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Vocational Behavior of Refugees: How do Refugees Seek Employment, Overcome Work-Related Challenges, and Navigate their Careers?

Alexander Newman¹, Jenny Bimrose², Ingrid Nielsen¹, & Hannes Zacher³

¹Deakin University

²University of Warwick

³Leipzig University

Editorial of Special Issue forthcoming in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*

Author Note

Alexander Newman and Ingrid Nielsen, Department of Management, Deakin Business School, Deakin University, Australia. Jenny Bimrose, Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, United Kingdom. Hannes Zacher, Institute of Psychology, Leipzig University, Germany.

Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to any of the authors:
a.newman@deakin.edu.au; jenny.bimrose@warwick.ac.uk; ingrid.nielsen@deakin.edu.au;
hannes.zacher@uni-leipzig.de

Abstract

Over the last few years, we have witnessed the largest displacement of refugees in modern history. Among the many challenges faced by refugees, finding employment and navigating the employment relationship are crucial for successful integration into mainstream society. In this editorial, we outline the background of our special issue on the vocational behavior of refugees and summarize the 12 conceptual and empirical articles included in the special issue. We conclude by outlining a number of implications for future research on the vocational behavior of refugees as well as for vocational practice.

Keywords: refugees, migration, asylum, integration

Vocational Behavior of Refugees: How do Refugees Seek Employment, Overcome Work-Related Challenges, and Navigate their Careers?

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, we have witnessed the largest displacement of refugees in modern history. By January 2018, nearly 5.5 million people have fled the civil war in Syria and the terror regime of the so-called “Islamic State” in both Syria and Iraq, and a significant number presently live in refugee camps in the Middle East (UNHCR, 2018). The effects of this crisis have been immense, not only in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, but also in countries such as Greece, Italy, Germany, and Sweden, which are the final destinations for many refugees, as well as countries which have agreed to resettle smaller numbers of refugees from the conflict zones, including Canada and Australia. The government authorities in these countries are in the process of developing policies to deal with, which often includes limiting, the immediate influx of refugees, but also have to think of ways in which to integrate refugees into the mainstream society in the medium to long term.

Integration into mainstream society is an extremely challenging process for many refugees (Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). In addition to applying for asylum status and refugee resettlement, seeking family reunification, and learning the culture and language of the host country, refugees with dependents also have to seek employment to support the immediate needs of their families and re-establish a livelihood (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006). Policy makers recognize the importance of assisting refugees to obtain employment quickly, as stable employment amongst refugees has been found to reduce welfare dependency, and enhance the educational and health outcomes amongst the children of refugee families (Khoo, 2005; Pernice & Brook, 1996). However, current knowledge of how refugees,

organizations, and policy makers negotiate these issues is very limited (Morrice, 2011). Very few studies have examined refugees' vocational behavior, including seeking employment, overcoming work-related challenges and traumata, and navigating careers after leaving their home country. In addition, we have limited understanding as to how vocational counseling professionals, organizations, and policy makers can best assist refugees in the adaptation process.

In order to improve our understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by refugees in navigating labor markets in receiving countries, overcoming challenges and traumata, and adapting their careers, we invited proposals for a special issue on the vocational behavior of refugees. Out of 36 proposals submitted, we invited 21 full manuscripts and sent them out for peer review, and we are pleased that 12 of them are now published as articles in our special issue. These articles showcase a broad variety of theoretical and empirical approaches (i.e., conceptual, qualitative, mixed-methods, quantitative). They are authored by researchers representing a variety of different disciplines (e.g., vocational counseling, work and organizational psychology, management, human resources management) from a number of different regions (Europe, North America, and Australia). In the following, we briefly summarize the articles grouped by research approach.

2. Summary of Articles

2.1. Conceptual Article

In a theory development article, Campion (2018) proposes a refugee-specific job-search model on career adaptability, structural and personal barriers, and resettlement success. While high career adaptability is generally linked to favorable career outcomes, Campion suggests that this may not necessarily be the case for refugees who frequently experience downward occupational mobility. She assumes that refugees with high levels of career adaptability

prioritize the creation and use of social networks over the acquisition of suitable jobs which, in turn, limits objective resettlement success (i.e., lower status jobs, low pay, poor language ability). Factors that further strengthen the link between career adaptability and network generation and use are two barriers; discrimination threat and low host country language ability. In contrast, the generation and use of social networks by career adaptive refugees is expected to positively impact their physical and mental health, strength of social ties, and life satisfaction.

