Mental Health and Wellbeing of South Sudanese-Australians

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Abstract

The majority of South Sudanese-Australians arrived in Australia and other host countries outside Africa, after spending a greater part of their lives in refugee camps or conflicts affected areas. In addition, refugees are often not able to return to their home countries because the causes of their departure [wars, insecurity, hunger] continue to apply in their country of origin. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the mental health and wellbeing issues some South Sudanese-Australians experience as a result of settlement difficulties and their earlier experience of conflict. The study looks at experiences of resettlement and settlement difficulties, and more importantly mental health and wellbeing issues in the wake of the aforesaid challenges. The data was collected from a qualitative method which comprised a

series of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with a total of 20 South Sudanese-Australians living in Melbourne. There were eleven males and nine females, with ages ranging from 18 to 64 years, who volunteered to participate in this study. Findings indicated that as many other people from refugee backgrounds, South Sudanese-Australians face a range of settlement-related challenges, and a host of post-resettlement adaptation experiences such as limited change of gender roles, language proficiency, unemployment, host society unacceptance or intolerance, constrained recreational opportunities, lack of community connectedness and overall mental health and general wellbeing issues. Experiencing conflict can be traumatic and refuge in neighbouring countries different socio-culturally can be challenging. In conclusion, these issues can not only be troublesome on a day-to-day basis, but also adversely affect the long-term mental health and wellbeing of refugees.

Keywords

Settlement, Mental health, South Sudanese, wellbeing, Refugees, cultural, Migration, African

Introduction

The forced migration of people from South Sudan to Australia started in the 1990s due to an extended civil war between North Sudan and Southern Sudan. As a result of that war, over 30,000 Sudanese arrived in Australia and many of them have since obtained their Australian citizenship (Abur, 2018; Abur & Spaaji 2016). The largest number of humanitarian entrants from Sudan arrived between 2000 and 2006, often after spending several years in refugee camps. Refugees are people who have fled their homeland often as a result of political instability, repression, and violent conflict (Abur 2012; Mamer 2010). The concept of refugee protection emerged during World War II, resulting in the Convention on Refugees and subsequently the establishment of the UNHCR (Abur & Spaaij, 2016; McDonald et al. 2008; UNHCR 2015). South Sudanese left due to these push circumstances in order to escape oppressive discrimination, or severe physical and mental harm (Abur & Spaaij, 2016; Mamer 2010). Such sudden departures generally mean that refugees do not have the time or opportunity to pack their belongings or to farewell loved ones (Abur 2012; Mamer 210, Marlowe 2011a). Often, they leave secretly for fear of persecution, without knowing if they

will ever be able to return. Typically, refugees are then exposed to uncertain and dangerous journeys (Mamer 2010).

'Refugee resettlement' is a term used to describe the relocation of refugees from a country of asylum to a third country for permanent integration, with the aim of addressing the needs of refugees through integration in that third country. While the resettlement process is complex, it is widely viewed as a durable solution for refugee problems (see Marlowe, Harris & Lyons 2014; Refugee Council of Australia 2010; Tipping 2011). Refugees are assessed and accepted for resettlement when they meet the criteria set out by the UN Convention (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2007; Fozdar & Hartley 2012; McDonald et al. 2008). The challenges that refugees experience are significant and multi-faceted (Abur 2012; Fozdar & Hartley 2013). Large numbers of refugees, who are waiting to be assessed and resettled currently live in refugee and displacement camps worldwide, such as the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, from where many South Sudanese have lived before migrating to Australia, as well as camps in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Egypt. These camps are characterised by shortages of food, inadequate medical services, and lack of sanitation (Ager 1999; Ajak et al. 2015; Marlowe 2011a).

In addition to these physical deprivations and hardships, many refugees experience highly traumatising events prior to their arrival in the camps, such as witnessing executions, death of loved ones, different forms of abuse, rape, and oppression as well as looting and widespread destruction. These experiences can have profound emotional and psychological impacts on families and individuals, and it has been widely recognised that as a result many refugees suffer from varying degrees of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Abur & Spaaij; 2016, Ajak et al. 2015; Marlowe 2011a; Tipping 2011). The complexity of the pre-settlement experiences of refugees and the impact of these experiences on individuals and families have implications on countries receiving refugees; destination host countries take on the responsibility to adequately support the refugees at both policy provisions and service delivery levels (Ajak et al. 2015; Marlowe 2011a). Countries providing resettlement programs do so voluntarily as part of the global sharing of responsibility to protect refugees and provide a durable solution to those who cannot return to their countries of origin (UNHCR 2015). The receiving country is expected to provide refugees with support services and access to resources that facilitate successful integration into the host society (Hurstfield et al. 2004; UNHCR 2015; Bloch 2000, 2008; Korac 2003; Peisker & Tilbury 2003). These issues discussed in the literature review are of great importance for the South Sudanese community in Australia who are the interest of this study. Families and individuals are struggling with resettlement and settlement issues and may

need some support services beyond what other refugees that fitted into monochromatic Australia earlier, in order to overcome settlement issues.

