Looking for a “Missing Link”: Formal Employment Services and Social Networks in Refugees’ Job Search

Silvia Torezani, Val Colic-Peisker & Farida Fozdar

Finding employment and developing social networks that can facilitate this task can be major challenges for migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Australia and comparable countries, and even more so for refugees who represent a potentially more disadvantaged section of the immigrant intake. This paper explores refugees’ perception and use of the Job Network (JN), a group of employment service providers contracted by the Australian government. Using data from a survey of 150 skilled refugee settlers from former Yugoslav, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds in Perth, Western Australia, as well as data collected through interviews with employment service providers and other key informants, we report a mismatch between service providers’ and refugees’ perceptions and expectations of the employment services. Refugees perceived the JN services and especially JN-provided job training as an opportunity to develop social networks rather than to learn specific job search-relevant skills. On the basis of this finding, and within the social capital framework, we apply the concept of “linking social capital” – the capacity of individuals to leverage resources, ideas and information from institutions beyond their immediate communities – to the labour market integration of refugees in Australia. We conclude that despite the failure of...
the JN to provide the services refugees need, their activities may be useful for developing linking social capital.

Keywords: Australia; Employment Assistance; Labour Market Integration; Linking Social Capital; Refugees; Social Networks

Introduction

The labour market integration of immigrants has special significance for Australia, a country in which immigration accounts for half of the total population growth and contributes to an increasingly diverse population (DIAC Population Flows). At the forefront of the ongoing public debate in Australia is the issue of national gains and losses from immigration. Refugees are, more than other migrants, often perceived as an economic drain (Jupp From White Australia). Yet Australia chooses its refugees for their “resettlement potential” (Jupp Exile or Refugee?; Iredale et al.) and they are often highly skilled. If such people are unemployed or employed below their qualification levels, their skills and occupational potential, often subsumed under the idea of “human capital”, remain unused, a waste at both a personal and national level.

Finding employment is a challenge for migrants from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds generally, and especially for refugees who are significantly disadvantaged compared to the general immigrant intake. This is acknowledged through policies: unlike other migrant categories, refugees are entitled to free English tuition, unemployment and family support and housing assistance immediately upon arrival in Australia (Taylor; ARC; DIAC “Fact Sheet 14”). For the first six months, while they attend English classes, refugees are exempt from seeking employment and accessing employment services is optional. Afterwards, job seeking is mandatory if they are to continue receiving welfare payments (Centrelink). Private, government and community agencies, collectively known as the “Job Network” (JN), provide employment assistance to Australian job seekers, including refugees (APC). But how do refugees perceive and use these agencies? In this paper we examine and contrast refugees’ perceptions of the JN with views on the employment assistance process expressed by employment service providers, and explore the role of JN as a possible site for building refugees’ “linking social capital” (Wolcock).

