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Aspirations of Resettled Young African Refugees: A Narrative Account

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Abstract

The study documents and explicates the academic experiences, visions, hopes and desires which shape the vocational aspirations of young resettled African refugees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the experiences of a sample of 14 young resettled African refugees in Brisbane, Australia. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the interviews covered the aspirations of the participants across three time periods, namely: life in the country of origin, transit and resettlement. The young people who participated in the study expressed high ambitions despite their experiences of school disruption pre resettlement and language difficulties post resettlement. The situation in the country of origin emerged as influential upon their aspirations in both pre and resettlement life. English language difficulties emerged as the most common consideration influencing aspirations following resettlement. The sample revealed a number of considerations that influenced their vocational aspirations before and after resettlement. Such considerations may enlighten service providers working with resettled young African refugees in Australia.

Key words: refugees, aspirations, theory driven, narrative

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Ongoing political violence in many parts of the world continues to force tens of thousands of people out of their homes, countries and regions. Recent estimates indicate that at the beginning of the year 2006 the number of persons of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) worldwide was approximately 20.8 million in comparison to approximately 19.5 million the previous year. Africa with approximately 5.2 refugees is second to Asia with 8.6 million refugees as a source of refugees (Refugees by Numbers, 2006). Although many African refugees have sought refuge within the continent in countries like: Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania among others, thousands of others have sought asylum outside Africa. Australia on a pro rata basis is one of the main countries of resettlement of refugees. Australia gave asylum to approximately 18 000 African refugees in the years 2004 to 2005 according to the Settler Arrivals statistics. Approximately 2 000 African refugees settled in Queensland (Refugees by Numbers, 2006; Settler Arrivals, 2005).

While a number of studies have examined the humanitarian needs of refugees, we have little understanding of the impact of the disruption associated with the refugee experience upon the aspirations of young refugees. Further research has the potential to enlighten us on how the experiences prior to migration and during displacement may be perceived as impacting upon the refugees' lives in the present, and in particular, on their aspirations.

The term refugee by definition refers to “a person who has a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality and membership of a particular social group or particular opinion” (Loescher, 2001: 44). The definition of aspirations as
adopted in this study will be based on Roughley and Elliott’s (Roughly & Elliot, 1995) definition of aspirations in their study of values, needs and aspiration in an Aboriginal community, in which aspirations refer to “visions, hopes and dreams in the short or long term” (p. 1). The current study focuses upon the long and short term vocational visions, hopes and dreams of young Africans resettled in Brisbane, Australia.

Understanding how individual aspirations are shaped and how they change across time is vital in making clear why educational aspirations in particular eventuate in very diverse educational outcomes along race, ethnic, and gender lines. It is regrettable that evidence is limited on how race and ethnic origin impact upon educational aspirations. This is largely because early studies of educational attainment centered on experiences of white male youth (Kao & Tienda, 1998). While succeeding studies have included girls and black youth, studies examining aspirations of young Africans, and specifically, young African refugees are nonexistent in the published literature. We do recognise however that the term “African” is a generic term and covers many groups and cultures and language groups.

**Theory Driven Research on Aspirations**

Within the theory driven research perspective there are two major theories proposed by Kao and Tienda (1998) which account for educational aspirations of both white and Afro-American people in Western societies, specifically, the status-attainment tradition and the “blocked-opportunities” framework. While the current study does not attempt to confirm or disconfirm these aspirations theories, it would be of interest to see whether the findings from qualitative study are able to contribute to such theory driven research.
Status-Attainment Theory

Early investigations of status-attainment processes endeavoured to explain the variation in educational and occupational aspirations of predominantly white males in Western societies on the basis of individual disparities in social class membership (Barr & Dreeben, 1983). Within this framework it is hypothesized that there are differences regarding the conceptualization of educational aspirations. One conceptualization maintains that educational aspirations indicate a state of mind that motivates the youth to do their best to succeed academically (Caplan, Choy & Whitmore, 1992). Early applications of this view within Western society considered educational aspirations to be a cognitive state influenced by the expectations of significant others, in particular, parents, teachers, and peers (Campbell, 1983; Davies & Kandel, 1981; Sewell, 1971; Sewell & Shah, 1968a).