2.2. Qualitative Articles

Abkhezr, McMahon, Glasheen, and Campbell (2018) challenge traditional perspectives on the role that agency plays in the career development process through their in-depth, qualitative examination of the resettlement experiences of refugees in Australia who had suffered lengthy displacement processes. The juxtaposition of their experiences in a developing country (their place of origin), with those in their host, developed country, provides powerful insights into the significant realignment of practice required by vocational professionals working with individuals whose agency has been stifled. The participants in this research comprised African young women who provided detailed narratives of their experiences, including the impact of their gendered experiences of oppressive and abusive relationships over a prolonged displacement period. Importantly, this paper offers vocational counseling professionals a measure of redemption in their work with refugees by recounting how a particular career intervention appears to have provided constructive support, which resulted in positive outcomes.

A qualitative methodology was also used by Eggenhofer-Rehart, Latzke, Pernkopf, Mayrhofer and Steyrer (2018), for their study of the attempts of integration by Afghan and Syrian refugees into the Austrian labor market. Austria receives high numbers of asylum seekers, but experiences limited success in their integration into employment. This research study

illuminates the hostile and unfamiliar processes encountered by refugees as they attempt to navigate an unfamiliar labor market in their host country. As with so many other countries, as part of their resettlement process, refugees have to confront how their cultural capital is so often undervalued. The consequent status loss and the threats to their occupational identities require proactive responses that result in the transformation of their human assets into new forms of capital that are more likely to be valued by their host country.

Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller, and Pundt (2018) explore how refugees use their social capital to enter their host countries' labor market. Drawing on qualitative data collected in Germany, they find that Syrian refugees have access to different types of social capital, which offer different forms of support to refugees during the labor market integration process. In particular, they find that vertical bridging social capital helps refugees to secure adequate employment, whereas horizontal bonding social capital and independent job-searching methods tend to result in refugees obtaining low-skilled work or underemployment.

Knappert, Kornau, and Figengül (2018) draw on qualitative data collected from refugees, employers, and experts from governmental and nongovernmental organizations in Turkey to investigate how inclusion or exclusion at work influences refugees' societal integration. They highlight how institutional voids, societal rejection, and exploitation legitimation are factors at the national level which facilitate the exclusion of refugees, resulting in precarious organizational employment practices and feelings of exclusion. They also show that this is particularly disadvantageous for female refugees, especially when gendered roles prevail in their home *and* host societies.

The theme of supporting the resettlement processes for refugees re-emerges in an article by Wehrle, Klehe, Kira and Zikic (2018). Also using a qualitative methodology, this study

focuses on the negative impact of existent barriers on refugees to their integration within German society. In particular, the research on which the article is based scrutinized the impact of barriers on the existing identities of the refugees. Additionally, findings illuminate coping responses that refugees develop. These coping responses developed despite the austere and constrained circumstances within which they are forced to operate. The article also reflects on the potential for refugees to achieve positive psychological growth, despite adversity.

2.3. Mixed-Methods Articles

Baran, Valcea, Porter, and Coleman Gallagher (2018) present the results of two studies on expectations and experiences of refugees in the United States. In the first study, they conducted 20 in-depth interviews with refugees and employees of refugee assistance organizations. Themes identified in the interviews include resilience-building obstacles and challenges, turning points and status changes, expectations versus reality, support, self-evaluations, giving up, self-sufficiency versus thriving, and learned dependency. The second study comprised survey responses from 60 refugees. Findings suggest that some refugees have unrealistically high expectation when they arrive in their host country. When these expectations are not met, refugees experience underemployment, psychological contract breach and, in turn, reduced job and life satisfaction, and thoughts about returning to their home country.

Baranik, Hurst, and Eby (2018) examine links between vocational stressors and refugees' coping mechanisms using a mixed-method research design. Specifically, they qualitatively analyzed the content of open-ended survey responses collected from 159 refugees in the United States. The most commonly reported vocational stressor was "access and opportunity," which includes refugees' feelings that their past work experience is not valued during job search, job search difficulties, and exploitation (e.g., low salary). The most common coping mechanisms

identified were “reflection and relaxation,” “problem-solving actions,” and “refugee-specific coping.” The latter includes improving language skills, participation in assimilation and multicultural activities, and seeking social support from other refugees. In subsequent quantitative analyses, Baranik and colleagues show that discrimination stressors, but not the other vocational stressors, related positively to anxiety, depression, and sleeping disturbances. Finally, avoidance-oriented coping strategies related positively to these strain outcomes.