While resettlement issues for refugees in general have been discussed above, this section discusses *settlement* issues for refugees that are of particular significance to the South Sudanese community in Australia. 'Refugee settlement' is a term used when refugees arrive in Australia and require a range of support services to establish themselves and become independent in a new cultural and social context (see Abur & Spaaij 2016, DIAC 2013). Settlement is a complex process that requires support from the host community, government, and non-government agencies to address different challenges (Abur 2012, Abur & Spaaij 2016 Lejukole 2008).

Refugees have sometimes been perceived as a burden on receiving countries. This notion of a burden features in both policy and research debates relating to displacement and protection (Zetter 2015, p. 17). Such political and community concerns are indicative of the global challenge of refugee resettlement amidst a trend of decreasing numbers of refugees being able to return voluntarily to their countries (Correa-Velez, Barnett, & Gifford 2015). The complexity of settlement is magnified by attachment to place – how refugees identify with the country that they settle in and how they create a sense of belonging (Hiruy 2009). Arguably this is very much influenced by how they are received; as burdensome or as being able to make an important contribution. Based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Protection, the countries where refugees are resettled must act responsibly in a non-discriminatory manner by ensuring that those people have the opportunity to participate fully in society (Abur & Spaaij, 2016, UNHCR 2015).

Ideally, settlement can be seen as a two-way process of mutual understanding of cultural expectations, with the host community working in partnership with refugees. Settlement is not just something that a refugee must do, but there is also a need for the wider community to adapt to accommodate the refugees. A 'spirit of hospitality', where refugees are made to feel welcome in a community, underpins successful refugee settlement programs (Abur 2018, Abur & Spaaij, 2016, RCA, 2011).

Settlement is meant to be the final stage for refugees and migrants to integrate into Australian society and it is a time when families and individuals require support to gain social connection and to develop economic independence (Bennett & Adriel 2014; DIAC 2012). However, Lejukole (2008) has argued that settlement can never completed; it is an ongoing process that involves the challenges of adapting to a new place and gradually connecting with

the host community. At the beginning the challenges of settlement can overshadow its benefits for refugees. These challenges include lack of social capital and language to assist the integration process. Settling in a new environment and social context is a daunting task for anyone, regardless of the educational level one may or may not have obtained (Abur 2012; Abur & Spaaij 2016). The impact of integrating into a new society can cause high levels of stress and anxiety (Pisano 1995; Refugee Council of Australia 2010). Refugees often experience a high level of homesickness and isolation and this is aggravated by culture shock that further hinders their ability to begin a new life in Australia (Abur & Spaaij 2016) As well as promoting optimal levels of wellbeing required to deal with the stress and adjustments involved in resettlement, integration programs that support emotional and personal rebuilding can help to prevent the development of more serious mental health difficulties (Marlowe 2010 cited in UNHCR 2002, p. 231).

The settlement of refugees has generated a vast body of research globally. Studies in this field have covered a broad array of themes critical to understanding forced migration and displacement. Prominent themes of particular relevance to this paper include drivers of displacement and forced migration, legal and moral frameworks, and experiences in refugee camps and countries of resettlement (see, for example, Abur & Spaaij 2016, Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2007; Fozdar & Hartley 2012; McDonald et al. 2008). Factors which have been identified as making a significant positive contribution to settlement include: feeling safe from racism and discrimination, obtaining secure and well-paid employment, being able to buy a home, and one's children feeling well supported at school and in the community (Abur & Spaaij 2016, Ager 1999; Fozdar & Hartley 2012, Fozdar & Hartley 2012, Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). These studies have discussed general challenges of refugees in Australia but have not critiqued policies nor have they provided ways forward to address issues significantly as people still experience unemployment, discrimination, lack of social networks and family/parenting related issues. These issues are heavily affecting mental wellbeing among many South Sudanese-Australians.

When a host country provides assistance to enable newly arrived refugees to integrate into their new society, services and treatment of refugees are influenced by the politics within the country (Allerdice 2011). In Australia, refugee settlement policy-making, management, and funding are centralised at the Commonwealth level. For the past few years, discussion of refugees in Australia has increasingly focused on refugees from African countries and the recent arrival of boats seeking asylum in Australia (Abur & Spaaij 2016, Baker-Lewton, et al

2017, Marjoribanks, et al 2010). Many of these recent debates in the media have attempted to distinguish between "bad" and "good" refugees. "Bad" refugees are those who "jump the queue", meaning they arrive by boat and not through the formal UNHCR channel (Abur & Spaaij 2016; Marjoribanks, et al 2010).

