This study investigated the resettlement experience of African refugees in a regional Australian city. A phenomenological approach was used to develop an understanding of the resettlement experience from audio-taped interviews conducted with eight refugees. A reflexive process prompted the researcher to acknowledge her subjectivity and identify her position in the research. Thematic analysis was used to identify central aspects of resettlement and individual adjustment. Five themes were drawn from the interview transcripts: 1) Overwhelming gratitude, 2) Challenges to identity, 3) Frustrated attempts to participate, 4) Despair for fractured families and 5) Hope and optimism for the future. Findings suggest that initial feelings of acceptance and sense of identity were challenged as refugees adjusted to new social and cultural experiences. They experienced grief about enforced separation from family members in Africa. The urgent need to reunite family heightened their frustration with limited employment prospects and the pace of becoming well-established in the community. In spite of the challenges, the great resilience of participants was evident in their ongoing hope and optimism for a better future in Australia.

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The adjustment of African refugee resettlers in a regional Australian city

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Abstract

This study investigated the resettlement experience of African refugees in a regional Australian city. A phenomenological approach was used to develop an understanding of the resettlement experience from audio-taped interviews conducted with eight refugees. A reflexive process prompted the researcher to acknowledge her subjectivity and identify her position in the research. Thematic analysis was used to identify central aspects of resettlement and individual adjustment. Five themes were drawn from the interview transcripts: 1) Overwhelming gratitude, 2) Challenges to identity, 3) Frustrated attempts to participate, 4) Despair for fractured families and 5) Hope and optimism for the future. Findings suggest that initial feelings of acceptance and sense of identity were challenged as refugees adjusted to new social and cultural experiences. They experienced grief about enforced separation from family members in Africa. The urgent need to reunite family heightened their frustration with limited employment prospects and the pace of becoming well-established in the community. In spite of the challenges, the great resilience of participants was evident in their ongoing hope and optimism for a better future in Australia.

Introduction

Recent Australian government policy has encouraged the resettlement of refugees in regional Australia (DIMA, 2006). This has resulted in African refugees settling in regional centres that were predominantly conservative and Anglo Celtic (e.g. Colac, Warrnambool, Wagga Wagga). As a social and humanitarian phenomenon, this settlement experience is worthy of understanding for refugees and hosts alike. Classic group behaviour theory (Barnes, 2001) suggests that the dominant host population designates itself as the “in-group”, while refugees are cast as the “out-group”. Coker (2004) argues that African refugees’ out-group status as pathologised “victims” has compromised their capacity to establish fulfilling new lives. Although some propose that identity is “deep-rooted” with unchangeable “core values”, the constructivist position has offered a deeper understanding of the psychological experience of refugees. According to this paradigm, refugees become self-constructors of their new identity, a position supported by Timotijevic and Breakwell (2000) in interviews with refugees in Britain. Identity construction occurs in response to a refugee journey that begins with the traumatic loss of a previous life (Lacroix, 2004). This led Williams and Aghdami (2005) to argue that the new identity is shaped by “bereavement”, and memories of the past. After such life upheavals resettlement invariably begins with a period of relief at being safe (Williams & Aghami, 2005). The negotiation of the new culture is a time of personal, social and cultural confrontation referred to as “culture shock” by Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001). Refugees cope during this time by reworking their new experiences through their past memories as they gradually adjust to their new life. Batrouney and Goldlust (2005) explored this process in interviews with Australian refugees. They found duality of identity, with refugees embracing a new Australian identity while maintaining a sense of their past identity.

Other research has highlighted the complexity of refugee adjustment. In a quantitative survey study, Montgomery (1996) found refugee adjustment had multiple components including economic, socio-cultural and subjective aspects. A multiplicity of factors was also evident in two Australian qualitative interview studies, with African refugees (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005; Udo-Ekpo, 1999). These studies found adjustment for African refugees was related to unemployment, under-employment, access to education, language skills and social interactions with the wider community. Additional resettlement concerns included difficulties with housing, transport, discrimination and secondary migration.
The importance of family support and rituals to successful adjustment was identified by Gow (2002) in a Melbourne interview study with Oromo refugee resettlers. In a mixed method study of Somali refugees in Sydney, Cakir, Roberts and Heyburg (2000) found that successful reunion with family members from the homeland was important. Khawaja, White, Schweitzer and Greenslade (undated) found religious belief, and social support, together with having aspirations for the future contributed to the adjustment of the Sudanese refugees interviewed in Brisbane, Queensland.