Another view proposed that educational aspirations are largely rational assessments of the expenses and gains of probable actions. Proponents of this point of view maintain that aspirations comprise entirely assessments of possible expenses and gains, thereby suggesting that material resources available to youth rather than psychological dispositions to achieve, are vital in molding education related aspirations (Alexander & Cook, 1979; Jenks, Crouse & Mueser, 1983). These arguments are based on a Western society context and therefore the authors do not take into account whether the degree to which aspirations mirror realistic expectations may differ according to culture (Kao & Tienda, 1998) or significant life experiences such as displacement.

Alexander and Cook (1979) and Jencks and colleagues’ (1983) point of view infer that race and ethnic disparities in educational aspirations simply reflect socioeconomic
inequalities among minority and non minority youth. They argue that since white students are, in general, from more advantaged backgrounds they can be expected to have higher educational aspirations compared to their black or Hispanic grade counterparts. This logic, which unreservedly writes off unique racial and ethnic differences in motivations to succeed, suggests that differences in educational plans stem entirely from variations in parents’ social (educational) and economic (income) resources (Kao & Tienda, 1998). In contrast, Garrison (1982) and Hauser and Anderson (1991) indicate that structural barriers to social resources along with cultural beliefs and practices possibly diversify educational aspirations along race and ethnic lines beyond patterns predicted by family background and accessibility of material resources. However, to date there is no literature on investigations of the status-attainment model within an African cultural context, thus the significance of these findings is debatable in terms of applicability to an African context. Furthermore, the status attainment model fails to explain cultural complexities and whether the experiences that refugees have undergone may contribute to the propensity to strive to achieve highly despite very limited material resources.

**Blocked Opportunities Theory**

The blocked-opportunities model has also been developed within a Western cultural context to explain race and ethnic disparities in educational aspirations within a North American context. This framework endeavors to explain minority and non-minority dissimilarities in educational outcomes (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Taking structural and social obstacles to educational and occupational achievement into account, blocked opportunities result in two theoretically separate reactions. On the one hand, it is suggested that it is possible for an ethnic group to overcompensate for the disadvantages
of minority group status by means of achieving highly academically (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). On the other hand, it is argued that blocked opportunities are able to result in underperformance should a racial group become doubtful of the value of educational success as a means of achieving higher status (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1991). Gibaon, (1991, p.259) acknowledged that the circumstances of political refugees differ considerably from those of voluntary immigrants with permanent resident status. Still another investigator discovered that refugees best fit the voluntary immigrant category (McNall, Dunnigan & Mortimer, 1994). While the blocked-opportunities paradigm have been expanded to a wider racial and ethnic spectrum (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Suarez-Orozco, 1991), the model has yet to be applied to an African context.

This inconsistency in terms of whether refugees are immigrant minorities or subordinate minorities renders the applicability of this model to the refugee group inconclusive.

Ogbu (1991) argues that the restricted societal acceptance of subordinate minorities and their limited assimilation into mainstream society (as shown by the restricted occupational and economic success of their parents) yields a rebellious culture that lowers aspirations. Contrary to Ogbu (1991), MacLeod (1987) ascribed the leveling of educational aspirations to limited opportunities which in turn yields disadvantage instead of attributing the flattening of educational aspirations to a minority status. Nonetheless, both studies were undertaken in the context of blacks residing in the United States of America, and so the inferences resulting from the restricted acceptance may not necessarily be pertinent to the experiences of black people in general.
In terms of the current study, the blocked opportunities paradigm would suggest that, since young African refugees fall under the subordinate minority category, it can be expected that the young people will have low aspirations either because they do not expect to gain economic success from educational achievement, because of their experiences in schools, at home and on the street or due to the limited opportunities. Even so, such a suggestion does not cancel the likelihood that the young people may attempt to overcompensate for the disadvantages of minority group status by having high aspirations and striving to achieve those aspirations. Since refugees can conceivably also fit into the category of voluntary migrants, this suggests that refugees may not be hindered to achieve just as other voluntary migrants are said to not be hindered (see Gibson, 1991). Overall, the blocked opportunities model fails to provide a sufficient explanation of the circumstances under which some ethnic groups develop a rebellious culture and thereby under-perform while others overcompensate for minority status and thereby have positive outcomes (Kao & Tienda, 1998). The current study adopts a qualitative approach with a view to documenting considerations influencing aspirations from the participants’ own stories. The rationale for the methodology is discussed further in the section following.