2.4. Quantitative Articles

Ivlevs and Veliziotis (2018) use the lens of the theory of cumulative disadvantage to provide an empirical analysis of labor market outcomes among people displaced by war and conflict as a result of the break-up of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Their regression analysis based on over 10,000 responses to the *Life In Transition II* survey shows that people who fled these conflicts are more likely to be long-term unemployed, are more likely to have experienced job loss, and are more likely to work in the informal sector. The results highlight the long-lasting impact of conflict and the ongoing vulnerability experienced by those who have been forcibly displaced in transition economics. On the whole, these negative long-term impacts of conflict are more pronounced among women than among men, and younger people are more likely to be willing to acquire further education and training than older people in an attempt to overcome the disadvantages they face as a result of displacement.

Newman, Nielsen, Smyth, Hirst and Kennedy (2018) examine whether diversity climate influences the work attitudes of refugee employees and the psychological mechanisms underlying its effects. They collected data from 135 refugees in Australia. In line with conservation of resources theory, they find that diversity climate positively influences the affective organizational commitment of refugee employees through enhancing their

psychological capital. In line with rejection sensitivity theory they also find that the influence of diversity climate on both affective organizational commitment and turnover intentions through psychological capital was stronger when refugee employees identify more with their ethnic group.

Pajic, Ulceluse, Kismihók, Mol, and den Hartog (2018) draw on career construction theory to examine whether refugees' adaptive readiness, captured by their psychological capital, is positively related to job search self-efficacy through the mediating mechanism of career adaptability. They also examine whether career barriers moderated the indirect effect between psychological capital and job search self-efficacy. Using samples of refugees in Greece and the Netherlands, they find that individuals with higher psychological capital were more confident to engage in job search behavior in the destination country, mostly due to their enhanced career adaptability. However, the relationship was weaker when participants experienced higher social barriers and was stronger when they experienced higher administrative barriers. They argue that their findings provide support for the career construction model of adaptation and demonstrate the importance of career adapt-ability resources as critical self-regulatory strengths that help individuals in this particularly vulnerable group adapt to occupational transitions.

Obschonka, Hahn, and Bajwa (2018) examine the influence of personality factors and entrepreneurial alertness and intentions on the career adaptability of refugees. Using a sample of Syrian refugees in Germany they find that entrepreneurial alertness predicts the entrepreneurial intentions and career adaptability of newly arrived refugees. They also find that general self-efficacy and resilience predicted entrepreneurial alertness, which in turn mediated the direct link between both general self-efficacy and resilience, and career adaptability. These findings highlight the importance of personal agency to the integration of refugees in the host society.

3. Future Research and Practice

This special issue presents a series of articles that highlight how refugees search for and obtain jobs, how refugees deal with stress during the job search process and after obtaining work, the factors which lead to refugees' exclusion from the job market, the factors which predict the success of refugees' in searching for and obtaining work, and the factors which predict the integration of refugees. Given that research on the work and career outcomes of refugees is very limited, this special issue provides important insights into how policy makers and counseling agencies might support refugees to reestablish their vocational pathways after leaving their home countries. Notably, a large proportion of the work in this special issue was exploratory in nature. Thus, the present special issue also provides a basis from which future work might be developed. For example, researchers might seek to confirm the empirical viability of conceptual models proposed, as well as the generalizability of the findings of qualitative work in this special issue to larger populations of refugees. Researchers should also consider undertaking more longitudinal work to examine the factors which predict refugees' career adaptability and career success over time. Furthermore, one important dimension of the refugee experience during their integration into their host country through paid employment that has so far been neglected is gender. It has been estimated that around 50 per cent of any refugee, displaced, or stateless population comprise girls and women (UNHCR, 2018), with gender violence in conflict zones requiring particularly sensitive support, as part of the wide ranging preparation that is required before transition into paid employment can be contemplated.

4. Conclusion

Refugees have typically suffered multiple psychological, social, emotional, and economic traumas. Re-establishing themselves in their host countries can represent significant challenges

that exacerbate the traumas that triggered their flight from their country of origin. This special issue on the vocational behavior of refugees provides us with insights into the depth and breadth of the nature of traumas suffered, often over long periods of time, and the human responses. With a focus on paid employment as perhaps the most significant mechanism for the re-integration of refugees into mainstream society, the articles presented here provide insights, understanding, and inspiration. As the number of refugees continues to increase and the nature of their suffering becomes more apparent, their plight increasingly becomes an urgent humanitarian, ethical, as well as practical imperative.

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