The relatively recent phenomenon of resettling humanitarian refugees in regional areas has created a need to understand this experience separately from the urban resettlement experience. The focus of this study was the development of an understanding of the adjustment of African refugees in one regional Australian city.

**Method**

A qualitative interview methodology was used because it suited both the context and the nature of the research question. The researcher was interested in the resettlement experience of African refugees settling in the conservative, dominantly Anglo Celtic regional city where she lived. In undertaking this study, the researcher utilised reflexivity throughout the research process to become aware of subjectivity, and so increase the integrity of the data analysis (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2006). Open structure face-to-face interviews were used to increase understanding through exploring participant experiences in context, time and space (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Interviews eliminated the need for participant literacy skills and respected traditional African oral cultures.

**Sampling criteria**

Participants were residents of Wagga Wagga, a regional Australian city of 57,000 people. Approval for the study was given by the Charles Sturt University Ethics in Human Research Committee. Sampling was selective, restricted to those from African backgrounds who had been in Australia between six and twenty four months. There were six female and two male participants, (four from Sierra Leone, three from Sudan and one from Liberia). They were recruited via a written invitation distributed through the Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga, and refugee support groups, and by word of mouth. All participants had refugee camp experiences. All but one had dependent children in Australia. Four had immediate family still in Africa and all had extended family there.

**Interviews**

Interviews were arranged through phone contact. Information sheets were provided and informed consent obtained. Interview length depended on participant responses and ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Interpreter services were offered but not requested. Contact details were provided for counseling support, but no referrals were required. Participants selected pseudonyms for use in the study.

Broad areas to be covered during interviews included “How had it been settling in Wagga?” “What had been hard about settling?” “What had gone well?” “How had it been meeting people?” “What did they enjoy doing here?” “What hopes had they for the future?” “Did they feel Australian yet?” Opening the interview with, “Can you tell me a little about yourself and where you came from to here?” provided demographic information. Questions from the broad areas were used only to restart stalled conversations. This technique encouraged an open conversational style, developed rapport and allowed opportunity for deeper insights. Flow was encouraged and understanding indicated through the use of “nods” and “hums”. Clarification was sought by rephrasing responses and the use of prompts (Kayrooz & Trevitt, 2005).

**Data analysis**

The researcher began the data analysis by “bracketing” prior knowledge through reflection, diary keeping and note taking to increase trustworthiness and contribute to reliability (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). “Intuition, empathy, imagination and open-mindedness” (Kayrooz & Trevitt, 2005, p. 128) were employed as the interviews were transcribed and each line was numbered. The analysis was a fluid process that began during
transcription when impressions of concepts arising from the data were documented. The “bottom up” approach continued as the transcripts were read for concept identification and each concept colour-coded using electronic highlighting (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2006). The colour-coded blocks of data were copied from individual transcripts into concept specific Word documents. The process then incorporated a “top-down” approach where the concepts found in the literature were combined with those found in the interviews to further refine understanding and fourteen categories emerged. Like categories were then grouped into five core themes.

Results and Discussion

The five core themes that emerged were: Overwhelming gratitude; Challenge to identity; Frustrated attempts to participate; Despair for fractured families; Hope and optimism for the future.

Overwhelming gratitude refers to the dominant response made by the refugees when asked about their resettlement in Wagga Wagga. All the refugees spoke emotionally of their gratitude for the opportunity to settle in Australia, and about the friendliness and generosity of their welcome to Wagga Wagga, which they perceived to be a safe place.

......I am grateful to the Australian people, the government for allowing us to come...........
......actually I love Wagga because Wagga is a quiet place.....Thank God...since I come here and I have had no trouble with anyone (Kiaka)

It is common for African refugees to perceive regional areas to be safe (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005). Amongst Wagga’s resettlers this perception had even survived the attack of a young African man at a taxi rank.

When the taxi come the other man decided to say: “Let those...let those black...f**king black monkeys not to...not to go to the taxi.” (Kiden)

Kiden explained that the refugee community viewed this incident as anomalous rather than an indication of wholesale discrimination. African refugees have generally been subjected to ethnic discrimination and violence in Africa (Gow, 2002) so Emmanuel expressed a common sentiment when he said he felt there was less discrimination in Wagga than Africa.