From a vast literature on the labour market integration of immigrants, various factors are known to affect employment outcomes (Liebig; Miller and Neo; Tomei; Valtonen “Cracking Monopoly”). Human capital, that is, the skills a potential worker brings to the labour market, is obviously vital for positive outcomes. Cultural capital is also important, as it provides the basis for feeling comfortable in a new country, as well as within a particular cultural sub-system, such as that of the workplace, or in the job-seeking process. We are particularly interested in social capital – those linkages and networks that can be used by individuals to their material or symbolic advantage. The concept of social capital arose in the context of the debate over the importance of social networks in the job-search process. Granovetter argued that job seekers in the USA
were more likely to find jobs through acquaintances – what he called “weak” social ties – than through “strong” ties with friends or family (“The Strength of Weak Ties”; Getting a Job). The notion of “social capital” was further developed in the 1980s by various social scientists, including Bourdieu, who argued that social capital consisted of two elements: social relationships that allow individuals to claim access to resources through their friends and associates, and the amount and quality of such resources (Portes). Drawing from prominent theorists of social capital, such as Bourdieu, Coleman, Portes and Putnam, the Australian Productivity Commission 2003 Report defined social capital as “a resource that facilitates cooperation within or between groups of people”, and whose key elements are social norms, social networks and trust (APC). Portes argued that “whereas economic capital is in people’s bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships” (4). Over the past two decades the concept has been used extensively by scholars in a way that has, at times, lacked conceptual rigour. In this paper we apply and further develop Wolcock’s notion that “social capital refers to norms and networks that facilitate collective action”, and particularly his idea of “linking social capital” (70). Wolcock elaborates on Putnam’s distinction between “bonding social capital” and “bridging social capital”, which again reflects Granovetter’s idea of “strong” vs. “weak” ties (“The Strength of Weak Ties”; Getting a Job). Bonding social capital refers to the relationships amongst family members and close friends, that is, within relatively homogenous groups, which are often limited in scope, and implies a depth of multi-stranded relationships. On the other hand, bridging social capital refers to relationships among acquaintances and colleagues: the “weak ties” that link an individual to a broad range of people, institutions and implicitly, resources (Granovetter Getting a Job; Putnam). Putnam argued that bonding social capital is important for “getting by”, that is, for a sense of “ontological security”, whereas, bridging social capital is necessary for “getting ahead”, that is, achieving material success and upward social mobility (19). He has been criticised for ignoring the fact that vertical, hence unequal, power relations between people limit the usefulness of bridging social capital. Wolcock has addressed this in his notion of “linking social capital” which refers to “the capacity to leverage resources, ideas and information from formal institutions beyond the community” (72). In other words, “[l]inking refers to relations between different social strata in a hierarchy where power, social status and wealth are accessed by different groups” (Cote and Healy 42). Those with less power will be less likely to be able to access available resources, ideas and information.

The data presented in this paper are part of a larger project that focuses on the effects of “visible difference” on the employment outcomes of three refugee groups (see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Integration”; Refugees and Employment; Tilbury and Colic-Peisker). Our findings, confirming previous Australian and overseas research, indicate significant refugee disadvantage in the job market caused by cultural differences, lack of qualification recognition, and the common occurrence of structural racism and discrimination. The main body of data were collected through a survey of 150 refugees, who arrived in Australia in the 1990s and 2000s on
permanent visas from the former Yugoslavia, Africa and the Middle East. Questionnaires, consisting mainly of multiple choice questions but also of open ended questions, were completed during face-to-face interviews with refugees conducted by bilingual assistants. Each regional group consisted of 50 participants who were of working age, either employed or looking for work, and with a completed high school, trade or professional education, and with on average high self-reported levels of English language proficiency. The sample was deliberately chosen in this way in order to eliminate the lack of human capital (poor English and/or lack of skills) as an explanation for poor employment outcomes (see Wooden; DIMIA; APC). In this paper we also use data from semi-structured interviews with employment service providers from for-profit and not-for-profit organisations as well as follow-up interviews with other key informants.

Refugees in the Labour Market

At the outset we took it as given that satisfactory employment is the crux of successful settlement for migrants and refugees. Satisfactory employment is defined as securing a job appropriate to one’s qualifications, skills and work experience. Refugee integration into the labour market is slower and less successful than that of other migrant categories: for example, six months after arrival, refugees have a 71 per cent unemployment rate (DIAC “Fact Sheet 14”). Although the rate decreases somewhat 18 months after arrival, it is still very high (43 per cent) when compared to unemployment among other migrant categories (“Fact Sheet 14”; see also Hugo; Taylor). The main challenges refugees face when seeking employment include poor English, non-recognition of skills and the lack of local job experience and referees (Scull; Taylor). These are challenges that refugees share with other CALD migrants, but given that refugees come from culturally and/or linguistically distant contexts and may also be dealing with trauma, they face a comparatively greater disadvantage. Even highly educated refugees proficient in English are disadvantaged in the labour market of Australia and comparable countries (Valtonen “Cracking Monopoly”; “From the Margin”; Lamba; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Integration”).

