employers are unaware of the value of a diverse workforce and the benefits workers from culturally diverse backgrounds could bring.

Perceptions of employment services

Ideally, government funded job seeker support services facilitate the relationship between refugees and employers, in order to ease workers into jobs, and employers into accepting diversity. We found this was often not the case.

Our respondents were relatively dissatisfied with job seeking assistance services, and there was a mismatch between their expectations and those of the service providers. Job seeking is mandatory for refugees after they have been in the country for six months (APC 2002). Since 1998, private and community agencies are contracted by the government to provide employment assistance to job seekers (Webster and Harding 2001). They are collectively known as 'Job Network' (JN) which replaced the former government provision through Commonwealth Employment Services (CES). Job Network is tasked with providing assistance with assessing skills, experience and capabilities; helping to improve job search skills through intensive job search training and assistance with job applications; helping with access to training, counselling and other services, work preparation and work experience; and giving feedback on interview technique.

We asked respondents about the methods they used to look for a job (Table 3) and, for those who had ever been employed in Australia, what methods had been successful (Table 4). The

answers varied among the three groups, reflecting cultural differences and approaches to resettlement.

Table 3. What methods have you used to look for a job?*

Methods	Yugoslav	African	MidEast	Total
Formal methods	84%	86%	90%	86.7%
Door knocking	32%	30%	52%	38%
Community networks	72%	38%	68%	58.7%
Other networks	36%	8%	10%	18%
Self-employed	20%	0%	6%	8.7%
Other	6%	4%	4%	4%

*Multiple answers possible.

A great majority of respondents had used formal job-search methods (newspaper advertisements, internet, shop window, Job Network and/or Centrelink) at some stage. Community networks were highly important for the former Yugoslavs and the Middle Easterners, but less so for Africans⁴. The latter, officially termed 'new and emerging communities', did not have access to established ethnic communities upon arrival in Australia.

Table 4. If employed in Australia, what methods did you used to find that job?*

Methods	Ex-Yugoslav	African	MidEast	Total
Formal methods	46%	60%	64%	56.7%
Door knocking	16%	24%	36%	25.3%
Community networks	66%	26%	48%	46.7%
Other networks	20%	6%	8%	11.3%
Self-employed	14%	2%	2%	6%
Other	8%	0%	4%	4%

*Multiple answers possible.

Formal methods appeared most successful in actually finding employment (56.7 per cent), though not as successful as one might expect from the numbers using this method. The Job Network is one of the formal methods used, but we cannot report on its success because we did not ask participants which of each of the formal methods was successful.

We asked those who had used the JN services to evaluate their usefulness (Table 5).

Table 5. How would you describe these services?*

	Yugoslav	African	MidEast	Total
Excellent	2.0%	2.0%	36.0%	13.3%
Good	6.0%	8.0%	16.0%	10.0%
Acceptable	10.0%	12.0%	8.0%	10.0%
Poor	32.0%	20.0%	8.0%	20.0%

*Number of responses per group: 26/50; 20/50 and 33/50 respectively.

A large proportion of former Yugoslavs and Africans were critical of JN services. A Bosnian woman who held a TAFE Diploma commented:

My case manager was very nice and provided moral support. However they never found a job for me. I did it on my own. I believe these services are useless and government should consider changing the way they function. They should have individually tailored services as not everyone has the same needs.

The appraisal of JN services by Middle Easterners was much more favourable. Given that the services they received were the same, we assumed this was due to a particular stance towards the authority of the government and a fear of negative consequences if criticism was expressed (see Tilbury 2006). This was confirmed by Iraqi respondents in follow-up interviews.

We also asked respondents if they found the JN services and job training useful in ways other than developing job seeking skills or finding a job (Table 6).

The services appear to have been most useful for meeting people. Overcoming isolation was particularly important for the Middle Eastern respondents. For the former Yugoslavs, establishing contact with employers and Australians in general was more important than for the other groups. The results indicate that while employment service providers seemed less than effective as 'cultural mediators' in the employment market, they did provide a necessary space for the development of refugees' social networks.

JN service providers, on the other hand, saw their role as that of 'expert mediators' between the unemployed and potential employers, providing training to the job seekers, and 'translating' skills for the employers.

