

“Work stimulates you to think about your future”: The importance of employment during social integration from the perspectives of young Somali men living in Australia and USA

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study investigating the importance of employment for young Somali men living in Australia and USA. The study, based on 30 young men participants, explores their experiences and perspectives about the role of employment during the transitional period of social integration into the receiving countries. The paper also compares young men’s experiences and perceptions of the importance of employment with their parents’ experiences. Scholarly findings on refugee employment are compared to the observations discussed in this research. Some differences between the young participants and their parents have emerged, yet, most of the respondents shared similar views about the importance of employment.

Key Words:

Somali, young men, parents, employment, integration, Melbourne, Minneapolis.

Introduction

People have been on the move since the beginning of human existence (Berry, Phinney, Sam & Vedder, 2006). The movement of ethnically, racially and religiously diverse migrants across continents is a relatively new phenomenon, and has been on the increase since the beginning of the twentieth century (Binder & Tosic, 2002). This presents “both opportunities and challenges for migrants, and receiving societies alike” (Berry et al., 2006: 1). Some of these people migrate voluntarily, hoping for a better life, but many are forced to migrate because they face persecution due to their beliefs, political opinions, or membership in a particular social group (Binder & Tosic, 2002).

Along with the nomadic way of life that still remains in the Somali blood, people are afflicted with prolonged civil war which creates hardships and the need to move. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Somalis fled from their homeland seeking a refuge and shelter in countries such as Australia and the USA. Due to ongoing violence and conflict,

Somalia remains one of the countries generating the highest number of displaced people and refugees in the world. There are more than 1.4 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Somalia while over 560,000 Somalis live as refugees in neighbouring and nearby countries (UNHCR, 2010 online)

The paper draws on the findings from my 2011 PhD thesis and, in doing so, presents a story of the experiences of young Somali men who have fled Somalia and are now living in the Australia and the

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USA, explaining their perspectives of the importance of employment in their receiving countries. The overall aim of this paper is to investigate and compare the perspectives and experiences of young Somali men living in Australia and the USA in relation to the importance of employment during their social integration. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify young Somali men's experiences and perceptions of the importance of employment in Australia and USA.
2. Identify their parents' perceptions of the importance of employment in contrast to young people's point of view.

The paper commences with a brief literature review which provides the context for study. Next, the methodologies used in the study are explained, describing briefly Somali community profiles in Melbourne and Minneapolis. The qualitative findings are discussed and focus on young men's experiences and perceptions of the importance of employment in Australia and USA. The paper specifically explores the importance of employment in fulfilling an individual needs, health and well-being, understanding cultures and developing negotiation skills and language acquisition, preventing crimes and providing a sense of direction, instilling a sense of belonging and providing positive role models.

Literature review

Having a job has constantly been identified as a major factor positively influencing many issues related to the social integration of refugees such as: self-reliance, restoring self-esteem and confidence, engaging with the host society, improving language and social skills and planning for the future (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore, Craig, Goodson & Sankey, 2006). Employment structures their psychological make-up and the cycle of their daily life activities in positive and productive ways (Bloch, 2002; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Giddens, 1993). It develops a sense of security and sense of belonging to the receiving country (Phillimore et al., 2003). Due to its importance in the adaptation to new milieu, the refugees must, first and foremost, find employment, which then paves the way for better social integration (Carmon, 1981). Refugees' employment and integration into the labour market are crucial points in their integration into the host society (Heimonen & Julkunen, 2006; Schedler & Glastra, 2000).

On the other hand, the consequences of unemployment for refugees, particularly youth, include a greater risk of mental health, a greater likelihood of criminality, lack of confidence in finding work, poverty, low social mobility and social status (Heimonen & Julmkunen, 2006; Melia, 2004). For instance, Heimonen and Julkunen, (2006) find that, while migrants and refugees employed in Germany are satisfied with their health, unemployed migrants and refugees are less satisfied with their health and with their lives in general (Heimonen and Julkunen, 2006). Similarly, Bloch (2002) finds that, regardless of the types of jobs they have, the majority of refugee employees in the UK were generally more satisfied with their life than unemployed ones. Recent studies show that refugee youth with unemployed parents have negative experiences from their peer groups, such as teasing or being paid no attention by their teachers (Montgomery & Foldspang, 2007). Refugees who are unemployed are more likely to be marginalised from the wider community than those who are working (Bloch, 2002; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007).