Our findings contrast with Wooden’s suggestion that lack of English proficiency is the most significant barrier refugees and other CALD migrants face in the labour market. In fact, the labour market situation is not necessarily better for refugees who have post-school qualifications and are fluent in English. In our sample, the former Yugoslavs had the lowest unemployment levels (14 per cent — they also had on average longer residence in Australia than the other two groups and the most developed ethnic networks), while the unemployment rate among Africans and Middle Easterners, who had higher levels of education and English language proficiency than the former Yugoslavs, was 32 and 38 per cent, respectively (Table 1). This indicates that unemployment is not just a “skills and language” problem, but also a “visibility and local networks” problem.
Our respondents identified a lack of Australian work experience (reported by 62 per cent), Australian referees (40.7 per cent) and recognition of overseas qualifications (31.3 per cent) as the main barriers to satisfactory employment. Those employed were mostly working below their level of qualifications (Table 2). While former Yugoslavs had the lowest unemployment rate, they had the highest rate of working below their qualifications (80 per cent). The numbers were lower for Africans (44 per cent) and Middle Easterners (24 per cent).

The main reason for the extraordinary occupational downgrading among Bosnians is their reliance on extended family and ethnic networks in securing jobs. Many Bosnians arrived as sponsored humanitarian migrants in the 1990s and were assisted by large, and mainly working-class, former Yugoslav communities in their job search, resulting in being channelled into low-skilled jobs (Colic-Peisker and Waxman).

Poor employment outcomes for refugees need to be placed in the context of interpersonal and institutional racism, as we have argued elsewhere (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Employment Niches”; Refugees and Employment; “Integration”).5 Most refugees are “visibly different” in the context of the predominately white and English-speaking Australia, and therefore exposed to local prejudices. A lack of cultural capital needed for success in the Australian labour market, especially among recent arrivals, relegates them to niches in the secondary labour market; those skilled and highly skilled may be even more adversely affected by this pattern (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Employment Niches”). Government-funded employment assistance through the Job Network should be a way of improving their chances in the job market, but our findings indicate that the employment services provided through the JN may be inadequate for refugees.

Table 1 Employment status (%; N = 150)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Middle Eastern</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed/looking for work</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time: less than 10 hours per week</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time: 11–20 hours per week</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time: 21–30 hours per week</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full time</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)One response missing in the African sample.

Table 2 Work by qualification (%; N = 150)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Middle Eastern</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above qualification level</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below qualification level</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Some of those who answered “unemployed” in the previous table did not answer the question corresponding to this table.

Number of responses per group: 49/50; 32/50; and 29/50, respectively.
Refugees and the Job Network

In recent years, policy changes guiding employment service provision in Australia may have adversely affected refugee employment outcomes. The current policy direction in service provision seems to be in conflict with the need for culturally specific services. The Australian government’s quest for financial efficiency has signified an important shift away from what was considered relevant in the 1978 Galbally Report. This report was an affirmation of multicultural policies in Australia, highlighting the economic and social benefits of investing in culturally specific services for CALD migrants. However, during the 1980s the Australian government started introducing policies of “economic rationalism” which reflected neo-liberal Thatcherism in the UK and “Reaganomics” in the USA (Orloff; Pierson; Kenny). By the late 1990s, the neo-liberal economic focus led to the privatisation and “mainstreaming” of many multicultural services. As part of the government’s push for privatisation, the Job Network was introduced in 1998, where tendered private service providers replaced the former Commonwealth Employment Service (APC). “Mainstreaming” implies that job seekers’ needs are universal and there is no need for culturally specific services or services geared towards special-needs groups such as refugees.

JN services are currently organised into three main stages. “Job Matching” is the initial stage whereby job seekers referred by Centrelink register with a JN provider. If after three months the job seekers have not found full-time employment, they are called to attend a series of Job Search Training seminars. This constitutes the second stage. If they have still not found employment within the next three months, they enter into the third, so-called “intensive assistance” stage, which involves several substages until the job seeker eventually finds employment (see APC; Lee). According to their website, JN provides the following services (DEWR):

- assessing skills, experience and capabilities;
- helping to improve job search skills through intensive job search training and assistance with job applications;
- helping with access to training, a wide range of vocational programs, counselling and other services, work preparation and work experience, giving feedback on interview technique;
- additional services, facilities and activities, such as interpreter services, travel assistance for interviews.

