What Skills do Somali Refugees Bring with them?

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Abstract

To gain a better understanding of why refugees have difficulties getting employment, 90 Somali (35 men, 55 women) were interviewed about their employment histories prior to resettlement in New Zealand and their experiences of employment in New Zealand. Close investigation of employment histories showed that most had numerous skills and that a large number had previously run their own businesses (mostly import/export). However, the study found several properties of their prior skills did not transfer well to their current setting due to language, cultural, and environmental issues. In particular, previous business owners relied heavily on informal language use to influence customers and sellers; many relied on informal social networking over different countries; many depended heavily on informal negotiation; they had trade routes over land rather than sea; they traded goods specific to the region; they ran informal economies on the side; and businesses had few government rules and legal requirements to meet. Recommendations are proposed to help overcome these more subtle difficulties and form the basis for future research interventions.

Introduction

Refugees moving into western countries are well known to have problems getting employment, and are typically unemployed or underemployed (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999; Forrest & Johnston, 2000; Montgomery, 1996; Stevens, 1993; Strand, 1984; Vinokurov, Birman & Trickett, 2000; Waxman, 2001; Wooden, 1991). Apart from the difficulties this causes for successful resettlement there can also be serious long-term physical and mental health problems arising from chronic under- or unemployment (Beiser & Hou, 2001; Holden, 1999; Pernice, Trlin, Henderson & North, 2000; Schwarzer, Jerusalem & Hahn, 1994; Strandh, 2000).

Many of the barriers to employment for refugees are also well recognised, and include

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language difficulties, qualifications not being recognized, and discrimination (Altinkaya & Omundsen, 1999; Beiser & Hou, 2001; Daly, Barker & McCarthy, 2002; Faelli & Carless, 1999; Montgomery, 1991; North, Trlin & Singh, 1999; Shih, 2002; Smith, 1996; Valtonen, 1999; Wooden, 1991). For example, although refugees resettled in New Zealand have their skills and qualifications assessed on entry to New Zealand, these assessments utilize western standards that often fail to acknowledge general skills, informal qualifications and previous experience. Overall, there is little research or literature on the previous skills that refugees have and how they might be better adapted to employment in the new country.

The present research study aimed to find out more about previous jobs and skills of one group of refugees in one small city in New Zealand. While narrowly focused, it was hoped that the methods and findings could be applied to other refugee groups. As part of a longer term collaborative research programme with a Somali community, we examined employment histories in detail, hoping to use the findings to develop new interventions to overcome barriers to employment for these and other immigrant and refugee groups. The community is very concerned about the problem, although a lot of effort goes into working towards employment opportunities and education for their children.

As well as confounding of factors in predicting employment, another problem with the refugee employment research area is that most of it has concentrated on men's employment and much less is known about women's employment (Ahmed, 1999; Chapple, 2001; Kelly, 1989; Markovic & Manderson, 2000; Morokvasic, 1993). We therefore over-sampled women in the present study to gain further knowledge about women's employment histories and experiences.

Method

Participants

The participants were 55 women and 35 men from the Somali community in New Zealand. They were a convenience sample but we aimed for a range of ages and conditions. The 2001 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 2002) indicated that there were 576 males and 534 females between the ages of 15 and 69 living in New Zealand who identified as Somali. The sample of 90 was an average of 32.3 years old, and had been in New Zealand for an average of 4.5 years. Of the 53 in the sample with children, they had an average of 5.3 children, ranging from one child to 15 children. The women were on average slightly older (33.0 years, ranging from 16 to 69 years) than the men (31.1 years, ranging from 18 to 50 years) and had been in New Zealand very slightly less time (4.4 years) than the men (4.6 years). Of those with children, the women, on average, had more (5.5) children than the men (4.8). These characteristics are very similar to a previous sample, but had been in New Zealand about one year longer because the present sample was contacted about a year later (Guerin, Abdi & Guerin, 2003).

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Procedures

In-depth interviews were conducted by fluent, bilingual, male and female Somali researchers in the language and place preferred by the interviewees. Most were interviewed at their home in Somali with notes made in English, which were typed as soon as possible afterwards. The entire sample was unwilling to be audio-taped so extensive notes were made instead. Most topics were straightforward and concrete so there was little problem interpreting and noting what was said (unlike interviews about mental health, for example, Guerin et al., 2004). Descriptive statistics were calculated for appropriate data and qualitative responses were reviewed for themes. The interviews were conducted between April 2002 and June 2003.