Rationale

Without undermining the significant contribution of quantitative methods towards assessing exile-related stressors and comprehending the impact of such stressors on refugee well being and aspirations, continued dependence on such methodologies restricts our understanding of the psychological experience of exile, the scope of stressors
associated with such an experience (Miller et al., 2002) and, in the context of the current study, how experiences of exile plays a role in influencing refugee aspirations.

Several authors have noted that to understand the experience of exile takes more than an account of the historical nature of the refugee experience. Such understanding necessitates knowing and understanding refugees’ lives before they went into exile because life before exile takes on a central reference point among refugees as they evaluate their present life circumstances (Eisenbruch, 1988; Miller, 1999). Quantitative methods thus risk shadowing the various nuances and genuine complications of the phenomena being studied (Miller et al., 2002), in this case, aspirations. As such a qualitative approach provides important historical and contemporary understandings of refugees’ experiences and the impacts of such experiences upon the aspirations of young African refugees. That is, qualitative research aims to give privilege to respondents’ viewpoint as well as to elucidate their subjective meaning (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002; Popay, Rogers & Williams, 1998).

Quantitative approaches such as questionnaires rely predominantly upon existing theoretical assumptions that may not be applicable in understudied areas about which relatively little is known. This is truer considering the current level of knowledge on how the refugee experience may play a role in the aspirations of refugees, specifically, young African refugees. A narrative approach to investigating aspirations allows participants to identify the range of stressors affecting them, and considerations influencing their aspirations (Banyard & Miller, 1998 Miller et al., 2002).

The use of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews designed to draw out such narratives, permits the significant domains of the refugees’ experience to
emerge from the interview data. The explication of these narratives allow us to gain a better grasp in the ways in which migration-related stressors are perceived, encountered and negotiated within different refugee communities (Dumka, Gonzales, Wood & Formoso, 1998; Manton, 1993; Miller et al., 2002), and how these stressors impact on refugee aspirations. Such an understanding can facilitate the development of culturally anchored quantitative measures to be used in subsequent research and aid in ensuring that interventions designed for refugee communities are targeting those variables considered most critical (Dumka et al., 1998; Manton, 1993; Miller et al., 2002).

Qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory and narrative analysis have informed the current study. These approaches center on understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences (Charmaz, 2000). Grounded theory endeavours to describe the subject matter from the participant’s point of view, thereby generating theories that are based on the participant’s lived experiences (Bowers, 1990). The narrative approach, by definition, highlights the sequential explanation and evaluation of experience (Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). Accordingly, the use of narratives embodies an ideal approach in the exploration of how the experiences of life preceding migration continues to shape refugees’ perceptions of and reaction to their present life circumstances and influence their aspirations. A narrative approach is ideal for the study of aspirations of refugees from Africa whose experience is largely outside the context covered by traditional causal theories.

The aim of the present study is to document and explicate the academic experiences, vocational aspirations and considerations as expressed in the aspirations of young African refugees across the pre and post migration time period.
METHOD

Participants

Fourteen young people aged between 16 and 26 (M=18.64, SD = 2.56), comprising 9 young men and 5 young women participated in the study. Of the total sample, eleven were recruited through contact with a non-governmental refugee resettlement organization. The other three respondents were recruited through contacts made with the African community in Brisbane. One of the youth leaders in the community identified potential participants and invited them to participate in the study. Respondents’ average period of residency in Australia was 2.46 years (SD = 1.45).

Thirty informed consent forms were handed out to young people and 15 completed forms were returned. The most common reason for the unreturned consent forms was that the young people stopped attending the organization without leaving contact details. Thirteen participants were in high school and one was at a tertiary institution. All participants were single. Of the 14 participants, four lived with their parents, three lived with their siblings, five lived with a relative, and one was in a de facto relationship. Thirteen participants reported their ethnicity to be Sudanese, and one participant as Somali. Eight (57%) of the participants reported their religion to be Christianity, three (21%) as Islam, one (7%) as Traditionalist and two (14%) participants did not indicate their religious affiliation.

Instrument

A demographic information measure was used to gather information on religious or political affiliations, availability and proximity of family and social support. The interview was adapted from the Refugee Distress and Coping Interview Protocol (Miller
et al., 2002) and was based on open-ended questions about life pre-migration, journey-in-exile and life in Australia with minor additions to questions to elicit aspirations related themes.