The majority of South Sudanese in Australia arrived through the work of the UNHCR in refugee camps. Despite this, they are still often labelled as "undesirable" refugees in Government and media discourse because of their settlement-related challenges in Australia, which have been both exaggerated and widely misreported by the mainstream media (Abur & Spaaij 2016, Marjoribanks, et al 2010, Baker-Lewton, et al 2017). Therefore, understanding histories and challenging issues facing people from refugee backgrounds in Australia, including people from the South Sudanese community, is very vital in policy formulation and service delivery practice.

Cultural Challenges and Mental Wellbeing

There is a general expectation that refugees will adjust quickly to the expectations of the host society, which (erroneously) assumes that acculturation and integration are straightforward, if not seamless, processes. However, cultural differences between the refugee community and that of the host country can mean that integration is complex. Culture has been defined as knowledge, social activities, and the interpretation of life or worldview with which individuals or groups associate, as well as an understanding of their society (Habermas et al 1985). This study conducted between 2014 and 2017 found that the South Sudanese community is facing complex issues in adjusting to their new environment including cultural change and general wellbeing (Abur 2018). Atem (2011) found that settlement of Sudanese refugees in Australia is complicated by cultural differences and by their experiences prior to arrival. While large numbers of people in today's society live in cities and towns rather than rural villages, as Giddens (1989) notes, some families and individuals in the South Sudanese community that has come to Australia have mixed experiences and lifestyles. Some had opportunity of living in cities and towns, but other families and individuals were from rural village settings to refugee camps and from refugee camps to settle in urban areas in Australia. The urban lifestyle South Sudanese have come into in Australia is markedly different from their experiences in refugee camps or in the villages.

In South Sudanese culture life events such as birth, sickness, death (mourning), marriage, and family reunion of members who were separated for long or reunion of partners of a broken

marriage due to war   are very important as they bring family, relatives, extended family, and friends together in either celebration support of each other through difficult/sad times. Among the Dinka, the largest tribal group in Southern Sudan, *togetherness* is an essential cultural element. It is also one of the reasons the Dinka people live in large groups or extended families that can reach beyond 12 families in a kinship chain of close blood relations (Juuk 2013; Makol 2012). Such cultural values and practices are still impacting the South Sudanese families and individuals in Australia in different ways. Some Dinka families find it hard to raise their children in Australia because they perceive some elements of Australian culture and lifestyles to be militating against Dinka cultural values and practices.

Raising a family in a culture new to one's own is a challenge for many African migrant families with very little knowledge of western parenting styles (Abur, 2018). Children of migrants tend to adapt quickly, but their parents still hold on to their own cultures and parenting styles (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). As children adapt to those systems and cultures of their new country, they are often required to interpret the new culture for their parents or other adult family members who are struggling to come to terms with the uncertainty space in which they find themselves (Juuk 2013; Renzaho & Vignjevic 2011). The uncertainty space is fraught with such issues as those relating to child rearing, child protection, and assisting a child with school work and all the complexity of regulatory frameworks and practices they are set in. For example, a teenagers may choose not to attend school, and not listen to or respect parents' opinions because they are more conversant with certain areas of the Australian context which they interpret for their parents (Abur 2012; Renzaho & Vignjevic 2011). Such matters remain intractable challenges for parents; their role and authority and responsibilities within the family become destabilised (Lejukole 2008). Many parents feel their responsibilities and respect are undermined when local authorities initiate programs that disregard parental opinion and choices in approaches to disciplining and managing their children in ways that are different to parental cultural values and practices (Bye & Alvarez 2007).

Thus, parenting children in a new culture has been one of the challenging tasks for South Sudanese families (Renzaho & Vignjevic 2011). Resettling can be highly disruptive and is often a lengthy transitional process. Juuk (2013) posits that resettlement in a different cultural context often involves losing structures that may have provided significant support for child protection and development, and individual and general family functioning. Often, there is considerable debate within the South Sudanese community among different generations about where they really belong. Some people consider themselves more Australian by adapting to Australian ways of life, and have criticised South Sudanese ways. The differences in cultural

values between Australian and South Sudanese societies have been the main issue causing anxiety among parents. Some South Sudanese parents in Australia are greatly concerned about their young people who are having contact with those outside their own culture, and resist any kind of relationship that a young person can form outside of their knowledge and approval which is contradicting to general perception that parents would be embracing intracultural relationships (Abur 2012; Renzaho & Vignjevic 2011). One of the things that adults or parents fear is the difference between Australia's liberal values and South Sudan's traditional and conservative values. This frequently leads to intergenerational disagreement and conflict in the family, as well as in the community and among different generations.

The rise of intergenerational conflict among refugees and migrant families due to difference in cultural values and practices is a major social problem. Social workers and people working in the criminal justice system believe that it is a major source of family breakdown (Marlowe, Harris & Lyons 2014; Renzaho & Vignjevic 2011). Maintaining one's original culture in the family is important in many societies and carries considerable weight in terms of an argument as to why people want to keep the values of their cultural practice and family relations (Abur 2012; Atem 2011). African, and particularly Sudanese, parents are a case in point. They often want their children to maintain traditional values and roles, but this creates tensions for teenagers who have grown up in Australia, who will confidently challenge such expectations and demands from their parents (Juuk 2013). The difficulties teenagers face in accepting traditional values and cultural expectations from parents include peer pressure, directly and indirectly, to adopt an Australian or western culture rather than continuing to value their traditional cultures. Conflict can occur within families whose members are all new migrants, as well as within families whose children have been born in Australia (Abur 2012; Juuk 2013). Clashes of this type generally arise around such issues as modes of dress and behaviour, differences in child-rearing practice and, in particular, a greater sense of independence amongst young people.