......like in Australia people....are not looking at people by their colour.... ........but in Africa, black can look at their friend black....And you say oh this man is not my ethnic group.....We do not speak the same language. (Emmanuel)

These expressions of gratitude and feelings of safety, delivered in simple terms, but reiterated and accompanied by visual expressions of great happiness, were suggestive of the early period of relief at being safe (Williams & Aghdami, 2005).

Challenges to identity is concerned with the refugees’ struggle with identity as they settled in Wagga Wagga. There was a feeling, in common with African resettlers in other areas that Australians had little understanding of Africa and who the refugees were as Africans (Udo-Ekpo, 1999).

They don’t understand that. People live in a similar way they live in Australia....In Africa .....Have television, everything...But maybe they see us black. They say “oh these people ...They don’t have anything in their country”. (Beckly)

Other challenges to identity included the loss of professional identity. An accountant, a school principal, and a professional photographer had been unable to find work in their professional area; a situation not uncommon for African refugee resettlers in Australia (Udo-Ekpo, 1999). While this may have challenged their sense of competence, Wagga’s resettlers reiterated their competence in the way they coped with their new circumstances. Bor Bee, faced with transport difficulties when he moved his family to a bigger house in the suburbs, decided to get his driver’s license.

So the problem was how can I get the payment? .....So I went to the job network and ......they paid for five hours... .....So...I think this was not the solution. So I borrowed the money from the bank. I
bought my car and then the Salvation Army gave me a person to train me on my car. I drive and achieve the fifty hours…..(Bor Bee)

This ability to negotiate the Australian system suggested successful adjustment (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). With adjustment to Australian culture came new identities as Australians. The responses to the question “Do you feel Australian yet?” were surprisingly emphatic.

I am an Australian...the government give me a permanent resident...And if you are living in the house permanently ....You are the owner of the house...I feel confident that I am an Australian (laughing). (Bor Bee)

Maintaining a pride in their African heritage while identifying as Australians indicated the duality of identity Batrouney and Goldlust (2005) had discovered amongst other Australian refugee resettlers.

Frustrated attempts to participate describes the frustrations experienced by the resettlers as they moved beyond the social network of the refugee support groups and attempted to participate in the wider community. Fat Sahid indicated the difficulties.

...there are times, ...I feel rejected because when I am applying (for jobs)... the way they reply, they tell you 'we have somebody who has more calibre than you'.........(Fat Sahid)

Participation in the workforce is a key to becoming a member of the local community. However for Wagga’s resettlers, as with many African refugees settling in Australia, gaining employment was difficult (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005). The refugees explained welfare was not an option because it did not deliver financial security, but more importantly, work was culturally appropriate (Udo-Ekpo, 1999). Lack of appropriate jobs in Wagga could force relocation. Beckly explained.

.....we want to come and develop our lives...

.you won’t be sitting down and waiting for

Centrelink money.....Yes and what will move

me from Wagga is because of jobs....(Beckly).

While employment was highly sought, it brought frustrations. Long hours of hard manual labour in workplaces such as the local abattoir made it difficult to upgrade professional qualifications or attend English classes. This was a similar situation to that for African resettlers in regional Victoria (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005). But while some refugees were frustrated that a requirement to upgrade their English kept them out of the workforce, others found the requirement to take English classes insulted their African English.
So my big problem is pronouncing things. I said, “But you can’t correct me on that anymore…….Because that is how we pronounce things”. (Kiden)

In common with refugees in other areas, frustrations were expressed about the inability to obtain work that related to previously obtained professional qualifications, and the need to retrain in those skill areas (Udo-Ekpo, 1999). Additionally, concern was expressed that children were not being adequately supported in the school system to overcome the disadvantages of previously disrupted educations.

As Taylor and Stanovic (2005) found for Victorian African resettlers, the difficulties with English, participating in employment and in the school system limited the development of social networks for Wagga’s resettlers beyond their own ethnic and religious groups and the refugee support groups.

Because sometimes it is not easy to greet a

person….here...so it is not easy to make

friendships. (Kiden)

As the development of social networks is important for refugee adjustment (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, undated) these barriers to the development of networks in the wider community put at risk the long term sense of belonging the Wagga Wagga African refugee resettlers develop towards their new community.