Methodologies

Ethnographic research

This study is a qualitative investigation comparing the experiences of young men living in Minneapolis, USA, with their counterparts living in Melbourne, Australia. The study was carried out in two field sites, the northwest suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, and the Cedar Riverside neighbourhood of Minneapolis, USA. The total number of formal interviews conducted as part of the study was 80 representing 30 young participants aged 16-25, and 50 other interviewees, including parents and key community members. This study is informed ethnographically. This type of research is particularly well suited for studying “hard-to-access groups”, such as refugees and immigrants, or groups resistant to survey methods (Hudelson, 1996).

At the beginning, the research plan aimed at keeping the balance between female and male participants but during the pilot project in stage one, it was evident that girls were not comfortable discussing some matters related to gender relationships with me while boys did not mind. Islam teaches that interactions between men and women, who are not related, should be restricted in both the public and private spheres. Culturally, it is often taboo (especially by elders) for a woman to have a relationship with an unrelated man, but there is more flexibility for an interviewer’s instructions with Somali men. These gender divisions made it difficult for the researcher to discuss a range of issues with young women. For that reason, the researcher decided to drop young women.

Methods of data collection and sampling

Primary data was mostly gathered through oral/narrative methods, which are best suited to Somali culture as well as to the participant parents’ levels of literacy. Data sources included audio recorded unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups and field participant observations. The sampling strategy of this study was purposive, using a range of specific strategies including snowball sampling, and key informant sampling through community networks.

Young participants’ socio-demographic characteristics

Among those living in Melbourne, all but two of the young people were born in Somalia. One was born in Australia and the other in Saudi Arabia. Their ages ranged from 16 to 25. Eight of the 15 young participants lived with both parents, and four young participants lived with their mothers only. One young man lived alone, one was married, one lived with his siblings and one lived with his mother and his uncle, who was also his stepfather. Most young people were from large families.

Melbourne participants had lived in Australia for an average of 11 years. In terms of length of residence, all but one has been in Australia for between seven to 15 years. One young man was born in Australia and lived here almost all his life, and one young man had lived in Melbourne for two and a half years. Eight out of 15 participants were studying at the time of the interview; one was studying at university, one at TAFE, one at ESL and the rest at high school. Two of these students had part-time jobs at the time of the interview. Seven out of 15 were not studying at the time of the interview and five of these seven who were not studying had full time jobs and two had part-time jobs. Again, guardians of the young people had jobs, four did not and one did not state his guardian’s employment situation.

In the Minneapolis study, all but one participant was born in Somalia (one young participant was born in Kenya). Their ages ranged from 17 to 25. Only three out of the 15 young people lived with both their parents, six young participants lived with their single mothers, a young man with his father who was married to another woman, two young participants with their older siblings, two with their uncles, one with his aunt and one lived alone. Most of these young people were from large families ranging from seven to 12 members.

In terms of lengths of residence in the USA, all of them except three young participants had lived in USA for between seven to 16 years. One young man lived there three years, another young participant lived there almost three years and one young man for four years. In terms of education, all of them were studying either at high school, colleges or university. Five did not work, three worked during summertime and school holidays, three worked fulltime, one worked part-time and one worked as a volunteer. Regarding their guardian employment, 10 out of 15 participants' parents/guardians had jobs; for one, his mum was sick, and another one, his aunt did not work. Two participants, who lived with their old siblings, and one who, lived alone, did not mention if their siblings had jobs.

Methods of data analysis

I began my analysis early in the research process during the formal and informal interviews, which gave me time to reflect on and discuss the topic of research with participants. Ongoing observations, filed notes, interactions with the community members, particularly young people, and attendance at community gatherings and congregations were also important to my analysis, and to understanding the topic deeply. Moreover, I transcribed the interviews myself, which gave me the opportunity to analyse interviews individually and then to analyse cross-case data, comparing their similarities and differences. I then coded and categorised interviews under themes.