Method

This paper is part of a large research project that explored settlement and wellbeing issues for the South Sudanese community in Melbourne, Australia (Abur 2018). Therefore, this research paper is collected from a qualitative data which comprised a series of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with a total of 20 South Sudanese-Australians living in Melbourne. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview data were coded and analysed

using thematic and narrative analysis techniques of the key themes in the findings. There were eleven males and nine females, with ages ranging from 18 to 64 years, who volunteered to participate in this study. Participants had been living in Australia between two and 14 years at the time of their interview. Participants were invited to share their settlement experiences in relation to their settlement journey in Australia. The interview questions were designed to capture the participants' lived experiences of settlement, family functioning and general wellbeing. Questions either pertained directly to settlement experiences/difficulties. The questions were generally framed in a way to describe settlement experiences in Australia including some obstacles hindering wellbeing of individuals and families. Most interviews were conducted in English as most of the participants were able and comfortable to share their stories in English. The first author's ability to speak Sudanese Arabic, Dinka and Kiswahili at times aided in translating/paraphrasing content or words in those community languages. The background of the wider South Sudanese community was cautiously considered because of their experiences of forced displacement, political persecution and the trauma of civil wars in South Sudan.

Findings and Discussion

> *Mental health issues in community are not only affecting individuals who are mentally sick but does have cascading consequences on general society. It is happening now in community on social media issues, people are abusing each other and creating serious allegations or defamations (**Participant 7, 38-year-old male, 10 years in Australia**).*

 People who experienced conflict and lived long in a difficult situation such as refugee camps are more likely to suffer trauma and other mental health problems (Abur, 2018).   More importantly, the continuation of conflict and poverty in many parts of Africa has caused historical neglect of mental health services and policies that would mainstream mental health on the health and wellbeing national agenda (Tempany, 2009). Both government and private agencies have overlooked the importance of addressing mental health issues in war affected communities. For instance, people living with severe mental health conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar mood disorder and severe depression (Kakuma, et al, 2010). South Sudan is one of the countries affected by war, poverty, infectious diseases and mental health problems. The South Sudanese people who migrated and settled in Australia are also facing serious mental health issues as the effects of conflict and settlement difficulties.

*Yes, settlement difficulties bring up many mental health issues in the South Sudanese community. We see people struggling with mental health issues, but they are not willing to seek help (**Participant 8, 25-year-old female, 14 years in Australia**).*

Mental Health and General Wellbeing for South Sudanese Refugees

*In many cases, we are confused by the difficulties and many issues that make our mind not function well as we were previously. Men are abandoning their families and some women are not copping well with children. This is just iceberg of mental health and general wellbeing matters facing South Sudanese-Australians. We know that a woman driven her own children into a lake in western suburb of Melbourne. She was not normal to me (**Participant 18, 30-year-old female, 15 years in Australia**).*

One of the ongoing problems in the South Sudanese community is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is often not discussed openly, but it is a significant issue when it comes to general wellbeing of family and community. This area of mental health is largely ignored or neglected in the South Sudanese community. There are some support services in mainstream Australian health and allied systems supporting individuals and families that are struggling with mental health issues or general wellbeing issues. The South Sudanese people are unwilling to seek mental health support services because of culture-related fear; there is a taboo associated with mental illness (Abur 2012, Marlowe 2010, and Tipping 2011).

*Mental health issues are often not appropriately addressed in African community groups because some people refuse not to discuss their mental health issues with families or friends. Also they don't seek support services outside of community (**Participant 11, 28-year-old female, 8 years in Australia**).*

According to Marlowe (2010), people are more likely than not to decline services which are not part of their belief system. For South Sudanese people, mental health problems are not often discussed because of traditional beliefs and taboos associated with mental illness (Abur 2012). When discussing mental health issues, South Sudanese people respond very differently to people raised in western societies (Abur, 2018, Marlowe 2010). This has sometimes made it difficult to offer counselling for trauma to particular refugees such as those in the South Sudanese community.