**Procedure**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Queensland University of Technology ethics committee. All potential respondents were informed of the goals of the study and assured of confidentiality. Participants completed an informed consent form and demographics questionnaire prior to the interview. As per the preference of the participants, interviews were conducted either within the premises of the non-governmental organisation, Queensland University of Technology or at a home of their choice. Interviews were conducted by either the researcher or a co-researcher involved in a related study on stress and coping in young African refugees. The interviewers were known to the participants through previous voluntary work with a relevant NGP. All participants were given a $20 supermarket voucher as a token of appreciation for their participation. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then independently coded.

**Explication of Interview Data**

Interview transcripts were read to gain an overall understanding of the participants’ experience. Filler words were excluded, following which the transcripts were entered into Atlas.ti 4.2, a computer program for assisting with the retrieval of qualitative data. Themes were identified that were taken to be salient expressions of respondents’ experiences and concerns in relation to their aspirations. This process involved open coding whereby interview transcripts were repeatedly read and key issues
mentioned by respondents noted and coded with the assistance of Atlas.ti. A total of 21 original codes and 14 final codes were identified and utilized. Based upon the content of the codes, codes were grouped into superordinate codes referred to as families. From the families themes were identified based on content similarities. The interview material was also categorized into pre-resettlement (5 themes) and post-resettlement (3 themes).

Results

The interviews covered aspiration-related themes during three distinct stages: experiences in the country of origin, experiences during transition and experiences during resettlement in Australia. Participants were eager to share their experiences and responded positively to the open-ended questions. Due to an overlap in pre-migration and transition narratives the two periods were grouped into one period which was then termed pre-resettlement. Post migration life was therefore termed post-resettlement. Pre-settlement themes comprised: the expression of vocational aspirations, school disruption, effects of school disruption, influences on aspirations, and a longing for education. Post-resettlement themes comprised: the expression of vocational aspirations, the experience of language difficulties, and influences on vocational aspirations.

Pre-settlement Life

*Expression of Vocational Aspirations.* Respondents commonly indicated that growing up in a war ravaged environment did not hinder a future focus. Participants revealed that not only did they desire to complete their primary education before resettlement, rather, they also had vocational aspirations. For example, a 21 year old female expressed her hopes of becoming a doctor: “I was hoping that when I grow up I would become a doctor.”
Not all respondents aspired to traditional vocations (i.e. becoming a doctor) or had decided on what they wanted to become in the future before migration. An 18 year old male respondent stated in response to a question on what he wanted to do or become in the future before migration, “nothing, but I think I will be a farmer”.

School Disruption. War inevitably has a dramatic impact upon local institutions, and education is no exception. The bearing of war can be in terms of the destruction of educational facilities (i.e. buildings), danger of traveling to school (i.e. in rebel controlled zones), and the unaffordability of school fees resulting from unemployment among other things. Data indicated that war disrupted school life either directly by causing flight or indirectly by diminishing employment opportunities and better paying jobs, thereby restricting affordability of school fees. Half the participants reported an impact on school affordability. In some cases parent(s) tried to make ends meet but could only afford to do so for a brief period. The impact of war in terms of schooling disruption was illustrated in the following example, in which a 17 year old participant described her experience:

“I had to get kicked out of school every time I don’t get the money for the contract that every month you have to pay money for the school and every time if I passed five days of that I have to be kicked out of school and I hate that. And after that two times or three times I said I didn’t want to go to school again. Nobody is affording to pay for me every month so that I don’t get kicked out of school, miss stuff and go back and it’s too late a bit...War is doing some stuff and that’s what causes people unemployment, like my parents and my dad ceased his job as a soldier and got a job that is not well paid so that is why they could not afford [school]”.
**Effects of School Disruption.** Where school disruption is a result of war, the process of fleeing one’s homeland means that it can take a while before the individual resumes education. The extent to which the young person falls behind depends on the length of the disruption of their education. Over a third of the participants indicated that they ended up falling behind their peers. Participants further described instances where they were promoted to upper grades regardless of their prior achievement as a way of catching up with their peers. The reported result was that respondents not only missed out on the grade they did not complete, in most cases they also did not get a chance to complete their particular grade and ended up being unprepared for doing an upper grade. The following is an example of a 17 year old female respondent which illustrates the process experienced when skipping grades:

“...And after that two times or three times I said I didn’t want to go to school again. I was in grade four... When I came to Egypt I started from grade six and seven and I missed grade eight, and I went to grade nine. They told me that, “you are old now and if you were able to do grade seven very well we were only testing you, you have to go to grade nine because your age is grade nine.”

