EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS OF REFUGEES
IN CANADA: PHYSICALLY IN CANADA BUT MENTALLY BACK HOME

By

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ABSTRACT

For most refugees that were forced to flee their home countries due to wars and political persecutions, Canada has offered them a second chance to start life anew. However, to start life anew is easier to say than to experience it oneself. The aim of this paper is to analyze and identify common barriers that prevent refugees from integrating into the Canadian labour market. The study takes an integrative approach and frames the analysis by using educational, employment, psychological, and social disciplinary insights. This is a mixed-method study that uses both, the qualitative and quantitative approaches and it is based on secondary research analysis using literature from academic and grey sources. As a result of doing this, the findings show that all four disciplinary perspectives share a common viewpoint that internal/external alienation as well as illiteracy and a lack of employable skills are major factors that negatively affect the employment perspectives of refugees in Canada. Furthermore, the findings also infer that all four disciplinary insights have gaps that portray refugees mainly as victims in the Canadian labour market, ignore culture shocks as potential factors that lead to unemployment, overgeneralize the employment ambitions of refugees and ignore the diversity among refugees.
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Introduction

Wars, political instability, and persecution are often the reasons why people decide to leave their native countries behind and seek refuge elsewhere. The concept of a refugee dates back to ancient Greece (F. E. A., 1944), and although lately, all news channels focus on refugees that risk their lives to escape Syria (Calabresi, 2015), there were also other mass exoduses of refugees in the past, such as during the World War II (Hiromi, 2014), and the ethnic conflict in Bosnia during the early 1990s (Blitz, 2015). It is estimated that by the end of 2014, there were 60 million refugees already displaced, and the numbers throughout the world continue to grow every day (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015). Fortunately, Canada’s gates for refugees have never been shut, and each year “12,000 to 16,000” refugees settle permanently in Canada (Lu, Frenette, & Schellenberg, 2015). While experiences and reasons for seeking refugee status in Canada may vary among individuals, every refugee must start a new life and integrate into the new Canadian culture, such as learning the new language and most importantly, finding work.

Research Question and Rationale

What challenges do refugees in Canada experience when they try to pursue employment opportunities and to what extent do refugees refuse to join the Canadian workforce?

This essay will focus to uncover obstacles that prevent legal refugees in Canada to obtain work and reach socioeconomic equilibrium. I am interested in this topic for two reasons. First, I am an “experienced” refugee who is aware of how difficult it can be to adapt to a new culture, but I know very little about the barriers that refugees face when looking for work. This topic will help me expand my knowledge and gain an insight into the experiences of refugees who look for work in Canadian metropolises. Second, the Canadian Council for Refugees report (2011)
suggests that access to employment for refugees is an area that requires further research. This ensures that my interest in research on this particular topic will be beneficial not only to me, but also to the entire community. And finally, this research question will likely raise more questions for future research that could potentially help develop programs that would assess refugees and help them orientate and set long-term goals in terms of finding employment and staying employed in Canada.

**Research Method**

To conduct this research, I use a mixed-method that includes qualitative and quantitative approach, and I use secondary sources that include the literature from academic and grey sources. The academic sources are searched through the following databases: EBSCOHost, Journal Storage (JSTOR), and SAGE journals. The grey sources are primarily obtained via Statistics Canada and other Canadian government websites such as Canadian Immigration and Citizenship and Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. In order to find common ground between the disciplinary insights, I review and analyze the academic sources first. The reason I chose to review the academic sources first was to identify as many variables (e.g. education, work experience, and the English language proficiency) as possible that have direct impact on employability of refugees in Canada. After I have identified all the variables, my next step was to identify gaps between the disciplinary insights. In order to do so, I reviewed and analyzed grey sources and then compared academic disciplinary insights to governmental statistical facts.
Justification for an Interdisciplinary Approach