Data analyses are presented here both directly and indirectly. Sometimes I present direct quotations from participants; sometimes I conceptualise participants' data in my own words; and sometimes I compare the qualitative data with views expressed in the literature. The main comparison is, however, between the qualitative data itself, for example, comparing data from Melbourne with Minneapolis data. Youth interviews are also sometimes compared with parent and adult views. The findings cannot be generalised to the whole researched population or to the targeted community (Patton, 2002).

Somali communities in Australia and the USA

Australia

A significant number of Somalis arrived in Australia, especially Victoria, under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program and the Family Reunion program, particularly during the period of 1991-2001 (Jupp, 2001; Clyne, and Kipp, 2005). As the 2011 Census shows, the Somali population in Australia numbered around 14000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The largest concentration was in Victoria, particularly in Melbourne (61 percent). The majority of Somalis have settled in Melbourne's northwest although there are communities in the inner city suburbs and in the west. The northwest suburbs are culturally diverse and the specific areas where Somalis have settled can be characterised as low income areas with a high proportion of public housing. The Somali community in Australia is highly urbanised – 98.7 percent live in capital cities (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2007).

The USA

As a result of the civil war, the Somali community has become the largest group of African refugees in the USA. It is:

one of the unique sets of newcomers to ever enter this nation ... the uniqueness of these newcomers and the fact that relatively little is known about them makes it imperative to study and understand their situation (Goza, 2007: 255).

The most recent estimates of the total population of Somalis living in the USA ranges from 150,000 (Shio, 2006) to 300,000 (Sonsalla, 2003).

Since 1991, the number of Somalis has increased rapidly, concentrated in the mid-western states, particularly Minnesota (Goza, 2007, Kusow, 2007). The largest Somali community in the USA lives in the Twin Cities, Minneapolis and St Paul, with a combined population of more than 50,000; the Twin Cities are regarded as the *de facto* capital of the Somali community in the USA (Schaid & Grossman, 2004). Many Somalis, especially new arrivals live “in the Cedar-Riverside areas between downtown Minneapolis and the University of Minnesota where you can easily see women wearing the hijab or a group of Somali men lingering outside a coffee shop” (Roble and Rutledge, 2008: 135). Somalis have also been drawn to almost all cities of Minnesota including small ones. Thus, they can also be found in Rochester, St. Cloud, Owatonna, Waseca, Marshall, Faribault and Mankato (Shio, 2006, Minneapolis Foundation, 2009). Pull factors for Somali resettlement to these cities include good services, education and employment opportunities, a good social welfare system, a well-established Somali community, and word-of-mouth among the Somali diaspora about the benefits of living there (Horst, 2006).

Results

The importance of employment

This paper discusses the employment experiences of young men in Somali communities in Melbourne and Minneapolis, and compares their experiences to their parents’ experiences, and scholarly findings on refugee employment. The main themes discussed are participants’ perceptions of the importance of employment. Although there are some differences between young men and their parents in the perceptions about the importance of employment, most participants in Melbourne and Minneapolis share similar views about the importance of employment for themselves and for Somali communities in fulfilling an individual’s needs; maintaining their health and well-being; and facilitating them to learn both the English language and the mainstream cultures. According to our participants’ point of view, employment helps them to develop the sense of belonging to the mainstream and organisational skills, and buffers them against the risk of involvement in crime since it provides them with a sense of direction in their daily life. These issues are discussed below.

Fulfilling an individual’s needs

Almost all participants in both Melbourne and Minneapolis confirm that the importance of employment is to earn money in order to fulfil personal needs and become self-sufficient and confident, which helps one to establish a life in the new country and to integrate economically and socially in positive ways.

As the interviewees noted:

Money makes you man (a young man³ from Minneapolis)

I think everybody is going to make money that is why you work. So, you can pay off what you like, you can pay off shoes, you can pay off for rent, for the bills, I mean [work] from that perspective is beneficiary [beneficial] (a young man⁹ from Minneapolis).

You get money and you can help your family, you can save money and later on you can do your own investment...you are a young single man so if you like to get married you can do it because you have money (a young man⁵ from Melbourne).