> *There are many people in the South Sudanese community who are struggling with settlement issues and this leads to many other mental health problems. Some people remain isolated because of their mental health problems (**Participant 12, 22-year-old female, 11 years in Australia**)*

Settlement issues affect the well-being of individuals and families from refugee backgrounds during their settlement period, and often become overwhelming (Atem 2011; Hadgkiss et al. 2012). Generally, there are significant wellbeing and mental health issues that require some urgent interventions for refugees to overcome some of the many settlement issues (Lejukole 2008; Mamer 2010). The wellbeing and mental health issues include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There is no intention here to either diagnose or label all refugees, but rather to acknowledge trauma as one of the settlement challenges for people from refugee backgrounds who have experienced appalling situations in refugee camps and elsewhere in transit (Marlowe 2010, 2011a). Their experiences in conflict areas and later in refugee camps are important factors in their ability to resettle.

> *Settlement journey and experiences can be frustrating sometimes. One can feel lost in the jungle sometimes and not knowing where to start and what to do. There are too many problems, starting with family, children are going their own ways, wife and husband are not agreeing on small issues. If you are a man, you think of taking your bag and go back to war and leave children with their mother (**Participant 14, 23-year-old male, 9 years in Australia**)*

During the resettlement and settlement process, refugees face many challenges including learning a new language, finding employment, gaining an understanding of the systems and culture of the host country and dealing with discrimination (Abur & Spaaij 2016, Baker-Lewton, et al 2017). There are also numerous stresses associated with being separated from family members, including navigating the family reunification process in Australia; profound feelings of homesickness; and isolation having come from a communitarian background (Abur & Spaaij 2016). These challenges can impede refugees from achieving well-being in the resettlement experience (Marlowe, Harris & Lyons 2014, Lejukole 2008; Tipping 2011, Renzaho & Vignjevic 2011). The length of time needed for refugees to settle and to feel settled–is closely linked to the number of support services provided. Support with income, housing, employment, education and health care assists integration into the local community and plays an important role in enabling refugees to rebuild their lives and sense of self (Abur & Spaaij 2016, Marlowe 2010).

Understanding post-trauma and wellbeing issues of South Sudanese families and individuals is important for effective delivery of support services, and policy making. There is no doubt that some, if not many, South Sudanese families and individuals have experienced some trauma and other wellbeing issues due to post-settlement and settlement experiences. There are some less tangible factors that play a vital role in the settlement process. These include feeling safe and secure; gradual regaining of a sense of self-worth and dignity; regaining a sense of control over one's life; resolving guilt; and processing grief around the loss of identity and country (Abur, 2018, Refugee Council of Australia, 2010).

Social isolation is one of the settlement difficulties for people who have no network and other supports around them. Some of the members within South Sudanese community are extremely engaged in hate speech through social media. Psychological stress and despair are caused by lack of participation and connection during the settlement period. The experience of social isolation is a problem that could lead to self-isolation, stress, frustration and anger, negative thoughts about life in general and purpose of living. There is always a trend of ignorance about the extent of mental problems in community and how the stigma/taboo of mental illness can be dealt with.

> *Social isolation is a big thing for people who stay at home without socialising outside their homes. Sometimes they become aggressive to themselves and their family members and cannot learn or see the world in a big picture* [sic]. ***(Participant 8, 25-year-old female, 14 years in Australia)***

Family Functioning and Social Problems

Family settling in new country is not an easy journey for many South Sudanese people who migrated and settled in Australia or other parts of the world. There is often a high level of confusion for many families and individuals when confronted with social change and settlement issues. There is a strong trend towards family dysfunction because of social change and welfare dependency. Many families have experienced some pressure in maintaining relationships either between parents or between parents and their children, especially teenagers (Renzaho, et al 2011). These relationship issues in families result from social and cultural change due to settlement pressures. Family breakdown and intergenerational conflict were trends participants pointed out as part of their settlement challenges.

*Culture is a big thing; people are struggling with change and fear of losing your own culture and replacing it with a different culture. Change is not an easy thing for many people; there is a fear of [the] unknown attached to change. There are lots of cultural issues that still exist or [are] practised within the South Sudanese community. I think people need to ask themselves where they want to be in the next 10 or 20 years. If people want to remain in Australia, they must accept change and be ready to go through changes and beyond. Unless they want to go back to South Sudan, then that is a question in terms of accepting change and adjusting to Australia. **(Participant 18, 30-year-old female, 15 years in Australia**)*

Cultural change is one of the big issues faced by the South Sudanese families in Australia during their settlement journey. Another participant echoed the preceding quote that social change and culture was affecting South Sudanese people and other African people in Australia as they were born and raised in a different environment to Australia.

*Culture and social changes affect South Sudanese people and African migrants as they adapt to Australian social life. People who were born in Africa were raised in a different social environment, which is not the same as the Australian way of life/ social situations. **(Participant 9, 30-year-old female, 12 years in Australia**)*

Financial hardship

Lack of employment and financial hardship contribute to other settlement problems such as inability to afford rent for families and individuals who are not working (Abur;2018, Abdelkerim & Grace,2012). There is a link between mental health problems and unemployment, given the high level of financial stress that families and individuals from refugee backgrounds experience when they are not employed (Abur, 2018, Abur & Spaaji, 2016). The gravity of mental illness is heightened when there is lack of financial security. The excerpt below describes a common experience among the South Sudanese people who are not employed.