The question as to the challenges that refugees face when looking for work in Canada is very complex. When looking out for work, a refugee is faced not only with one issue such as language barrier (Hou & Beiser, 2006), but he or she faces many other barriers such as racism and a lack of Canadian work experience (Levine-Rasky, Beaudoin, & St. Clair, 2014; Rousseau, Ferradji, Mekki-Berrada, & Jamil, 2013; Wilson-Forsberg & Sethi, 2015). In order to gain an insight and answer this or any other complex question, more than one disciplinary perspective is imperative. As Repko (2012) notes, a “question is complex when it is composed of multiple components or agents connected through nonlinear as well as linear relationships” (p. 85). In fact, multiple disciplines look at this same problem and aim to answer this same question, but there is actually no unified answer. Furthermore, a multidisciplinary approach, as Repko (2012) adds “makes no attempt to integrate their insights” (p. 20). Therefore, a complex question needs flexibility, not rigidity, and disciplinary approaches have a tendency to be less flexible (Szostak, 2012).

Literature Review

Educational Insight

Refugees that have no educational background face serious obstacles to learn the English language and become employable, and some researchers (Creese, 2010; Hou et. al., 2006; Tomic, 2013) mutually agree that refugees have difficulty finding work when possessing no or very little English skills. A study by Hou et. al. (2006) shows that the acquisition of the English language among refugees in Canada rapidly improves within a few first years after arrival, however, the improvement of English is closely linked to the educational background of refugees. Formal education plays a key role in terms of predicting the “post-migration language
fluency”, and refugees that have no formal education are less likely to learn English and even less likely to seek work (Hou et. al., 2006, p. 141). Another study by Benseman (2014) emphasizes that while some refugees struggle with illiteracy and must study hard to learn English, a nurturing and a trusting school environment is of crucial importance for some refugees to successfully learn the language and integrate economically and socially into Canadian society (Benseman, 2014). Therefore the Canadian government donates funds and has over the years been very supporting of language programs that help refugees not only acquire necessary language skills, but also help them prepare to join the Canadian workforce (Hou et. al., 2006).

**Employment Insight**

Most prospective employers often devalue the work experience of refugees, and they are often segregated into so called “refugee jobs” (Asanin Dean & Wilson, 2009; Jackson & Bauder, 2013). A study by Jackson et. al. (2013) investigates the employment experiences of refugees in Toronto, Ontario and concludes that most refugees aside from being discriminated based on their gender or race, they are also segregated into temporary and part-time jobs. Aside from the fact that these temporary and part-time jobs are extremely low paid, these types of jobs are also dead end jobs that offer no career advancement (Jackson et. al., 2013). Many others who do not have any employable skills or Canadian work experience are expected to volunteer even though that does not necessarily guarantee an access to a higher paid job later (Wilson-Forsberg et. al., 2015).

Some refugees that come to Canada are literate and speak English, but even this is not enough because if they speak English with a strong, pronounced foreign accent then they are often devalued and discriminated against by potential employers (Creese, 2010; Tomic, 2013). Creese (2010) extracts from her study that African-English accent is a huge disadvantage for
African refugees in Vancouver because many employers are not enthusiastic to hire them. In other words, refugees that have difficulties to master North American English accent have lower chances to obtain higher positions and are often victims of marginalization and discrimination (Creese, 2010). Therefore, it is certain that despite the fact that Canada is multicultural, bilingualism can have a negative impact on an individual and his or her career or employment prospective (Tomic, 2013).

**Psychological Insight**

Wars and persecution leave many physical and emotional scars that prevent individuals from achieving economic success in Canada (Beiser, Puente-Duran, & Hou, 2015; Beiser, Simich, Pandalangat, Nowakowski, & Fu, 2012;; McKeary & Newbold, 2010; Simich, 2010). Based on a community research study in Toronto, Ontario, Wilson, Murtaza and Shakya (2010) conclude that many refugees arrive in Canada with deep inflicted psychological wounds because many were subject to or they have witnessed crimes against humanity in their home countries, however, language barrier and financial difficulties only worsen their psychological well-being after their arrival to Canada. Furthermore, Guruge and Butt (2015) emphasize that young female refugees are more likely to suffer from mental disorders after their arrival in Canada compared to young male refugees, and a network of people (e.g. family and school) are of crucial importance for their well-being and an easier integration into the community and the workforce. Evidence also shows that community support is very important because it does not only help refugees escape isolation and lessen their mental suffering, but it can make them feel “at home” (Simich, 2010).
Social Insight