The method of interviewing was to "talk around" the topics rather than to ask sequentially fixed questions. This follows recommendations by Pe-Pua (1989) for indigenous research, based on the *Pagtatanung-tanong* or "asking around" method she used with Filipinos. The method is such that questions are asked in a natural conversational context, so participants feel like they are having a chat rather than being interrogated. This is important for refugees since they have aversive histories in most cases with government and military interviews. The information sheet was translated into Somali but because many do not read the language (it was only put into written form in 1972), the interviewer also discussed the sheets with each participant. Similarly, the questions and themes were written in English but were talked through in either Somali or English depending upon the language preference of the participants.

In addition to some demographic questions, participants talked about their education and qualifications, their current income and work, and details about their jobs before arriving in New Zealand, including whether these jobs required a great deal of communication. They were also asked about the jobs they had in New Zealand, and what they felt has made it difficult for them to gain employment.

Results

Employment Background

For the 35 men, 19 had no formal qualifications, six had Diplomas or Degrees (animal science, business (2), nursing, public administration, computing), one had a two-year automotive engineering qualification, and nine had a High School Certificate equivalent. Of those with no qualifications, five were currently completing degrees or Diplomas, and one had almost finished a Law degree before it was interrupted by the civil war in Somalia. Of the 55 women, 48 had no formal qualifications, six had Diplomas or Degrees (accounting, nursing, midwifery, machine operator, hair dressing, business), and one had a High School Certificate equivalent. Of those with no qualifications, four were currently completing qualifications. Two women also pointed out that they had

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done all the accounting for their own businesses in Somalia but there were no formal qualifications needed and currently none that would recognised all their practical work.

For the 35 men, only six had their income from fulltime employment: one as a taxi driver, one in the computer industry, and four working in freezing works (usually as halal slaughter men). Overall, 83% were not in fulltime employment. Of the others, 26 had their main income from government unemployment benefits, and three from student allowances for tertiary education. Examination of part-time employment found that only 17 out of the 35 (49%) were unemployed and with no part-time employment, while one of the students and 10 of the others had part-time employment with their allowance or benefit.

For the part-time employment, the total sample had at one time or another held 59 jobs, making an average of 1.7 jobs per man. This ranged from no jobs ever up to five jobs held at some point. Considering that they had been in the country on average for 4.5 years, that some were students, and that some were older or with disabilities, this does not look as bad as the 83% unemployment would suggest. The part-time jobs included fruit picking, fruit/mushroom packing factory work, car groomer, management supervisor, meat works, car groomer, supermarket, plastics factory, working for a drug company, service station work, taxi, checkout, sports coach, chicken processing, computer labels, forklift, hall job, teaching aide, teaching/liaison person, laboratory work, and milk production factory.

For the 55 women, none obtained their income from fulltime employment. One woman had household income from her husband's fulltime job, 38 (69.1%) had household income from government benefits, five from benefits for sole parents, eight from a student allowance, one lived with her sister but did not say where the household income came from, and two did not answer this question.

The women did a great deal of part-time work, however, with a total of 60 jobs. This was unevenly distributed (unlike the men) and about half the women (28) had never had a job at all. Of the 37 women who had jobs, this meant that they had an average of 2.2 jobs each, more than the men. The part-time jobs included: fruit picking, grading and packing (apples, mushrooms, kiwifruit, asparagus, blueberries), cleaning houses, checkout work, planting wood, and charging some board for flatmates. The main employment for women was seasonal fruit picking and processing, and many had undertaken this hard work regularly for some years.

Barriers to Employment

Participants were asked about the barriers they had found to getting employment. A couple reported no barriers:

> *"I have a job. I believe I can get a job if I want one."* (26 year old man)

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Most reported barriers, however. The majority of the men answered that lack of English and lack of qualifications were significant barriers. Some also reported discrimination as a problem. Many women answered similarly in that English and qualifications were a problem but more answered that they had family commitments and were not looking for work.

Some believed that they had been discriminated against in getting jobs, either because of their age, their skin colour, the way that they dress, the lack of formally recognised qualifications, and their lack of English skills. More women (24 out of 55) also reported discrimination as a problem and in particular the way they dress was an issue for many employers.

> "*There are not enough jobs around some places; it is hard to get a job because of my colour / race.*" (30 year old man)

> *"Also employers have a negative attitude towards employing Somalis as they view Somalis as not good employees.*" (22 year old man)

> *"Mostly I guess it's the way I dress puts them off, and some cases like my last job when I went to apply I had lots of layers of clothing but when I started working they told me to wear pants which was not mentioned during the interview. So it's like blackmailing you emotionally. I disagreed and told them you didn't mention in the contract and I'm not going to agree with you. I was lucky I wasn't fired but I don't expect them to give me a job in the future.*" (20 year old woman)

Many reported that they had family commitments that either precluded them from most employment or took up most of their time. This was more common among the women (although not exclusive to the women).