The cost of renting a house was very high and everything was tough. We later lost the house because of financial problems. We joined one [of] our family members in Melbourne and shared the accommodation which was later better, but again the house was not [big] enough for us all. Sometimes living as a family is better than living alone in terms of housing: accommodation can be so challenging and difficult to manage

financially when you are not working. Getting housing is one of the many challenges that refugees face, especially when they have no work. They cannot afford to pay rent through Centrelink payments. (***Participant 7, 38-year-old male, 10 years in Australia)***

Modern employment theory argues that there are significant benefits of employment for refugee communities in Australia (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012, Abur & Spaaji, 2016) Further, employment has important social benefits for individuals, families, neighbourhoods, and communities. Financial benefit of employment is linked to stable family situation and mental health outcome such as decreased crime rates, reduced drug and alcohol abuse, and stable healthy families (Cullen 1999; Forstater 2006). Employment is particularly significant for refugee communities as it assists in enabling people to integrate more easily into the host community. Financial independence, opportunities to enhance skills, build social networks and contribute to society all aid in the process of establishing a sense of home in a new country and creating a positive self-identity (Cholewinski 2010; Trewin 2001).

Supports from community members of newly arrived individuals and families help to reduce some of the settlement difficulties for those who have no relatives to assist them.

Some of us had no formal or informal network and connection when we came here. Everything appeared complicated to do it on your own. Parents are stressed and young people are also stressed with what is happening between schools and home. I'm aware of some people who are almost giving up on their lives because of settlement difficulties and trauma (***Participant 8, 25-year-old female, 14 years in Australia).***

Successful settlement and integration come when there are enough support services to offer advice, guidance, and active participation in education and employment, as well as in sport, particularly for young people. In this study, participants were asked to describe the settlement process from their own personal experiences and understanding. One participant highlighted the broad range of settlement success or failure:

Settlement is a hard thing to measure, how to define successful settlement? Settlement and integration have been misunderstood: integration and settlement are long-term work, which cannot be achieved within a short time. People can still work, doing jobs they do not really like or enjoy. This can make them feel homesick sometimes when they feel unwelcome due to some issues. Some people struggle with settlement issues such as housing, unemployment and other [things] such as racism and discrimination. To me,

there are people who are really doing well in terms of settlement and there are people that are struggling with challenges. But the thing is: how do you define successful settlement and unsettlement? **(Participant 18, 30-year-old females, 15 years in Australia)**

There were also differences in the settlement experience between young people and their parents in the South Sudanese community. Some parents or adults were and still are struggling because they miss their networks and their old ways of life.

Some are settling well, and some are still having difficulties in settling, especially the adults or parents who are still struggling lots with settlement challenges. Their ways of living in Africa are very different to the lifestyle here. They have no network and neighbourhood support as they used to chat freely in the village. Here, they have to think about bills and issues of children at school or work[ing] to pay bills. (**Participant 17, 25-year-old female, 12 years in Australia**).

Trusting on other people to tell you how to deal with little issues can be a big shock and change for some people who, perhaps, are used to being independent. Some parents in the South Sudanese community rely on their children to tell them basic information to be able to know what to do in Australia because of they have zero proficiency in the English language. One challenge has to do with finding housing for family as newly arrived people from refugee backgrounds. Some families and individuals from the South Sudanese community encountered accommodation problems as part of their settlement experiences.

*When I came to Australia, things were really new for me and my family. We thought and said to ourselves, "This will be interesting". Indeed, things became harder and harder, particularly when we were looking for accommodation, it was so difficult because none of us were working. No-one was helping us to find a house, and we had no experience in dealing with estate agents. Later on, someone helped us to get a house, but we found it difficult because we had no money to pay rent. We tried to apply for government housing, but this was also hard to get because there were many people on the waiting list. The waiting list can go for more than five years, depending on your case/situation of your family. (***Participant 20, 19-year-old female, 9 years in Australia***)*

Experience of Racism and Discrimination

This section presents general racism and discrimination experienced by the South Sudanese community members during their settlement journey. Some of the specific issues of racism and discrimination in relation to participation in employment and sport are discussed under each section later. It appears that racism and discrimination have been widely experienced in institutional settings as well as random occurrences in community neighbourhoods.

> *My sister who started her primary school at Year 5 here was told she would not do her VCE because she came from a non-English background. This was really bad for her and for her family because we believe that the school let her down. There was not enough support given to her at school. They know she came from a non-English speaking background. The school should have supported her to learn English and not say she cannot do this and that because of her poor English.* (**Participant 11, 28-year-old female, 8 years in Australia**)

Participants reported some issues of racism and discrimination based on their experiences or experiences of their family members.