Certain political events such as the 9/11 are often the reasons why certain ethnic groups are stereotyped and heavily discriminated against by the larger society (Jamil & Rousseau, 2012; Levine-Rasky et. al., 2013). But, the Middle Eastern refugees experience discrimination in more intensity compared to the Middle Eastern immigrants because the latter enjoy higher socioeconomic status and a better integrity (Jamil et. al., 2012). Additionally, refugees from the Middle East are trapped in “socioeconomic marginalization” that exacerbates a serious barrier towards reaching a socioeconomic equilibrium (Jamil et. al., 2012, p. 385). Similarly, refugees from northern parts of Africa speak French and integrate well in Quebec, but the intensity of prejudice and discrimination based on their religion is very high (Rousseau et. al., 2013).

Therefore, it is obvious that the war on terror has put the burden of guilt on many Muslims in Canada that at the same time segregates them from the rest of the Canadian community as well as prevents them from full integration into the Canadian labour market (Jamil et. al, 2012). On the contrary, there is a historic social stigma against Roma across Europe and North America and although more than 60,000 Roma live in Canada, this ethnic group is perceived as an undesirable group by the larger society that creates obstacles for Roma to find work and integrate (Levine-Rasky et. al., 2014). Undesirable ethnic groups are often forced to struggle with poverty, and their employment outlooks look not very positive and promising (Carter & Osborne, 2009; Makwarimba, Stewart, Simich, Makube, Shizha, & Anderson, 2013; Levine-Rasky et. al., 2014).

Disciplinary Insights Common Ground

Although each of the aforementioned disciplinary perspectives provides an insight into the challenges that refugees face when looking for work in Canada, there is also a basis of mutual agreement among disciplines. I have identified two common ground areas,
internal/external alienation and illiteracy, that interconnect educational, employment, psychological, and social insights and strengthen their perspectives through integration.

All four disciplinary insights to some extent acknowledge that refugees are internally and externally alienated from other Canadians. The internal alienation refers to deep emotional scars such as war trauma that evolve into post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Wilson, Murtaza and Shakya, 2010). The external alienation occurs when refugees feel not welcome in the Canadian society because of racism and intolerance (Jamil et. al., 2012). Although it may appear that internal/external alienation are two separate concepts because the former represents internal and the latter represents external conflicts, these two concepts are in fact very closely related. Educational, employment, and social perspectives jointly share the idea that refugee’s employment ambitions are seriously thwarted if there is a serious language barrier (educational insight), poor job outlooks (employment insight), and socially negative attitudes towards refugees (social insight). For instance, an individual who suffers from severe PTSD may not be fully capable to learn English, but English is a prerequisite to find work and communicate with other Canadians. In reverse, lack of employment and English skills lead towards unemployment that could potentially exacerbate the symptoms of anxiety and PTSD (Simich, 2010, p. 71). Therefore, it can be concluded that disciplinary insights concur that refugees are caught in a continuous internal/external cycles that negatively affect refugees’ employment outlooks.

Aside from internal-external alienation, there is also a common assumption among educational, employment, psychological, and social disciplinary insights that it is extremely difficult for refugees to find work, and especially for those that are illiterate and have an inadequate educational background. Learning a new language can be quite exhausting and discouraging, especially for an individual who is learning a new language starting from the letter
A. But it may also take months, even years, to learn a new language, acquire adequate working skills, and expand career networks. During those months or years, refugees are often involuntarily volunteering or working for extremely low wages (Wilson-Forsberg et. al., 2015). It means an individual who struggles to learn English (educational insight) is also stuck in an unpaid and undervalued job (employment insight). But again, learning English and gaining necessary working skills does not guarantee success in finding work, especially if a refugee belongs to a socially stereotyped and prejudiced group (Carter et. al., 2009; Makwarimba et. al., 2013). A socially undesirable group may often be a target of stereotypes and prejudice (social insight) that could potentially seriously demotivate individuals (psychological insight) to seek work. All four disciplinary insights overlap in terms of linguo-socio-economic experiences of refugees in Canada and acknowledge that refugees are challenged to learn new language and acquire necessary employment skills.