Without an income from a regular job, anxieties about coping with daily life tend to multiply (Giddens, 1993). Unemployed people become dependent on others or on social welfare, which results in loss of independence and social status. Studies of 1,770 refugees in Birmingham, UK, showed that participants stressed that having a good job meant material self-sufficiency (Phillimore et al., 2003). As well as fulfilling personal needs, employment is perceived by many participants in this study as a critical means to help family and relatives, particularly those who need it the most in Somalia, the war-torn country.

Health and wellbeing

A number of participants also linked the importance of employment with using their time in positive and productive ways, which improves their physical and psychological fitness and well-being. Suffice to say that a healthy person has a better chance of integrating and interacting with others than an unhealthy person.

You will intellectually and psychologically become fit, because work stimulates you to think about your future (a young man⁶ from Melbourne):

Work gets you up in the early morning because we can all tend to sleep [and] there is no production. So, I think work itself is another way that [is] saying: hi get up this morning. You have to do something. Take an advantage of the day. Be active (a young man⁴ from Minneapolis).

According to the young man cited above, working migrants and refugees are generally healthier than jobless ones. A popular Somali proverb makes a strong connection between a working body and well-being. “Cududii fayowbaa maskax caafimaad leh” – a healthy mind is in a healthy and working body. “Employment has been found to be crucial to the psychological well-being of ethnic minority migrants” as work significantly enhancing the psychological well-being of migrants compared with the unemployed (Phillimore et al., 2006: 19).

Understanding cultures and developing negotiation skills

Employment is also considered by participants, particularly by parents in Minneapolis, as a means of understanding other cultures, which facilitates both refugees’ and mainstream employees’ negotiation skills, shared understanding and mutual respect. Guerin, Guerin, Diiriye & Abdi (2005: 10)

acknowledge the importance of acquiring the knowledge and culture of the new country including “the subtle interpersonal...colloquial English and informal...communications skills” which enable new arrivals to establish networks and social advancement in the new country. A mother² from Minneapolis talked about her experience saying:

I know other cultures. I learnt other cultures because I work with different backgrounds like Mexicans, and African Americans. I learnt how to deal with non-Somalis. I think I am more active and socially more connected than many [Somali] people who don't work...even if I go to other countries, I know how to live and how to work with other people, and [I can] easily adapt to other cultures.

This view is endorsed by Phillimore et al., (2003) and Giddens (1993), who explain that employment is a mechanism for economic advancement for refugees as it helps them to establish social connections, make friendships among the mainstream, improve their language skills and cultural understanding and develop a sense of security through participating in shared activities with others. Working refugees are observed to adapt more quickly and easily to the new culture than unemployed ones, who experience social isolation (Phillimore et al., 2006).

Language acquisition

Somali parents' perceptions of the importance of work are connected to language acquisition through communicating with mainstream Australians and Americans. Craig et al.,'s (2006) findings reinforce these views, asserting that employment enables refugees to increase learning opportunities, particularly the new language of the host society. It also enables them to rebuild shattered lives and regain self-confidence:

At the beginning of this job, I did not know any word...I did not understand at all unless people use a body language and pointed things with their fingers. Now, I know everything and if the manager addresses something I can understand easily what he says (a mother² from Minneapolis).

Parents' emphasis on language and cultural acquisition through work could be attributed to the fact that they often start work without any English or with insufficient English soon after they arrive in the USA or Australia. By communicating and interacting with other employees whose common language is English, they learn English practically and develop an understanding of the new culture. In contrast to their parents, young people learn English and about mainstream cultures through schooling. Young males rarely talk about the workplace as a critical place to learn English and the new culture.

Interestingly, most Somali parents interviewed in Minneapolis mentioned frequently the importance of employment to language and cultural acquisition while their counterparts in Melbourne did not. According to my interviews with participants in the USA, the majority of Somali adults, including parents, have paying jobs which connect them to mainstream people. In comparison, most Melbourne participants believe that a large number of Somali adults in Melbourne, including parents, are unemployed. However, a few participants did believe that most Somali adults do work, but at casual jobs or self-employed jobs or jobs that isolate them from intermingling within, and negotiating with other Australians. These casual or self-employed jobs include those in day care and factories. For that reason, adults in Minneapolis may have greater communication about opportunities and interaction with the mainstream than those in Melbourne; because of their regular interaction with the mainstream,

those in Minneapolis can improve their language skills and cultural understanding faster than those in Melbourne.