Twenty per cent of the JN clients are from non-English-speaking backgrounds (DIMIA), with 16 per cent receiving intensive support (Liebig) and there is widespread recognition of their need for specific employment services (Constable et al.; UNHCR; Jupp From White Australia; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Active”; Colic-Peisker and Waxman; Walker et al.). Western Australian community-based service providers have also inquired into these problems. For example, Puls indicated in her report on three refugee communities (Somali, Iraqi and Cambodian) that JN-provided training did not meet the participants’ expectations. Lee reported that
the lack of specialisation among JN members contributed to “limit a migrant’s or refugee’s ability to obtain professional employment in Australia” (9). Similar problems have been reported in other states. In Queensland, for example, Scull reported that employment service providers did not seem to respond directly to the needs of refugees and Temporary Protection Visa holders. She proposed the development of an “employer liaison/job placement program” (57) in order to improve refugee employment outcomes. According to NTCOSS, refugees’ difficulties in finding employment and shortcomings in employment service provisions in the Northern Territory seem to be similar to those of Western Australia and Queensland.

Another change recently introduced in the Job Network is the “outcome-based” payment to service providers, which means that the number of people successfully allocated into permanent jobs determines the payment service providers receive (see Kyle et al.; Oslington). Even though the new model allowed for tendering of specialised services focusing on CALD clients, there were no financial incentives for doing so. On the contrary, outcome-based payment for the service providers leads to a greater focus on clients who were more easily placed in permanent employment (Kyle et al.; Liebig). While there are a few JN members that specialise in CALD clients in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, there are currently no such specialists in Western Australia where our research was conducted. JN is tasked with providing an equivalent service to all job seekers, and the government website indicates as much by providing “service guarantee” and “code of practice” brochures in 20 community languages (DEWR), suggesting a wish to be seen as providing adequate services to CALD migrants.

From our data it appears that in accomplishing their task, employment service providers see their role as that of “expert” mediators between the unemployed and employers. A JN staff member (who worked for a service which provides private personnel recruitment as well as JN services to welfare recipients) explained:

> It’s a coaching role, absolutely. You’ve got to remember, too, that some of our clients [employers] may be managers in certain fields but they don’t have any skills in actually recruiting and understanding core functions or [...] competencies of particular jobs, so really, we’re experts; we know [...] what’s transferable, what’s not, what you can do with certain skills. Then, it’s actually convincing the client to at least look at people on their own merit and saying: “this can work for you and there are so many other benefits to it”, as well.

The JN service providers seem to respond to the demands of the market by identifying the employer as the client and the job seeker as what may be called a “secondary client”. This creates a “moral hazard”, a term for opportunistic or “shirking” behaviour (Cragg), as JN providers may focus on job seekers who are “job ready”. The JN service providers appear to see themselves as brokers between the unemployed and employers by “translating” skills for them, making employers realise what particular individuals can offer and what “extra benefits” they might bring to the workplace. But the question of whether they, as employment advisers, are able to “see” the skills of educated refugees is a moot point. In addition, instead
of investing efforts into training those who need to gain local labour market skills, service providers may focus on those who already have such skills, due to the outcomes-based incentives, as mentioned. In such a system, refugees are unlikely to be a priority to the service providers.

However, some JN staff do appear to recognise some of the difficulties refugees face:

It’s hard. We have some doctors who can’t speak English, who can’t get a job here. We have people who have very little education, as well, because they didn’t have opportunities in their previous country [...] We also have people who are middle-of-the road [...] We have people who are in the line of work that they used to do in their country, but communication is the main issue: communicating with the employer at interview time or taking instructions or giving instructions about work becomes the major barrier for these people. One of the things about when they come to us is the frustration of not finding employment in their line of work and the urgent situation of earning money [...] You will find very qualified people tend to do unskilled work, and we have a lot of cases here. For example, I can quote you a doctor, a very qualified doctor, he is a storeman [in a warehouse because] he needs money to feed his family.