> *"The most [barrier] is child care. I have four children under the age of seven, we are living on a single income, so having child care is very expensive, and I don't have any qualifications even if I work I can't earn more than $8 hr. So I will not be able to get well paid job to cover my child care cost & transport. Plus with the way I dress with veil there aren't any job opportunities in NZ."* (26 year old woman)

As expected, poor English proficiency was a common barrier for working in New Zealand settings, although some women pointed out that English was not imperative in a number of jobs they were not given.

> *"I can't even do my grocery shopping without an interpreter, how can I apply for any job? I need to learn the basic things first, like communicating in English."* (54 year old woman)

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> *"Simply because every one thinks I'm a walking tree who cannot follow the simplest instructions like picking blueberries; it's my arms that pick the fruits and not my mouth. I'm so angry about the whole issue of job seeking because there isn't any for me."* (57 year old woman)

Also as expected, not having the recognised qualifications for employment or not having experience in New Zealand situations was often mentioned as a barrier to employment by both men and women.

> *"Not having a New Zealand qualification is my biggest barrier."* (37 year old man with an overseas Diploma in Animal Science)

> *"No English, no qualifications, my skills aren't needed here as there isn't any pastoralists and nomadic people."* (48 year old woman)

Some participants reported that there were either not enough jobs around, or that others got preference over them because of the scarcity of jobs.

> *"I'm experienced in retail business, but I can't do that because of my clothing and no opportunities of what I used to do."* (52 year old woman)

> *"I don't know, but sometimes I feel that I'm always going to be third best. First it's white-NZ, second is NZ Maori, and then I go to number 3."* (21 year old woman)

> *"Language, also not enough jobs in Hamilton, only seasonal work."* (22 year old man)

Many women reported that the ethnically way they dressed was an issue for employers, sometimes for interfering with the work and sometimes merely because their dress code were unusual for New Zealanders.

> *"I think mostly is my dress code, as a Muslim and race because of my colour, and the employers presume I don't have enough English. And also my lack of professional qualification e.g. nurse, social worker etc."* (26 year old woman)
> *"…and again if employers think that I'm going to suffocate during summer because of my layers of clothes, then don't feel sorry for me, because it's my comfort zone."* (57 year old woman)

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Previous Employment

Table 1: Employment Prior to Coming to New Zealand for Somali Men and Women

Men's Employment	*Women's Employment*
Money transfer	Nursing/ nurse aid
I worked for the government in Somalia. I also was a farmer growing different crops	Business woman, had a clothing store where I used to import clothes from Asia and Middle East
I was a truck driver transporting goods	Nurse and midwife
Shopkeeper (cashier)	Selling things
Selling ice	Machine operator for eight years in a textile industry in Somalia
Business - retailing in clothing	I had a good paying job in Somalia. I was mainly teaching women who have lived in semi-arid zones what crops to plant that can survive during famine
I was farming	I used to sell bulk food not available in Somalia e.g., sugar shortage meant starvation in Somalia so I will travel to neighbouring countries and buy tonnes of sugar and sell it in Somalia and it was worth a fortune. In Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania. I was always on the road for business
Business (retailing in hides) and import and export	Sold clothes to customer and did daily intake like counting money and recording it and balancing.
Hotel Manager	I owned a food shop (dry rations)
I was a nurse	Sold tea leaves from East African countries to Somali where it was not available and sometimes sugar from interstate
Area sales manager at a Company	I was self-employed, I had a restaurant where I was a cashier and supervised the daily function of the restaurant.
Business: food and clothing	Had a clothing chain shops; brought clothing and perfume from the Middle East and sold in Somalia
I was a driver (truck driver)	Business woman (selling dry foods that are imported from Middle East which were not available in Somalia)
I had my own business (commodities - wholesales and retailing)	Looking after [animals]; I would also buy a big sacks of different rations e.g. sugar, flour, rice and sell to other pastoralists who will pay twice the price
Shop assistant with my mother	I worked as a physiotherapist but without any qualification in the refugee camp in Kenya just to get little income for survival
Shop keeper; I worked in a farm	
I worked for a petrol company and a business	
Customs/ airport and seaport in Somalia	
I was a business man (food stores, clothes)	
Managing a hostel for orphans	
Truck driver	

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The results so far suggest that some of the well known barriers are present in this population and a few other problems have been revealed. One of the aims of the study was also to investigate what skills the interviewees had in Somalia and what prevented the transfer of those skills over to New Zealand. Participants were therefore questioned about previous employment prior to arriving in New Zealand. We found much diversity in prior employment experiences. Table 1 presents the main occupations of the 20 men and 15 women who had jobs prior to New Zealand. Most of the others were too young to have worked at that time.