A buffer against crime and providing a sense of direction

Another reason why employment is important is that it serves as a buffer against crime, such as drug dealing, fighting and association with gangs.

Work keeps me out of trouble, like instead of being involved in wrong things, you keep busy your time with something that is worthy (a young man1 from Minneapolis).

Work protects you from a lot of bad things. For example, if you have job you don't waste your time and you don't be on streets, because you get started early morning and you finish late afternoon or evening...Job puts you in right direction. It prevents you from involvement into trouble. It protects you to clash with police. In this country, if you are not studying or not working you get lost...and if you go through that, you know, stage of you know 'I am not working' and stuff like that you cannot build mentality ways you know, 'I am part of this country' and that can lead you to dissolution, disenfranchise and you become at risk you know, and can commit crime, take drugs you know...[and] you hurt others and hurt yourself (a young man13 from Melbourne).

As these responses show, young men believe that employment means that they put their time to good purpose, keeping them out of criminal activities and trouble. At the same time, they spend their time on meaningful things, indicating that young Somali men in work are able to integrate into the wider society in a more positive way.

Both parents and young men in the USA and Australia confirm that work enables them to discover their talents and what kind of job they are good at. Additionally, participants emphasise that work helps them gain local experiences, makes them motivated, disciplined, well organised in their ordinary lives, and behave responsibly. Employment also encourages people to plan for the future because

You have a sense of direction when you work (a young man8 from Minneapolis).

When you work you have aim, and long vision and you think a lot of things to do but when you don't work you have no aim and you will remain in the same position without going forward. When you have work you can establish your life in this country and buy house (a young man2 from Melbourne).

This perspective accords with Giddens' (1993) view that regular employment provides employees the rhythm of organisation on a daily basis and a sense of direction while unemployed people endure boredom and develop a sense of apathy about time.

Instilling a sense of belonging

Most Somali parents in Minneapolis and a few young men in both countries highlighted that having a job gives them a sense of belonging to the new country and makes them respected by the wider society. A working person is perceived by the host society as a good citizen and a contributor to the new country.

You are a taxpayer and that gives you good record and credit. To have good record, you have to work hard (a mother¹ from Minneapolis).

The issue of employment's contribution to the development of a sense of belonging is elaborated by young man⁹ from Melbourne:

Personally before I had job, I was kind of disillusion you know, I was Australian but I wasn't you know...I believe there are a lot of stereotypes out there. I believe that you know, being young African [man] living in Australia I have seen a lot of people, older [men] most drive taxis [because of] that we will never gonna to be able to get you know, jobs, certain jobs because of, you know, we don't belong here. But when you're working hard or if you do get the opportunity, then you know, you say to yourself I am a tax payer you know, I can do some sort of you know, and you build. It doesn't get overtime but the longer you work the longer you start to believe that 'I am part of this community [the wider Australia community] I am part of this country'...when you are not working, people will say to you, you are not contributing to this society which you know kind of puts you back you know, which means 'I am not part of this nation'.

As mentioned, the reason for Somali parents', in Minneapolis, frequent mention of the benefits of employment can, in part, be explained by the fact that most Somali parents interviewed in this study in the USA do work, and the work culture is clearly observed in the Somali community in Minneapolis. For that reason, the spirit of the community in Minneapolis is very high. In contrast, a work culture is less observable among Somalis in Melbourne and, accordingly, the level of community integration seems not to match that in the USA. In Minneapolis, the Somali community's high motivation was described by a participant mother who believes that Somalis in Minneapolis are now becoming house owners, and popular and powerful in Minnesota. She says that there is a community perception that even though the Somali community has been in Minneapolis 13 years, many American people believe that the Somali community is at the same level of development as other immigrants who came more than 40 years ago. She predicts that one day there will be Somali senators in Minnesota.