Apparently, some of the downward mobility which has been widely reported (Liebig; Constable et al.) is facilitated by the JN, due to the urgent need to obtain any paid work. We asked the JN staff members whether they were aware of the tendency for refugees to end up in particular market niches. The response indicates a recognition and attempt to address this problem by encouraging clients to look at a broader range of options and take up further training:

We try to break that barrier [...] They tend to focus on the area that they know, we tend to train them to look at the broader picture which is how they end up getting jobs in other unskilled areas or trying to change career altogether. Many of them we send back to study in their new line of work, of experience.

JN staff also recognised that downward mobility was sometimes the consequence of finding jobs through community networks:

Yes, within the community, for example, they know someone who owns a business [...] so they use the network, but a lot of them we try and push them into areas that they’ve never tried before. Some of them do well, some of them fail tragically.

Our data indicate that service providers, like employers (see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Employment Niches”), insist on a “cultural fit” for a person to be considered employable. The need for people from a CALD background to understand the “Australian way” becomes even more poignant in the case of skilled refugees proficient in English, whose main problems in gaining employment are a lack of local work experience and a limited knowledge of the Australian labour market (see Scull). A recruitment agent, from a combined commercial/government-funded service provider, explained:
Because one is the experience in the Australian market, second is the ability to adapt to Australian culture as quickly as possible and third thing is the way Australians do things, the way we conduct interviews, the kind of clothing that we’re expected to wear, the kind of job they’re expected to do, for example, in some countries you have siesta time, lunch time […] I give talks to people in migrant centres and clubs sometimes. […] And one of my advice is that you got to know the culture and the law of the country. That’s a very fundamental thing.

One key problem relates to the ways in which the terms “culture” and “diversity” are understood by all parties involved, that is, the job seekers, the service providers and the potential employers. Service providers and employers place stress on the need for the job seekers to conform to the demands of the Australian job market. Yet the provision of guidance on being culturally appropriate for available positions is variable.

Kyle et al. note that a common concern with the adequacy of the JN services is that they do not provide their refugee clients with the necessary information about the workings of the employment services (iii–iv):

Many refugees have a poor understanding of their rights and obligations and the appeal mechanisms available to them. The consequences of these problems are reported to include that individuals do not get effective assistance.

The above indicates that service providers have variable awareness of, and approaches to, dealing with the specific problems of refugee job seekers. We now turn to refugees’ perceptions of the quality of the services provided by JN.

Refugees’ Perceptions of the Job Network Services

We asked those who had used the services to evaluate their usefulness (Table 3). Former Yugoslavs and Africans were highly critical of these services, considering them “poor” (52 per cent) or merely “acceptable” (22 per cent).

A Bosnian woman commented:

My case manager was very nice, polite and provided moral support. However they [JN] never found a job for me. I did it on my own. I believe these services are useless and government should consider changing the way they function. They should have individually tailored services as not everyone has the same needs.

Table 3 How would you describe formal employment services (%, N = 150)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Middle Eastern</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aNumber of responses per group: 26/50; 20/50; and 33/50, respectively.
Among comments made by African respondents, criticisms were similar. A university-educated Ethiopian man expressed his experience in stronger terms: “Job Network providers are the real ‘dole bludgers’ who earn [their living] by pretending to find jobs while they leave their clients to their own devices.”

These evaluations were in stark contrast to those from Middle Eastern respondents, 52 per cent of whom rated the services as “excellent” or “good.” Their highly positive evaluation could be partly attributed to a methodological artefact resulting from general cultural politeness imperatives and partly to mistrust in authority and the consequent fear of losing Centrelink payments. An Iraqi settlement officer explained: 

Iraqis do not want to criticise anyone. [...] I’m trying to convince them [Iraqi clients] that I’m working for the community organisation, but they think I’m a government agent. This is an issue we raise with the community from time to time ... we tried to organise a peaceful demonstration against the war in Iraq, but people were afraid to come over [...]. They say “the government may cut our Centrelink payments”.