**Disciplinary Gaps**

Despite the fact that disciplines many times overlap on this particular issue about refugees and employment, each discipline is limited in its capacity to address this “complex” problem because of disciplinary boundaries that do not permit transgressions (Repko, 2012), and everything that falls between those disciplinary gaps is something, as Bogenhold (2013) refers to as “the blind spots”. These blind spots are not necessarily failures of disciplines, but they are the cues for an interdisciplinary researcher to lead a study into a new direction. After careful analysis of all four disciplinary insights, I have detected as well as gained an insight into three important blind spots: a) excessive victimization of refugees in the world of employment, b) ignorance of culture shock as a potential factor that leads to unemployment, and c) overgeneralization of employment ambitions among refugees.
First, all disciplinary insights portray refugees mainly as victims in the world of employment despite the fact that any kind of employment, paid or unpaid, is really an opportunity for refugees to integrate mentally and physically into Canadian society. None of the disciplinary insights provide adequate attention to the importance of those often devalued and unpaid jobs. In reality, volunteering may at first appear very unattractive because one must accept full job responsibilities without getting paid, but it is often a “stepping stone to paid work” for individuals who lack employable skills (Trembath, Balandin, Stancliffe, & Togher, 2010). Through volunteering, refugees get a chance to interact with other people, gain new skills, and at the same time make new friendships and expand a network of potential employers in the future. Unfortunately, there is no statistical evidence that is specifically focused on how often refugees engage in volunteer work, but Turcotte (as published in Statistics Canada, 2015) estimates that younger Canadian people in general (between the ages of 15 and 34) are more likely to volunteer compared to older Canadian population (between the ages of 55 and 74). Based on this report, it can be assumed that refugees under the age of 35 perceive volunteering and low income jobs more positively and are probably more likely to take the opportunity to volunteer and improve their career outlooks compared to refugees that are over the age of 55. It is understandable that older refugees may not have career aspirations like younger generation, but it does not mean that volunteer and low paid jobs cannot be beneficial to older refugees too. Evidence shows that volunteering is highly beneficial to elderly because it has a positive effect on mental disorders such as anxiety and depression (Anderson et. al., 2014). This is not to deny that refugees face difficult times upon arrival or to overgeneralize and assume that all refugees have identical experience in terms of employment in Canada. However, it is of crucial importance to point out that volunteer and low paid jobs should not be underestimated because
they are an enormous opportunity for refugees to engage in the community and improve their mental health, self-esteem, and prepare them for a better career or job opportunities in the future.

Second, all disciplinary insights disregard culture shock that demotivate many refugees, especially men, to seek work and integrate into the Canadian society. Culture shock is very subjective and probably one of the most common roadblocks that put refugees in a situation to be in a constant state of alienation in relation to Canadian society. According to Allen (2014), police-reported hate crimes have steadily risen from 2011 in Ontario, and the targets of hate crime are usually visible minority groups such as Muslims and Asians. Such hate crimes are potential factors that frighten refugees when seeking work and open communication with Canadians. On the cultural side, however, Canada is a country that offers equal employment opportunities to both men and women, but this is quite problematic for refugees that come from strict patriarchal cultures. Men become very disappointed with their lives when they see their wives become financially independent, and as a coping strategy, those men tend to withdraw from Canadian life by not seeking work and socializing only with men from their home countries (Chambers & Ganesan, 2005; Anderson, Reimer Kirkhan, Waxler-Morrison, Herbert, Murphy, & Richardson, 2005). What makes this matter even more problematic is that refugees tend to segregate into neighbourhoods with other refugees of the same ethnic origin, and that “social isolation” prevents them from acquiring English and working skills (Feng & Picot, 2004). This perfectly explains that culture shock is a reason why many refugees never join the Canadian workforce and although they live in Canada, they are mentally and culturally back home.