Some of these were set up as businesses, although everything was done informally:

> *"I was self-employed, I had a restaurant where I was a cashier and supervised the daily function of the restaurant."* (42 year old woman)

This particular case was a big operation although this counts for nothing with New Zealand businesses:

> *"I was a cashier in Somalia and I started my restaurant by just selling tea in front of my house, then I built a makeshift hut where all the interstate truck drivers could stop for tea and refreshments. Then that gave me enough money to rent premises on site, I ended buying the property and turned it to a major restaurant chain. But all this does not apply as qualifications in NZ*." (42 year old woman)

Other operations were completely informal:

> *"I can't say I used to work in an office but looking after over 500 goats, 50 cows, 30 camels was more than a full time job, and sometimes in the process of looking for pasture involved dusk to dawn and being very far from the shops and town, so sometimes I would also buy big sacks of different rations e.g. sugar, flour, rice and sell to other pastoralists who will pay twice the price."* (69 year old woman)

> *"I used to sell bulk food that was not available in Somalia e.g. sugar shortage meant starvation in Somalia so I will travel to neighbouring countries and buy tonnes of sugar and sell it in Somalia and it was worth a fortune."* (66 year old woman)

The other women were: nurses, machine operators, physiotherapist (unqualified), and one teacher.

> *"I was mainly teaching women who have lived in semi-arid zones what crops to plant that can survive during famine. Yes, it was mainly speaking and giving directions in Somali."* (57 year old woman)

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Inspection of these prior employment histories of both men and women shows a number of interesting properties about previous jobs. These include: speaking in Somali, social networking, negotiation skills, the importance of over-land trade routes, multiple jobs and (legal) informal economies, knowledge of regional-specific trade, and the differences in legal and bureaucratic requirements. Some comments will be made about each of these.

Those participants who had previously worked in Somalia, 19 men (two said no as both had been truck drivers) and all the 13 women (two did not answer) stated that they required good language skills, coupled with good casual or informal social skills. As one woman stated:

> *"If I opened a shop in NZ and I never spoke to any customer when they spoke to me, how many would come to the shop? So for me it's purely language."* (46 year old woman)

The majority reported that they also need to speak a number of languages, in particular Somali, Swahili, and Arabic, in their prior jobs. Only two mentioned English as a language they had used regularly and for one the participants, they only used the roman numerals.

Most of the jobs involved close social networking to form import and export partnerships and to establish relationships with customers. In order to influence partnerships and customers, the participants noted that it requires a thorough command of a range of informal skills conducted in informal settings within the context of Somali and neighbouring regions. It also requires a good understanding of people and communities and how the social organisations work. That is, it was not only important to have a good grasp of the language in their prior employment, but it was also important to be socially skilled in informal settings. Even those who now have good command of the English language do not have this informal fluency and ability in colloquial English.

The prior jobs also required a strong need for negotiation skills which once again require a strong command of the regional dialects and informal languages. For example, the participants needed to negotiate prices for both buying and selling of goods in a variety of settings. The buying and selling operations in Somalia were frequently built around commodities specific to the region, with some saying how they took advantages of local demand. Many were also not in competition (at least at that time) with large multinational food supply companies selling basic food items cheaply (rice, sugar, flour, etc.).

A number of participants also noted that in their previous businesses they had used extensive African trade routes, most of which were overland. For example, goods may be bought in one country, sold in another, other goods purchased and sold again in the original country. Operating businesses using these trade routes was very different

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compared to operating a trading business in New Zealand, in which trade is conducted primarily with overseas buyers or sellers. Trading overland was often less difficult given that the participants had easier access to different countries and transport compared to the difficulties associated with New Zealand's geographical isolation and its bureaucratic requirements for international, overseas trading. The participants were clear that there were few bureaucratic or legal rules concerning running a business in their country of origin. Rules and forms for starting a business were minimal, and no business or safety plans were required. One simply began buying and selling and hopefully this worked and expansion occurred. Small (legal) informal economies were common.