As indicated in the above example, the respondent had only gone to school up to grade four before dropping out due to financial difficulties. Still when she resumed her schooling she started at the sixth grade because of her age.

**Influences on Vocational Aspirations.** Individuals decide on or desire to pursue particular vocational aspirations for a variety of reasons. Several considerations emerged as pivotal to respondents’ desire and/or decision to follow particular vocational aspirations. These considerations included academic performance at the time and the
impact of the war situation. To some degree, how well respondents performed at school along with views of significant others determined their vocational aspiration choice.

The war situation can inspire a future focus in terms of individuals desiring to pursue vocations which will enable them to make a difference in their homeland (i.e. doctors). Additionally, war can yield hopelessness in terms of individuals struggling to see themselves doing or becoming “something better” following the disruption to their education. The following examples exemplify the war situation’s impact upon the young people’s academic performance and influences aspirations:

“Because I was the best student all over the school, the teachers always encouraged me to become a doctor because they said, “You like too much reading”’ (Male, age 20).

“Because you know sometimes I feel that if people die, because the situation is really there no doctors or something like that, so when people die I feel like helping but no way, so I feel that I have to be a doctor and help” (Male, age 21).

A Desire for Education: While it would be expected that the reasons for seeking refuge from a war torn country would be driven entirely by seeking safety, for more than a third of the respondents a quest for education was given as a the reason for migration. Education was regarded as the next most important value following safety as highlighted in the following example:

“Safety and study, so when I got to Kenya ok I am already safe in some other ways so the thing is education, especially when in Sudan I was worried much about life, and education, but education comes second, so when I am already in Kenya I am worrying for education”. (Male age 21)
Post-resettlement Life

The Expression of Vocational Aspirations. Adjusting to life in a different country and culture may lead to or require a change in goals and aspirations. This change of goals may be desirable or may be demanded by the situation or challenges encountered in the host country. The majority of participants in the present study expressed aspirations to achieve. Nonetheless, for half of the participants aspirations changed from what they were or were not before migration as highlighted in the following example:

“*When I went to Egypt my idea was to be a player like soccer or basket ball but when I come to Australia I changed my mind. Now I want to [do] engineering ... I want to [do] psychology that’s what I want to do*” (Male, age 18).

Whilst several respondents’ aspirations changed from one vocational aspiration to another, it seemed that other participants who used to have specific aspirations (i.e. becoming a doctor) were yet to decide on vocational aspirations from a choice of at least two interests since resettling in Australia. This is illustrated in the above example. It appeared that about a third of the respondents experienced a confusion or challenge in deciding what they would like to do in the future in terms of vocations.

*It is really hard to [make] the decision to get what you are going to do and what I am going to be in my future. But I am thinking to be a nurse. I am choosing two things. Nursing and accounting. So I am trying whether I am going to be good at it. So I am going to do it but I am not really sure. But I would really like to be a nurse you know* (Female, 21).

Language Difficulties. Moving from a non-English speaking country to an English speaking country presented challenges to respondents when they resettled in
Australia. This was a challenge even to respondents who could reportedly speak English before resettling in Australia. In the case of participants who could speak English, their accent and pronunciation reportedly made it difficult for them to be understood when communicating. The following examples illustrate the view expressed by over a third of the respondents:

“I never thought that I could speak English because when I came here I couldn’t speak English, I can’t hear it even, I can’t hear what people were saying so I’m just dead. You would just be talking there in English but I don’t understand what you are talking about, not at all” (Female, age 17).

“Studying English here I think is difficult to understand the English and because here when I came with my little bit of English I catch up to understand them but they don’t actually understand my pronunciation” (Male, age 18).

English as a new language of communication presented even more of a challenge in school. Adjusting to a new school in itself can be difficult, more so when the language of instruction is a language that one learnt for the first time after resettling in the host country at the age of 18 or so compared to kindergarten age. The situation may be exacerbated by the fact that due to the war situation in the respondents’ countries of origin, and the disruption to education, individuals may not have been to school for a period exceeding a year, making it difficult to adjust back to academic life. This may be compounded by the possibility that the young person may have skipped some grades, thereby missing out on some material which then makes academic life an even greater challenge. Where one’s academic life is a challenge, deciding on a vocational aspiration may be even more challenging.
All but two participants in the current study pointed out that they experienced academic difficulties at one point or another in the host culture. Language difficulty due to English not having been a language of instruction in their countries of origin made school life difficult in both understanding and being understood in class. The following examples highlight this challenge:

“English in OP subjects at school, it’s really difficult. I have a book now that I can’t really read properly, I have to look at the dictionary a lot of times”

(Female, 17).