Table 6. Have you found the employment services useful in other ways?*

	Yugoslav	African	MidEast	Total
To meet people	36.0%	26.0%	66.0%	42.7%
To meet other migrants	20.0%	22.0%	40.0%	27.3%
Overcoming isolation	22.0%	10.0%	50.0%	27.3%
Learning about Australia	30.0%	18.0%	46.0%	31.3%
Teachers and staff were helpful	40.0%	20.0%	24.0%	28.0%
Establishing employer contacts	30.0%	14.0%	20.0%	21.3%
Establishing contacts with Australians	34.0%	16.0%	14.0%	21.3%

*Multiple answers possible. Number of responses per group: 29/50, 13/50 and 43/50 respectively.

Service providers and employers stressed the need for the refugees to conform to the demands of the Australian job market, demands which include language and other technical skills, but also revolve around 'cultural skills', similar to the 'soft skills' mentioned above. In an evaluation of immigrant unemployment in Australia between 1980 and 1996, Miller and Neo (1997), noted the relative disadvantage of NESB migrants and the need for specialised services. Contrary to this need, outsourcing government employment services has increased the 'mainstreaming', which, according to our respondents, has resulted in inadequate services to those from NES migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Given the sort of social exclusion outlined above, including high levels of unemployment, employment in low-status labour market niches, discrimination and a lack of effective job seeking services, one might expect a negative impact on refugees' life satisfaction.

Discrimination and life satisfaction

Exploring life satisfaction is a burgeoning area of Western social science but refugees have only recently appeared as a target population in this type of research (Tran and Nguyen 1994; Werkuyten and Nekuee 1999)⁵. It has been shown that employment, job satisfaction and life satisfaction are related (Judge and Watanabe 1993). As noted before, employment is an

important indicator of settlement success for migrants and its importance for social inclusion is generally accepted among scholars of immigration (UNHCR 2004; Valtonen 2004). In addition to employment, we sought to understand how other aspects of settlement impacted on life satisfaction.

Table 7 shows a number of self-assessed domains of life satisfaction: health status, employment status, job satisfaction, financial satisfaction, social support, Australian networks, acculturation (cognitive aspect) and adaptation (practical aspect) in the new environment, and the perception of everyday or 'street discrimination' (we asked separately about discrimination in the labour market).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for life satisfaction domains in three refugee groups

		Ex-Yugos.	Africans	MidEast	Total
Domains of settlement success/ life satisfaction	Range*	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Health	1-4	3.36 (.72)	3.80 (.41)	3.59 (.64)	3.58 (.63)
Employment status	1-4	3.18 (1.15)	2.66 (1.29)	2.59 (1.37)	2.81 (1.27)
Job satisfaction	1-4	2.79 (1.07)	2.55 (.94)	2.79 (1.02)	2.72 (1.02)
Financial satisfaction	1-4	2.36 (1.02)	2.06 (.99)	1.88 (1.01)	2.10 (1.02)
Social support	1-4	3.02 (.94)	3.14 (.61)	2.90 (.68)	3.02 (.76)
Australian networks	1-4	2.52 (.95)	2.67 (.72)	3.00 (.61)	2.73 (.79)
Acculturation	1-4	2.98 (1.11)	3.44 (.79)	3.27 (.93)	3.23 (.97)
Adaptation	1-4	3.18 (1.10)	3.35 (.86)	3.59 (.61)	3.37 (.89)
'Street' discrim. (lack of)	1-4	3.02 (1.00)	2.55 (.84)	2.63 (.91)	2.74 (.94)

* Questions on domains of life satisfaction were answered on a four-point scale, where 1 = 'not at all happy', and 4 = 'entirely happy'.

Respondents across the three groups were most satisfied with their health, and least satisfied with their financial situation. All groups scored relatively highly on acculturation and adaptation, possibly due to their high levels of education and language ability.

In order to measure refugees' life satisfaction, we included two questions in the survey: 'Are you generally satisfied with your

life at the moment?’ and ‘Do you feel your life is ‘back to normal’?’ The two measures were combined into a single ‘refugee life satisfaction score’ (RLS score) for the purpose of further statistical analysis.