> *Racism exists in schools and workplaces. Some people let their personal opinions overarch their professional responsibilities and a duty of care by becoming racist. It is not good for people to be racist to other cultures and let their professionalism down. It is not good to be emotionally negative to other people or cultures because you are adding to their emotional sorrow and you are discouraging them from growing as good citizens. I think people need to do things based on the ethical and moral duty of the schools or organisations they are working for.* (**Participant 14, 23-year-old male, 9 years in Australia**)

Consequences of racism and discrimination do affect people psychologically and limit their free moment in public places. Some participants in South Sudanese community reported that those who experienced racism and discrimination in public were fearful of going out and beyond their comfort zone again because the experiences remained with them.

> *People who experience racism remained closed and were not ready enough to go beyond their comfort zone. This is a hard thing for many of our people. It is unfortunate that racism still exists: the important message is not to let racism hold you back. When I came to Australia, I went through racism and discrimination. People used to say to us on the street, "Go back to your country," and people said to mum, "She comes from banana*

land; go back to your banana land". People used to spit at me and sometimes I went home crying and thinking, "Why did people treat me like this? What is wrong with me?" However, later I learnt that racism and discrimination should not hold me back. I have studied as much as I wanted to. I learned quickly that there are good people out there; there are good and bad people in every society. **(Participant 18, 30-year-old female, 15 years in Australia)**

The negative interactions between young people from the South Sudanese or African backgrounds with police in Melbourne have created a lack of trust in the community. This created a perception that the police officers are racially targeting young people from African community groups

I am concerned with the way police interact with young people from the African community while they expect you to integrate successfully in Australia. Police are punitive on young people, they treat them badly even when the young people have done nothing wrong and were just socialising as a group. Police can interview them as if they committed a crime. Such attitudes make it hard for young people to trust and believe that police are there to protect people – including them. Many young people from South Sudanese and other community groups believe that police treat them as a gang while they are not, but once they are treated as a gang by the authorities, they turn against the authorities and do not trust them anymore. Now many of young people are in prison and this shows the system does not support newly arrived refugees and migrants to settle better. Small issues can fuel them and if they react negatively, they will end up facing gaol. **(Participant 9, 30-year-old female, 12 years in Australia)**

Participants believed that not all South Sudanese young people were bad when it comes to poor behaviours. Some participants stated that they decided to get involved in advocacy because of young people being targeted by police officers and treating them badly.

I was involved in an advocacy group because I did not like the police targeting refugee young people, particularly black young people from Africa who are often treated or targeted by police as criminal. Look at me; I am a South Sudanese and I have never fought in my life but guess what? The police or some people think that all the South Sudanese young people are bad because they fight lots on the streets. This is not true to generalise and treat the whole community as bad people. **(Participant 12, 22-year-old female, 11 years in Australia)**.

A lack of empowerment and skills to deal with some racial issues was highlighted by participants as something affecting their community members. However, some participants had strong feelings toward claiming their rights as an Australian citizen.

> *There is no doubt in my mind and the minds of other South Sudanese that we are citizens of Australia. Although there are discrimination and racism here and there, we need to claim we are South Sudanese Australians. Nobody is going to give them that; we needed to claim this for ourselves. Many people in South Sudan respected the system; they respected the judicial system and laws. However, this does not mean people cannot be critical of some things. I do think that people eventually feel as citizens of Australia, not by holding passports, but by asking the question: "How long is it going to take?" The real point is this: People are going to go; people do need to be given opportunities in the workforce to feel that they are contributing to this society and not depend on welfare payments. When people enter the workforce and become taxpayers, involved in the army, police force, studying and so on. I think people do need to respond to racism: I am an Australian citizen as much as anyone else who thinks they are an Australian citizen.* **(Participant 19, 27-year-old female, 11 years in Australia)**

Participants believed that there was negative stereotyping of the South Sudanese community. They believe that there are people who constantly stereotype them without knowing much about their backgrounds. They also believe that people in the South Sudanese community need to stand up and talk about racism and discrimination openly.

> *Some people can judge you when they see you without knowing your background. I think the issue of racism and discrimination needs to be discussed and challenged openly. Racism and discrimination are everywhere, but the problem is that people do not want to discuss this openly. This is what makes it alive in the community: people need to be encouraged to talk about racism and discrimination openly.* (**Participant 15, 28-year-old male, 10 years in Australia**)

Ignorance can lead people to make wrong comments about other peoples' cultures or backgrounds. One of the participants described her experiences of growing up in Australia as a black child as very difficult because of the racism and discrimination she had witnessed.

> *I grew up in Australia as a black kid for over 15 years. People are often subjected to racism [pause] and the argument that Australia is not a racist country is not true. There*

is still racism in Australia compared to America. America has a long history of dealing with the black population and the black community has emerged strongly in America, while in Australia indigenous black people have been marginalised and always treated as low-class citizens. The same attitudes have now been applied to African migrants. Their rights and dignity are often undermined or ignored. The thing is, there is an open or hidden racism in Australia, which is affecting people because people that experience racism always remain isolated from the rest of the community. (**Participant 18, 30-year-old female, 15 years in Australia)**

Participants believed that casual racism is very common and is expressed in different ways such as sarcastic expressions. Some participants expressed the view that nobody liked to be talk down to, and people did not deserve to be treated in that way.