“Frustrating, especially in school when you do like, math or English, you understand in your mind but you don’t know how to tell the teacher” (Male, 20).

Considerations Influencing Aspirations: A change or confusion in aspirations’ choice may suggest a change in considerations that influence the choice of future work related roles or goals. English language difficulties emerged as a major consideration contributing to a change or confusion in aspirations. A young male expressed the impact of language difficulties on his aspirations this way:

What made me change my mind? Like I told you before, I used to be good at those subjects but when I move here to Australia, then it start to become confusing, things don’t make sense, you don’t get help, and they know English is your second language and they are supposed to spend more time with you, they don’t (Male, age 20).

Altruism. At times the individual’s aspiration choices may be influenced by his or her experiences of hardship and thereby the desire to contribute to making the society a better place. This desire then will motivate the individual to aspire for a vocation that
will play an active role in for example, providing medical help where it is needed. In the current study three respondents indicated that the situation in their country of origin played a role in their aspiration choice. This theme is expressed by a male respondent in the following example:

“Yeah I realise there is a lot of crimes and violence back home, so I think that maybe we need to get together some people who can work out the violence and everything. So I think that now I have to do that and help those people in that way” (Male, age 21).

Discussion

The results suggest the suitability of a shift away from an exclusive focus on the refugee experience in terms of trauma, and toward a consideration of the refugee experience in terms of the broader context of their life including their vocational aspirations. The qualitative methodology employed in the current study facilitated the identification of critical experiences associated with the respondents’ vocational aspirations both in pre and post resettlement life. The present study identified the presence of vocational aspirations in both pre and post-resettlement life as reflected in the data explicated. Additionally, the current study documented academic experiences of young African refugees in their pre and post-resettlement lives as shown in such themes as: school disruption, effects of school disruption and language difficulties. Lastly, the study explicated considerations that influenced respondents’ vocational aspirations in both pre and post-resettlement life.
Respondents consistently reported that the war situation in their countries of origin directly and indirectly disrupted their schooling, either by the danger it posed or by diminishing resources that could be used to pay for school fees. The desire to resume education therefore became an important reason for migration second to the need for safety. Considering the time it can take to flee and settle in another country, the amount of time that elapsed before respondents could go back to school resulted in respondents skipping succeeding grades to catch-up with their peers.

Respondents reported having vocational aspirations in their country of origin and these were influenced by the situation in their homeland. This reason emerged as being one of the influential considerations even in post-resettlement vocational aspirations. Whilst the situation in the country of origin had an influence upon post-resettlement vocational aspirations, an even more common influential consideration was the challenges posed by English as a language of instruction in the schools.

Theory driven research on aspirations, specifically, the status-attainment model maintains that aspirations are to a great extent rational assessments of the expenses and gains of probable actions (Alexander & Cook, 1979; Jenks, Crouse & Mueser, 1983). Additionally, another view of the status-attainment theory suggests that educational aspirations indicate a state of mind that motivates the youth to do their best to achieve academically (Caplan, Choy & Whitmore, 1992). The blocked-opportunity model on the other hand argues that the youth may be driven to achieve highly as a way of overcompensating for the disadvantage of minority status (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Furthermore, another view put forth by other proponents of the blocked-opportunity model is that an ethnic group may under perform should there be doubts regarding the
value of educational success as a way of achieving higher status (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1991).

Bearing the above perspectives in mind, the current findings suggest that economic difficulties did not seem to influence aspirations choice, rather, the situation in the country of origin and in particular, language difficulties were the influential considerations for the resettled young African refugees who participated in the study. Therefore, while not conclusive, the findings suggest that considerations influencing aspirations are not confined to economic evaluations of the individual’s existing circumstances nor the individual’s socioeconomic status, at least in an African context. Considering the participants’ aspirations prior to and after resettlement and in spite of the challenges encountered, the youth still did their best to succeed academically. This finding may be seen as consistent with the status attainment model (Caplan, Choy & Whitmore, 1992).