Despair for fractured families pertains to the despair the resettlers felt about loss of family and separation from loved ones. The personal losses suffered by the refugees were enormous. Gow (2002) found family to be crucial to refugees’ sense of well-being. However, in the case of the Wagga resettlers the refugee journey had often broken families apart.

It is very, very difficult. Very hard....’Cause my

son was a year and a half old when I left.....I

have been here 22 months......Sometimes he talks

to me and sometimes he refuse...(Fat Sahid)

As is the case for African refugees in regional Victoria, (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005) most of the Wagga resettlers were supporting family in Africa. Many were also attempting to bring family to Australia. Negotiating the migration system to obtain permission for family reunions caused great emotional strain. The financial requirements of family reunion made participation in employment essential.
...if they approve me I will have to buy...ticket(s).... ten thousand dollars.....Where can I get ten thousand? (Beckly)

While this situation was difficult for all those attempting to bring family to Australia, for those who remained unemployed the sense of despair was palpable. This indicated that successful family reunion was essential to their overall adjustment and sense of well-being (Gow, 2002).

**Hope and optimism for the future** is the final theme. The resettlers all had hopes and dreams which they freely expressed. The overall direction of these dreams was summed up by Fat Sahid.

*I want to become a citizen ....of Australia. I want to work to them. Get a good job...To get a good income....and stay here because of my children and I want my family to come over and join me.* (Fat Sahid)

Khawaja, White, Schweitzer and Greenslade (undated) found aspirations for the future was a successful coping strategy for African refugees. Children were a great source of hope for the future. Mamie talked of her little daughter:

*Yes it would be very good for her because she.....will be the future of tomorrow because she will start her school here.* (Mamie)

There were also dreams of returning to Africa in the future; not permanently, but rather to “help”.

*I can’t help thinking ...well...I have to go back to Sudan and do what I have to do in Sudan and come back to Australia.* (Melissa)

These dreams appeared to be driven by the collectivist nature of African societies and the need to fulfill family obligations (Gow, 2002). Strongly held religious beliefs also appeared to underpin this need to help those left behind. Khawaja, White, Schweitzer and Greenslade (undated) highlighted the importance of religious belief as a coping strategy for refugees. A belief in God was an important factor in the adjustment of the African refugees who had settled in Wagga Wagga. It had sustained them in adversity and once resettled it appeared to have contributed to their optimism for the future.
Yeah because you know to me the things which kept
me alive is only God....It is only from God’s smile
that is keeping me alive until today. (Kiden)

Conclusions
This study found the adjustment process for eight African refugee resettlers in Wagga Wagga involved socio-cultural, economic and subjective factors. The findings showed similarities to the multiple components described by Montgomery (1996). There was a sense of gratitude and relief at being safe in Australia. There were challenges to identity created by lack of community understanding about their African heritage, and the loss of professional status and professional work (Udo-Ekpo, 1999). There was the willingness to adapt to the new culture and the development of a duality of identity as their new Australian identity emerged (Batrouney & Goldlust, 2005). Like other African refugees, religious beliefs were an important coping strategy (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, undated).

There were aspects of adjustment which this sample had in common with other regional groups. There was the perception of Wagga being safe as a regional city. Attempts to gain employment had mixed results. Manual work was available but not professional opportunities. There were also difficulties in accessing English classes, professional education and adequate educational support for their children (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005; Udo-Ekpo, 1999). These difficulties reduced opportunities for wider social contact.

The current sample was particularly concerned about employment difficulties because financial constraints undermined attempts to support family overseas and work toward reunion in Australia. This created great emotional distress and has been noted by others (Cakir, Roberts & Heyburg, 2000; Gow, 2002). In spite of this the refugee resettlers were optimistic about their future in Wagga Wagga.

Implications for future research
As a qualitative study, this research has limited generalisability. There were challenges of language and cultural difference between the researcher and the participants. However this should not deter further research into the regional resettlement experience. Future research opportunities lie in the development of more effective coordination of state and Federal government regional refugee support services. There is a particular need for regional Australia to find ways to utilise the skills of refugees with professional qualifications. Research is required to develop innovative ways to ensure regionally located African refugee children receive an education which meets their needs. Flexible delivery models for English language classes and professional education options for adult resettlers also need further development. Local government and refugee organizations should more effectively coordinate their local community resources to facilitate the settlement of refugees. Most importantly, research is required into ways to reduce the financial and emotional hardship for refugee resettlers in their attempts to bring family to Australia for reunion.

References