Finally, many of the participants had multiple jobs in North Africa and took advantage of opportunities. Interviews in previous studies indicated that Somalis would travel to Saudi Arabia or elsewhere for seasonal or longer work and send money back home to families.

Conclusions

The study reported in this paper was conducted with one refugee group in one city, but the issues surrounding barriers to employment raised in the study are worth repeating elsewhere. In particular, although the participants reported commonly found barriers to obtaining work and employment other than low paid, non-standard and precarious (namely, language knowledge, qualifications, and discrimination), there are other barriers that have more to do with intangible skills, such as interpersonal communication, social networks and regional knowledge, which have been frequently overlooked as important in the extant literature.

The findings show that insufficient communication skills are still a problem for many of the participants, even after living in New Zealand for a number of years, which suggests that the current services may not necessarily be providing adequate training in this area. Having a good knowledge of the subtle interpersonal skills and processes – skills that do not transfer easily into a culturally different and developed country with a new language, (such as New Zealand) – is essential when trying to establish social networks in a new country. It was not surprising, therefore, that the participants reported that they had had limited social networks in New Zealand, compared to their extensive networks in Somalia. The findings also show that the informality of the Somali commerce was very different compared to New Zealand; for example, there are few rules for establishing and running businesses, the informal communications and networks are different and there is a tendency to conduct multiple, informal business arrangements simultaneously in order to obtain an overall income rather than a single wage or salary. Overall, the participants were hampered in their ability to gain employment, obtain positions similar to those they had in Somalia, or start their own businesses in their adopted country because of their lack of knowledge of New Zealand's commercial laws, their limited networks, the insufficient knowledge of colloquial English and informal, cultural communications – skills

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mastered in Somalia and which are essential in business.

The findings also prompt a number of recommendations. Firstly, small business mentors should provide information on New Zealand's commercial laws and regulations to those wishing to start their own business as well as be cognizant of the limited informal networks that most Somalis have in their newly adopted country. In addition, by including a mix of both formal and informal properties, assessments can be used more effectively to highlight the lack of knowledge of New Zealand commerce and informal communication in certain migrant communities and explore more creatively the transfer and applicability of skills.

Secondly, in the short-term it would be wise to find employment that could circumvent having to learn all these new skills rather than waste them completely as happens at present. In this particular Somali community, a number of new initiatives have arisen for small or informal employment opportunities. These initiatives include Koran teaching, small clothing trades, making and then selling incense, and selling some foods in a small way (e.g., one member of the community once made a large, one-off pasta import and sold it locally to Somali). However, while these business initiatives provide some relief in the first instance, they are problematic as they are located *within* the Somali community and do not attempt to expose the Somali community to the wider economy in which they live. The problem with this is that it is either not sustainable as employment or else will only support a few people in this way. One cannot open ten dress shops for primarily Somali clients in one, small New Zealand city. There are, however, a few initiatives that are beginning to extend the working experiences of Somalis. For example, some Somalis are applying previous business skills and experience to taxi companies in New Zealand in which an excessive amount of English and western bureaucratic acumen are not necessarily required. However, more research is needed to determine how well these businesses are doing and how they are coping with the bureaucratic rules of running a business in New Zealand.

Secondly, what are missing are interventions to enhance the whole social and business networking and the informal, conversational ties that characterise small-scale businesses (Guerin, 2004, 2005). If businesses are to be sustainable in small cities, then the larger population needs to be accessed as a market, and restricting business to Somali speakers or contacts through Mosques will not be viable. One way might be for businesses to mentor specific Somali individuals with excellent English skills into the business social networks available, to be the up-front person. Others working in the Somali side of the business need not have the same level of informal conversational and negotiation skills if individual representatives could be mentored and trained. It could also be an advantage in business circles to be known as the Somali representative and this would certainly be noticed and remembered, and would be good for future marketing.

Finally, the employment issues for Somali women in New Zealand suggests the need for

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re-skilling programmes that are scheduled at times suitable for women who are meeting the demands of large families. The skills of managing large families and households could also be fostered through setting up child care and kindergarten programmes with cultural and religious emphasis for women who want to work but have small children.

In all, there are good possibilities to go beyond the large unemployment and sizable part-time employment status of most refugee groups, and move into more sustainable self-employment. This will not only require adapting the skills already possessed the migrants but also finding ways to utilize such skills in a new context. We are hopeful that other adaptations of skills can be made at a more micro-level with individual cases if followed though. To this end, it would be useful for future research to look at interventions that incorporate the prior employment skills into a New Zealand context. This could include learning about the social organisation and social networking opportunities in New Zealand, as well as practice with informal English.

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