Furthermore, the participants’ status as refugees, which may be considered to be a minority status and therefore a setback was not reported to have a negative or positive bearing on aspirations choice as would have been expected by proponents of the blocked-opportunity theory (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). That is, based on the narratives, there is no indication that respondents chose their aspirations as a way of overcompensating for the disadvantages of minority status. Rather, the findings suggest that when people with minority status aspire highly, the reason is not necessarily to overcompensate for the disadvantages of minority status. Additionally, the current findings indicate that underperformance or a “giving up” on aspirations can be the result of language difficulties rather than respondents doubting the value of educational success as a way of
improving one’s life, a view put forth by the blocked opportunity theory (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1991). The fact that the situation “back home” played a role in the young people’s aspirations suggests that the youth viewed education as a way to be better equipped if they are to one day contribute to the advancement of their “homelands”. Therefore, contrary to the blocked-opportunities theory, the themes which emerged from their narratives did not suggest any tendencies on the part of participants to overcompensate for minority status (Sue & Okazake, 1990) nor under-performe because they doubted the value of educational success as a way of improving one’s status (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1991). Rather, most respondents changed their aspirations post-resettlement from what they were pre-resettlement mainly because of English language difficulties and the situation in their country of origin.

The present findings add to our understanding of the experience of being a refugee and considerations influencing aspirations, particularly, aspirations of young African refugees. These findings shed light on what has been suggested regarding young people’s aspirations choice: firstly, expenses and the socioeconomic status do not necessarily play a role in the choice of aspirations for every ethnic group, specifically, young African refugees, secondly, a desire to achieve highly academically is not necessarily driven by the intent to overcompensate for minority status, and thirdly, underperformance, or “giving up” on aspirations is not necessarily due to a loss of faith in the value of educational success to improve one’s life. The current findings suggest that even in the midst of extreme hardship, young African refugees can still envision a better future, a future in which their vocational aspirations may be realised. Indeed, the difficult experiences seem to be a source of inspiration for some young people as evident in that
the situation in the country of origin played a role in aspirations choice of some participants. Furthermore, while language difficulties were often experienced in the host countries, most young people continued to express vocational aspirations even if their current aspirations were not their first choice. Consequently, the current study highlights the substantial resources characterizing young refugees, and gives a voice to their strength to still envision a better future and to adopt their aspirations in accordance with challenges experienced at a given time. Minority status does not necessarily mean that young people do not aspire for higher education en route to achieving their vocational aspirations. On the contrary, the participants in the study still aimed to achieve at significant levels.

One of the limitations of the current study is that the African participants were predominantly Sudanese. As such, the findings tell us more about one group of young Sudanese refugees resettled in Australia than young African refugees in general. Similar to most qualitative studies, the findings of the current study are limited to the group studied, and thus cannot be generalized to other groups. Nonetheless, the findings give some insight into understanding considerations influencing pre and post-migration aspirations of this group. An additional limitation is that most of the participants learnt English upon arrival in the host country, which may have limited their comprehension of the questions to some degree as well as their ability to express themselves in depth. Future research should therefore either utilize a bilingual interpreter or employ a sample of participants who have been in the host country for a longer period of time, to eliminate English language comprehension and expression problems.
An important limitation of the current study was that coding was conducted by a single rater thus limiting the reliability of the study in that inter-rater reliability could not be calculated. Future qualitative studies on aspirations should endeavour to include more participants who lived in refugee camps. Furthermore, it is possible that the young people who accepted the invitation to take part in the study were those who were more resilient, and so future research should take that the participants level of functioning into consideration. Additionally, future studies should ensure that the sample includes young African refugees from different countries instead of one nationality dominating the sample as was the case in the current study. Considering the amount of time spent in the recruitment process and rapport building, future research should consider the issue of sample diversity.

In summary, the present study has revealed that even in situations of chaos and potential trauma where attaining an education is highly problematic people can still desire to achieve academically and vocationally against all odds. The study provides a basis for a better understanding of the aspirations of young African refugees living in Australia. Service providers need to recognize that young refugees may benefit from educational services that address their expressed needs (i.e. language assistance) rather than mainly psychological services. Such services may comprise: 1) “homework” clubs for assistance with different subjects considering that homework requirements are in English, 2) after school English language assistance programmes for the improvement of English grammar, and 3) social activities that provide an opportunity to interact with a broader community of young people for whom English is a native language. These activities
would contribute to resettled young refugees improving their language skills and enhance their sense of community.

References


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