Notwithstanding the fear, those who did provide further comments provided critical views of the JN services. A male Iraqi graduate commented: “they told me look for job and when [you] find job, tell us”. Another TAFE-trained Iraqi man commented that “most people who work there are not qualified and have no idea how to fix problems or deal with migrants”.

One of the services provided by JN is “job search training”, which includes the job application or resume writing, interview technique, advice on how to demonstrate one’s skills to employers and confidence building, as well as exploring new areas of work where existing skills might be transferred. The majority of our respondents who had used the JN services had attended these training sessions (68 per cent of former Yugoslavs, 44 per cent of Africans and 82 per cent of Middle Easterners). We asked them to assess how useful they found the training (Table 4). Of those who responded most found this form of “cultural” training more useful than the JN services generally. Once again, respondents from Middle Eastern backgrounds provided the most positive responses and Africans were the most critical.

Table 4 How useful did you find the job training in order to find employment? (%, N = 150)^a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Middle Eastern</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very useful</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty useful</td>
<td>54.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat useful</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all useful</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^aNumber of responses per group: 33/50; 21/50; and 42/50, respectively (only some of our respondents attended job training).
In the comments section, for instance, a Nigerian man with a postgraduate qualification indicated that he attended the sessions out of a sense of threat:

As far as I am concerned the training is a waste of time, money and energy for both the government and people like me. The training is so basic that it is even boring. I did the training because I had to do it under the Social Security Act.

The perceptions of the JN services demonstrate a range of different expectations among the survey respondents, some of which are related to their cultural backgrounds. JN providers may not be adequately trained to provide the sort of job-seeking assistance that refugees require. To investigate these issues further we asked participants about their job-seeking methods.

“Job Networking” and the Development of Linking Social Capital

How do refugees seek jobs in the local labour market? In our survey, we classified the use of newspaper advertisements, Internet, shop window, Job Network and/or Centrelink, as “formal methods” of job seeking. Informal options were “door knocking”, the use of “community networks” and “other networks”. The remaining options were “self-employment” and “other”. By “community networks” we meant strong ties with extended family, friends and ethnic community. “Other networks” referred to other “weak” ties within the wider community. Participants could choose more than one option when identifying the methods they used (Tables 5 and 6).

Job search methods varied among the three groups reflecting cultural differences and approaches to settlement. Among our respondents, 86.7 per cent stated that they had at some stage used formal methods to seek employment, although community networks were also important for former Yugoslavs (72 per cent) and those from the Middle East (68 per cent). In terms of the methods used which resulted in success, formal methods also received the highest response (56.7 per cent). The Middle Eastern group showed the highest successful use of formal methods (64 per cent said they found a job this way), followed by Africans (60 per cent). This may be the result of the higher education level of these two groups, reflecting not only more confidence

| Table 5 | What methods have you used to look for a job? (%; \(N = 150\), multiple answers possible)\(^a\) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Methods         | Yugoslav | African | Middle Eastern | Mean         |
| Formal methods  | 84      | 86      | 90             | 86.7         |
| Door knocking   | 32      | 30      | 52             | 38           |
| Community networks | 72      | 38      | 68             | 58.7         |
| Other networks  | 36      | 8       | 10             | 18           |
| Self-employed   | 20      | 0       | 6              | 8.7          |
| Other           | 6       | 4       | 4              | 4            |

\(^a\)Number of responses per group: 50/50; 48/50; and 48/50, respectively.
with the formal methods but also the types of jobs being sought, which are normally filled through formal recruitment procedures. On the other hand, 66 per cent of former Yugoslavs found jobs through community networks.

Our data indicate the importance of formal job-seeking methods for refugees. However, whether their success in finding employment has resulted from the use of the JN services specifically is another matter.