Table 8. Overall life satisfaction in three refugee groups

	Range	Ex-Yugos.	Africans	MidEast	Total
Item		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
General satisfaction	1-4	3.12 (.98)	2.92 (.73)	2.93 (.52)	2.99 (.77)
Life back to normal	1-4	3.06 (1.07)	2.80 (.68)	2.80 (.68)	2.89 (.87)
Refugee Life Satisfaction	1-4	3.09 (.97)	2.86 (.67)	2.87 (.53)	2.94 (.75)

Refugees were relatively satisfied with their life: an average of 2.94 on the 4-point scale was close to the ‘mostly satisfied’ mark. This was somewhat surprising given their experiences of difficulty in finding employment (as outlined above), and for many, trauma in the process of getting to Australia, together with general racism in Australia (40 per cent of our sample reported being ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ ‘treated in an unpleasant way’ as a refugee).

Ex-Yugoslavs expressed the highest life satisfaction and were more likely to report being ‘entirely satisfied with their life at the moment’ (46 per cent) and that their life was ‘entirely back to normal’ (48 per cent), while only 10-12 per cent of the other two groups felt that way⁶. Gender and age differences may partly account for the higher satisfaction of Bosnians (see Cummins et al. 2005). Ex-Yugoslavs also had somewhat longer Australian residence than the other two groups (see Table 1), although the length of residence was only weakly correlated with the RLS score. Stable housing for ex-Yugoslavs (the condition fulfilled for a large majority, see Colic-Peisker and Waxman 2005), and the presence of extended family for Africans (fulfilled for 32 per cent of our African respondents), were also related to the perceived degree of settlement success and overall satisfaction.

Further statistical analysis (multiple regression) showed that job satisfaction was by far the strongest predictor of life satisfaction for Bosnians (it has to be taken into account that job satisfaction was highly correlated with financial satisfaction). For

Africans, social support was the main predictor of general satisfaction, with financial satisfaction also significant. For Middle Easterners only financial satisfaction was a predictor of life satisfaction.

We were surprised to find that 'street discrimination' (measured by a question 'have you been treated in an unpleasant way because you are a migrant/refugee') did not seem to affect general life satisfaction. However, discrimination in the labor market did⁷. It seems that 'general' discrimination such as verbal street incidents were treated pragmatically: respondents may have found it unpleasant but largely inconsequential for their lives. Certainly they provided evidence that they tried to move on quickly, finding ways to justify it, or not let it affect them. A large majority considered Australians to be generally 'friendly and accepting'. The reason why the experience of discrimination in the job market did affect life satisfaction⁸ may again reflect a pragmatic focus: unemployment, loss of occupational status or harassment in the workplace have much more potential to affect one's life on an ongoing basis than isolated street incidents. Also, labour market location is the main aspect of class location, therefore if someone who previously had a professional status is reduced to menial work it is clear this would affect his or her life.

It must also be acknowledged that refugees' satisfaction with life is influenced by a 'relative deprivation' effect which may find them more satisfied because they are comparing their lot with that of their compatriots back home, or their ethnic communities in Australia, rather than the general Australian population. Refugees' relationship to the host population is generally expressed through a 'discourse of gratitude' about being able to live in a 'safe' country with access to welfare, education, and theoretically, jobs. Relatively high life satisfaction may also indicate resilience among refugees, who appear able to remain positive despite considerable difficulties. However, in the later stages of settlement, refugees may start comparing their circumstances with members of the mainstream society, and consequently see themselves as more relatively deprived than before, even if their objective circumstances change for the better. Since our respondents were relatively new arrivals who had been in Australia for about seven years on average, this possible negative response was not yet apparent.

Conclusion

This paper has identified a number of issues in relation to the settlement of 'visibly different' refugees in Perth, Western Australia, and especially their labour market experiences and overall life satisfaction. These issues give some indication of the levels of social inclusion and exclusion faced by skilled refugees. Our findings indicate that refugees experience a loss of potential to use their human capital and find themselves in jobs (if they have jobs) beneath their skills levels, in the secondary labour market where there is little opportunity for upward mobility. Refugees also perceive the employment market to be prejudiced against them. Employers, on the other hand, are apparently unaware of these issues, and neither perceive discrimination nor accept responsibility for it. For them, cultural difference is seen as a legitimate reason for exclusion from the job market. This indicates unresolved issues in the area of anti-discrimination — a lack of transparency in recruitment procedures leaves refugee applicants unclear as to why they have been rejected for a job and enables employers to apply their personal prejudices and discriminatory practices. Employers also appear to be unaware of the value of diversity in the workplace, and tend to privilege the 'cultural knowledge' of mainstream Australians, leaving refugees with little opportunity to develop local experience and knowledge. Education of employers about what constitutes 'discrimination', and a broader application of the Australian motto of 'a fair go', would go a long way to improving the social inclusion of 'visibly different' migrants and refugees.