Rageh Omaar, a British of Somali background and former reporter with the BBC, recently made a documentary for the Al-Jazeera channel. He investigated the situation of Muslim communities in the USA, including the Somali community in Minneapolis. Omaar compares the Somali communities in the UK to their counterparts in Minneapolis and concludes that the Minneapolis community is going forward, in contrast to the Somali communities in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, and every place he has visited since. The following is excerpted from the documentary:

My adopted home England has a bigger Somali community than Minneapolis and it has been settled for longer. But they don't tend to think of England as home. My parents are typical. Their mental bag is still packed to return to Somalia, but that is not true here. These Somalis [in Minneapolis] are no less scarred or traumatised by their experiences. They are planted their roots deeper and faster than any Somali community I have seen in the world. They don't talk of returning home. They are home (Omaar, 2008).

In Omaar's interviews with Somalis in Minneapolis regarding their feelings towards the USA, his respondents highlighted the way in which the USA society fostered their positive adaptation, as the quotation below indicates:

Here in America, if you don't organize, if you don't vote, if you don't participate [in] American way of living you lost...you have to be American first, you have to do what other Americans do. You sacrifice your life to defend America because this is our country...because of the opportunities I get, the welcoming I get compared where I came from, how we were, how I was...this is home (cited in Omaar, 2008).

Positive role models

Both parent groups in Minneapolis and Melbourne believe that working parents make positive role models for their children. Work also enhances their relationships with their children and puts them in a position to be able to help in their children's education. The opposite is assumed to be true when parents have no jobs:

Children feel satisfaction when their parents go to work every morning to help them...that encourages children to do similar thing when they grow up. Kids say: I want to become like my parents, work hard and help people (a mother1 from Minneapolis).

I am father and I have experiences both being unemployed or employed. As a parent, when you work, you get more time with your children in meaningful ways. For example, when you finish job, you directly go home and then you see your children that they have just come back from school and they are doing their homework. So you can sit with them and help. When you work you are either at work or at home, and your children in both situations, see you as a responsible father, but if you don't work, you become careless, and you will be less involved into your children's homework...when you work, even if you personally cannot help your children, you can help them in other ways such as taking them to private school or bringing a home tutor and pay him/her (a father1 from Melbourne).

Religious encouragement

Finally, some parents and young male participants in both countries attribute the importance of employment to Islamic perspectives, stressing that Islam urges people to work hard. For that reason, they see work as worship. They explain that the ultimate goal of Islam is to enable every person to work and become self-sufficient, helpful to others and, at the same time, avoid dependence on others.

It is narrated from Prophet Mohamed that he said: the Prophet Daud [David] used to eat what he earned by his hands (a young man1 from Melbourne).

Another young man from Melbourne also alluded to Prophet Mohamed's teaching that the 'upper hand is better than the lower hand', meaning that the giving hand is better than the taking hand.

Conclusion

This qualitative investigation compared the experiences of young men living in Minneapolis, USA, with those living in Melbourne, Australia. According to information gleaned from our participants, employment is seen, first and foremost, as fulfilling personal needs to be self-sufficient. Lack of work

can lead to loss of independence and social status. This view correlates with Giddens' (1993) assumption which emphasises that, without an income from a regular job, anxieties about coping with everyday life will be multiplied.

Employment is also viewed by young participants as improving physical and psychological wellbeing. Additionally, both groups of young people stressed that employment serves as a buffer against crime, drug dealing, fighting and gang activity. It also protects youth from clashes with police, enables them to discover their talents and makes them well-disciplined, as it provides them with a sense of purpose and a daily routine.

Moreover, some parents and young men from USA and Australia expressed the view that employment gives them a sense of belonging to the new country; makes them respected; and helps them to be seen by the mainstream as good citizens because they are contributing to the new country in positive ways. Employment earns people a good reputation in the wider society as well as in the Somali community. Furthermore, employment provides, for refugees, opportunities to establish social connections, make friends among the mainstream and develop a sense of security and sense of belonging through participating in shared activities within the host society. Working parents make positive role models for their children and are in the position to provide for their children's material needs.

Despite identifying the similarities mentioned above among participants in regard to the importance of employment, there were, on the other hand, some differences. For example, employment is considered by parents, particularly those in the USA, as an important factor in understanding mainstream culture, acquiring English and rebuilding their shattered lives. Young people did not mention these factors, because they acquire culture and learn English at school.

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