As mentioned before, one of the most interesting findings of our survey was that respondents seemed to have found the JN services useful in ways other than its core purpose, which is to help them into employment (see Table 7). When asked whether they found services useful in other ways, the most frequent response was “to meet people” (42.7 per cent). When coupled with the other “social network” focused answers – “to meet other migrants” (27.3 per cent) and “overcoming isolation” (27.3 per cent), as well as “establishing contacts with employers” (21.3 per cent) and “contacts with Australians” (21.3 per cent) – it is obvious that refugees saw the services as opportunities to develop their social networks. Overcoming isolation was particularly important for the Middle Easterners. For the former Yugoslavs, establishing contact with employers and Australians was perceived as of relatively higher importance than for the other groups, as their social networks, for already stated reasons, were considerably more developed than the other two groups.

Table 6 If employed in Australia, what methods did you use to find that job? (%, N = 150, multiple answers possible)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Middle Eastern</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal methods</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door knocking</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community networks</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other networks</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Number of responses per group: 50/50; 42/50; and 42/50, respectively.

Table 7 Have you found the formal employment services useful in other ways? (%, N = 150, multiple answers possible)\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yugoslav</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Middle Eastern</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To meet people</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To meet other migrants</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming isolation</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful in learning about Australia</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and staff were helpful</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful in establishing employer contacts</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful in establishing contacts with Australians</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Number of responses per group: 29/50; 13/50; and 43/50, respectively.
The data indicate that even though employment service providers seemed inadequately prepared to act as cultural mediators in the employment market, they did provide a necessary space to enable their clients to fulfill their needs, including meeting other people and developing social networks. In other words, even when not fulfilling their designated task of making their refugee clients “job ready” and eventually gainfully employed, JN seemed to play a role as a mediator in the potential development of refugees’ “linking social capital”.

Migrants are clearly at a disadvantage in terms of social capital, since they have left behind their formal and informal, weak and strong, ties, and face the task of rebuilding them in the new country of residence. In terms of finding employment outside of the “ethnic niches” within a secondary labour market, linking social capital is crucial. In fact, bonding social capital or “strong ties” may actually work against migrants and refugees to reproduce this situation (as we have argued elsewhere, see Colic-Peisker and Waxman; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Employment Niches”; Castles and Miller). We found, for instance, that nearly half of our participants (43.3 per cent) had relatives in Australia, and more than three-quarters (79.4 per cent) indicated that they were “entirely” or “mostly” happy with their private social networks, which included their “ethnic community”. Both the presence of relatives and ethnic community are measures of strong ties, which may facilitate the transition to work within ethnic niches, but may also hamper occupational mobility beyond low-status jobs.

Bridging social capital, that is, networks linking individuals to the wider community appear to be less developed in our sample. About half of our respondents indicated that they were either “entirely” or “mostly” happy with their Australian (i.e. extra-ethnic) social networks. However, given that these links do not seem to be of much use in securing jobs, Wolcock’s recognition of the importance of hierarchies becomes relevant here. Only 18 per cent of our respondents across the three groups said they used “weak ties” in job seeking and only 11 per cent actually found a job through them. In both questions, former Yugoslavs reported using “weak ties” to a much greater extent than Africans and Middle Easterners (see Tables 5 and 6). Refugees, and especially those “visibly different”, may have found it difficult to break into the hierarchies which limit opportunities for “outsiders” on the basis of institutional, cultural and personal racism. For example, a young Sudanese man who completed his pilot licence with honours in Australia, explained that he had not been able to get a job as a pilot:

One of my instructors actually told me . . . “these days it is not what you know. [. . .] I know you are better than heaps of them here but you are not going to get employment simply because people work in gangs here”. . . Other avenues of work would probably come because I took the advice [. . .] You know, if you don’t know anybody then you are nowhere. And to make it worse, now that I don’t know anybody and I am different [black and with a foreign accent]. This is how I put it, I am different from the rest. So, it will make it even more difficult than anything.
Fortuitously for our argument, the organisation tasked with helping refugees into work is called “Job Network”. The name of this organisation implies the provision of the sort of social capital required to access information and resources necessary to find employment: it ostensibly links job seekers, service providers and potential employers. The findings presented above indicate that it is the more general opportunity for meeting other people and developing social capital which is the most highly valued aspect of the JN’s role, as opposed to the skills provision which the JN providers themselves see as important. More specifically, our findings indicate that skilled refugees see JN as part of their “linking social capital”.