Refugees are relatively dissatisfied with the services provided to them by Job Network, which is tasked with assisting them into appropriate employment, and the service providers seem oblivious to the very real problems refugees face. Skilled refugees find the training opportunities provided by the JN less useful for actual skills development and securing employment and more useful for developing social networks. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, refugees remain relatively satisfied with their lives, indicating high levels of resiliency. Our qualitative data indicate, however, that discrimination is felt negatively by many respondents.

We conclude that more needs to be done to recognise refugees' qualifications — including a fair, up-to-date and

transparent system of assessment, and better coordination between JN and employers providing professional training and work experience placements. We also suggest that targeted assistance in job seeking, using a client-driven rather than employer- or service provider-driven approach, is needed. The increasing mainstreaming and privatisation of job seeking services appears to have made them less sensitive to cross-cultural issues and generally less successful in helping NESB migrants and refugees. A targeted NESB assistance service, such as that which exists in NSW in the form of a 'Skilled Migrant Placement Officer', could be successfully instituted across Australia and would go some way to addressing these concerns.

The current research project indicates a number of areas of concern for refugees in the Western Australian labour market. Many of those who nowadays come to Australia through humanitarian immigration are highly skilled and proficient in English. However, they are unable to find appropriate work, with many unemployed or working below their capacity. This serious loss of occupational status disadvantages the refugees and also represents a waste of human capital for the Australian community. Refugees attribute some of this disadvantage to systemic barriers, and some to discrimination based on language ability, name, accent, appearance, religion and 'cultural compatibility'. Some employers appear to hold stereotypical and prejudiced views about 'visibly different' migrants and refugees, and to engage in discriminatory practices. Employers generally assume that the market, as ultimate arbiter of human capital distribution, will ensure equitable outcomes, without being aware of the need for specific targeted programs to assist refugees into work. There is a clear place for policy in trying to improve employment outcomes for refugees, including service provision and ensuring employers are educated about the various barriers the visibly different face in the Australian labour market. It is such policy responses which will help to ensure skilled refugees are not excluded from participation in the 'Australian dream'.

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Notes

¹ Valtonen (1999; 2004) analysed this situation in Finland and the Netherlands; Lamba (2003) in Canada, Rydgren (2004) in Sweden and Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006; 2007) in Australia.

² The questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic information; labour market experience; and satisfaction with aspects of settlement and life in general.

³ These percentages are not precise and only indicative, due to different ways the question was answered: all but 2% of ex-Yugoslavs responded to the question, yet 14% had reported being unemployed. It is assumed that many of these unemployed ticked the 'working below qualification level' box. On the other hand, 36% of Africans and 42% of Middle Easterners did not answer the question, reflecting more closely the numbers reporting they were not employed (see Table 2).

⁴ By 'community networks' we mean close-tied networks such as extended family and friends within the ethnic community. Hence, 'other networks' refers to looser ties with the wider community.

⁵ It is important to note that the idea of measuring life satisfaction has been dominated by Western thinking. Therefore, measuring life satisfaction in a cross-cultural situation should be undertaken with caution.

⁶ Chi-square test showed that the distribution of responses was significantly different in Bosnians as compared to the other two groups ($p=.000$).

⁷ Discrimination in the labor market was not included in the correlation/regression model because it was measured differently in the survey, by offering 'yes' and 'no' answers and then offering a range of reasons for perceived discrimination to those who answered 'yes'.

⁸ The RLS score of those who had 'experienced discrimination in the job market' was significantly lower as compared to those who did not have such experiences ($p=.006$). Difficulties in finding a job (where discrimination was not perceived as a reason) did not significantly affect life satisfaction.