And finally third, the employment ambitions of refugees are either too overgeneralized or entirely overlooked by most disciplines. In fact, all four disciplinary insights to some extent emphasize that unemployment among refugees is linked either to psychological or social factors.
However, this gives a false perception that all refugees have identical employment ambitions, but at times there is a wrongful portrayal of refugees as a “drain on Canada’s economic resources” (Jackson et. al., 2013). It is accurate that refugees are heavily dependant on welfare upon arrival (Jackson et. al., 2013), and most need a long time to adjust to the Canadian system (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2002). But Statistics Canada (2014) reports that, “SA [social assistance] rates are generally lowest among single individuals… and generally highest among lone mothers and couples with more than two children” (para. 46). This aforementioned statistical evidence that lone refugee mothers and parents with multiple children are welfare dependent hints that child care is a potential factor that thwarts career aspirations of young refugee women and often prevents one parent from joining the Canadian workforce. But even welfare dependence is not something ongoing for years, as Lu et. al., (as reported in Statistics Canada, 2015) explain that the first four years from the day of arrival are most critical when refugees seek and are heavily dependent on welfare. Age is also an important factor that can potentially predetermine the employment ambitions of refugees. It is mostly the older refugees (over the age of 54) that are welfare dependant compared to younger refugees (under the age of 35) (Statistics Canada, para. 60). The employment ambitions of refugees should not be overgeneralized or overlooked because that does not only create a false image about refugees among Canadians, but this also ignores the diversity among refugees.

**Conclusion**

Canada’s doors for refugees have been open in the past and continue to be open in the present. But those open doors do not guarantee economic integration into the Canadian labour market. The focus of this study was to uncover common barriers and obstacles that prevent refugees in Canada from full integration into the labour market.
After a careful integration of four (educational, employment, psychological, and social) disciplinary insights, it became evident that refugees are caught in an internal and external cycle of alienation from Canadian society. Psychological barriers are serious factors that often force refugees to stay unemployed, but poor English, a lack of employable skills and continuous social pressures, especially racism and prejudice, are equal in having a negative impact on refugees’ employment outlooks. Furthermore, the disciplinary insights share a common thought that illiteracy and a lack of employable skills have serious impact on employment perspectives too. It takes time to become proficient in the English language and during that time, refugees often have no other choice but to become volunteers or they become stuck in financially stunted and unrewarding jobs. Although all four disciplinary insights share a common understanding of the obstacles that refugees face when looking for work; they have also left certain gaps unaddressed. It is entirely true that refugees are forced to accept unrewarding jobs, but on the positive side such jobs are opportunities not only to acquire necessary skills, but also expand a network of people and open the gates to future employment opportunities. Volunteering makes a positive impact on young people’s employment ambitions and older people’s mental well-being too. Additionally, cultural shock is also a major factor that prevents refugees from joining the Canadian workforce. First, high incidences of hate crimes against refugees from certain ethnic groups scares away refugees from integration into the Canadian culture. Second, men from patriarchal societies cannot simply accept the fact that their partners are financially independent. Instead of adapting to the new Canadian way of life, some men fully isolate themselves socially and that way isolate themselves from employment opportunities. And finally, while most refugees are welfare dependent for the first few years, refugees are diverse and have different employment ambitions. Their ambitions are mainly linked to their age and marital status when
they arrive in Canada, but again, refugees are so much diverse that it is absolutely necessary to work with each refugee individually in order to uncover their employment ambitions.

The questions about refugees and their integration in to the Canadian labour market are not very easy to answer, and it is even more arduous to find instant solutions. But where there is no will, there is no success and where there is no support, there is no integration.
References