Conclusion

The importance of social networks in the job search process has been widely recognised, but little attention has been given to their relevance and the difficulty that their lack represents for recent migrants and refugees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In this paper, we have attempted to tackle this missing link: a nexus between refugees’ perceptions and use of employment service providers and their need to develop local social capital in order to improve their employment outcomes and reach their occupational potential.

Unemployment among refugees in Australia is regarded by some scholars as a problem of skills. However, our findings challenge the argument that their unemployment, underemployment and loss of occupational status are necessarily related to a lack of English proficiency and job skills. Even refugees with tertiary skills and good English proficiency may still be at a disadvantage in the Australian labour market, since they are regarded as outsiders in the white-Western-English-speaking culture due to their racial visibility and cultural difference. Subtle mechanism of exclusion (as well as not-so-subtle, as the quote from the Sudanese man shows) based on cultural difference may hamper the creation of weak ties in the wider community and restrict refugee networks to the strong ties of their ethnic communities, resulting in relegation to the secondary labour market employment niches available to those communities.

In this context, formal employment services (JN) may become a way to develop refugees’ networks or “linking social capital”. Clearly, there is a mismatch between perceptions of refugee clients and JN providers of the adequacy of the services, and perhaps expectations of their respective roles. While only a handful of refugees found jobs through the Job Network – which appear to have become less helpful to CALD job seekers through government outsourcing, cost-cutting and mainstreaming – they found their services useful in building their social networks and especially weak ties in the wider community.

Our respondents’ criticisms of the JN should be read with caution, as they include specific cross-cultural issues, mismatched expectations and perhaps also misunderstanding of the role and the mode of functioning of formal employment.
assistance in Australia. The importance of cross-cultural factors, to which this paper cannot devote more attention because of its limited scope, is also implicated by the fact that the perceptions of the JN services are not homogenous among the three refugee groups.

Our findings support many of the conclusions in Liebig’s recent report which recommended a number of measures for improving the cultural and social capital of refugees in relation to labour market outcomes. He suggests work placements in skilled jobs should be more widely available, to help with the acculturation and skills adaptation process; that the services already available to refugees should be better linked to employment (possibly through providing financial incentives for contractors of settlement services to take a labour-market-oriented approach, or for Job Network to provide more targeted assistance); and that Job Network be made to keep, and release, data on employment outcomes for immigrants and refugees in particular. Such responses would go some way to alleviating the difficulties refugees face in an employment market which seems reticent to acknowledge their human capital, and which places more emphasis on cultural and social capital.

Notes

[1] This paper is part of an Australian Research Council-funded project (DP0450306, 2004–2006) titled “Refugees and Employment: The Effect of Visible Difference on Discrimination”, based at Murdoch University, Western Australia.

[2] The three authors contributed equally to the writing of this paper.

[3] For brevity, we cover all categories of humanitarian migrants by the term “refugees”.

[4] The majority of former Yugoslavs were Bosnians who had lived in Australia for more than seven years on average. The Middle Eastern sample consisted largely of Iraqis. African respondents were mostly from Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia. Both Middle Eastern and African respondents had been in Australia for approximately five years at the time of the survey (late 2004).

[5] Consideration of the effect of visible difference on refugees’ difficulties to integrate successfully into the job market has been the focus of the research project from which this paper is drawn. For further readings in relation to this particular topic, see Colic-Peisker and Tilbury “Integration”; “Employment Niches”; Refugees and Employment; Tilbury and Colic-Peisker.

[6] For further discussion of issues around differences in reporting, see Tilbury.

Works Cited