Settlement experiences can be bad sometimes when you meet people who have their personal issues with certain ethnic groups. They can try to talk you down because they don't like you or people from your background for some reason. Such people make settlement difficult because you always think; I don't deserve to be treated like this. I deserve an equal opportunity like others. It is unfortunate that there are people who aim to distract the others and deny them opportunities to grow and contribute to Australian society as good citizens. (**Participant 14, 23-year-old male, 9 years in Australia**)

Concluding Discussion

There is ample evidence in the literature to suggest that those with a refugee background have experienced some form of abuse, rape, oppression, or have witnessed horrific atrocities, including killings, looting, and destruction of personal wealth. Some have been in slavery, forced to live in exile and in shocking conditions in refugee camps (see Lejukole 2008; Mamer 2010; Marlowe 2010, 2011a). These experiences evidently affect many refugees, including those from the South Sudan, who may have been forced to live in refugee camps for many years. They bring these difficult experiences with them when engaging in resettlement programs (Mamer 2010).

South Sudanese refugees have been studied for years for post-trauma issues because of their background in the civil war, displacement, and their lives in refugee camps (see Lejukole 2008; Mamer 2010; Marlowe 2010, 2011a). In Australia, most people from South Sudanese community have no idea what trauma means from a health perspective, or how to seek help if

one has encountered traumatic challenges (Abur 2012 and Lejukole 2008). In some respects, trauma presents a powerful argument that helps people claim for recognition as refugees (Marlowe 2011a). Trauma is something that has helped many refugees gain entry into refugee camps, acquire refugee status, and access services in Australia (Marlowe 2011b). However, traumatic experiences – or being labelled as having trauma issues – can limit opportunities for refugees to integrate into their host society, as well as to obtain decent employment and participate in decision-making (Westoby 2008).

More specifically, it is not uncommon for cultures such as the South Sudanese to decline to discuss their trauma or mental health issues. Trauma is a new concept for them. It is often viewed as a weakness to talk about mental health issues. This is a general observation in relation to common attitudes and feelings around trauma and this is confirmed by other research (Abur 2012; Marlowe 2010). Some of the strengths, resilience, and coping mechanisms that assist the South Sudanese to deal internally with trauma issues, stating that many do not want to hear about post-trauma, as it labels them in negative ways (Marlowe 2010). This does not mean that there is no trauma among at least some South Sudanese people who have resettled in western countries such as Australia, and among those still living in South Sudan because of the long civil war, they have witnessed. As part of transition and settlement, families and individuals would find themselves with fewer or no skills to deal with past and present challenges in the new environment (Abur 2012; Tipping 2011).

Having social connections enhances the wellbeing and health of people through daily contact and support for social issues (Bloom 2014). Personal social wellbeing involves a person's relationship with others and how that person communicates, interacts, and socialises (Bloom 2014, Mikkonen & Raphael 2010). It can also relate to how people make friends and whether they have a sense of belonging. For example, going to the movies with friends can help to ease the daily stress of social isolation (Mikkonen & Raphael 2010). Social health and wellbeing refer to the social hierarchy of people, their financial status, living conditions, social support, level of education, acceptance of race, gender, religion, and behaviours, and access to health care (Hadgkiss et al. 2012). For refugee community groups, such as the South Sudanese community in Melbourne, their social well-being can be measured by a broad range of indicators. They include the level of income of members and their families, social participation and social support networks, current and previous education, understanding social and political systems, understanding critical challenges of settlement (such as living conditions, racism and

discrimination, and culture shock), and other factors such as city lifestyle (Mikkonen & Raphael 2010).

The complex roles played by these social determinants of the health and well-being of those who feel socially excluded are at an extreme level for the disadvantaged and may be experienced both directly and indirectly (Hadgkiss et al. 2012). The disadvantaged are more likely to experience social exclusion from decent employment opportunities, due to their backgrounds as refugees, having English as a second language or lacking certain skills and qualifications (Abur & Spaaij 2016). It is very common for refugees to lack supportive relationships, suffer social isolation, and face mistrust of and by others. Racism and discrimination further increase stress and other unsettling emotions (Abur & Spaaij 2016). Stressful living conditions make it extremely hard to take up physical leisure activities or to practice healthy eating habits because most of one's energy is directed towards coping day to day. Such conditions can cause continuing feelings of shame, insecurity, and worthlessness, which affect psychological health (Bloom 2014, Mikkonen &Raphael 2010). The social environment brings a new complexity in terms of health and wellbeing (Hadgkiss et al. 2012). For instance, lack of employment and participation in sport can cause many problems for individuals. As Kakuma et al (2010) posit, a lack of participation in social activities within the local community creates inequality, and feelings of stigma and social isolation, which can lead to serious health and wellbeing issues.

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