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Refugee Women, HRD, and Transitions to Employment:

A Summary of Methodological Approaches

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Abstract

Refugee women comprise half of the world's 19.5 million refugees today. Many refugee women resettle in industrialized countries, yet there is limited research particularly on their human resource development issues, including transitions to employment. This paper summarizes the methodological approaches of research conducted on refugee women and their transitions to employment. Majority of the 22 articles surveyed described refugees from Africa, utilized qualitative approaches, and have been conducted in the United States of America. Implications to HRD research include further inquiry on refugee populations using participatory approaches, and ethical considerations in the conduct of refugee research.

Keywords: human resource development, refugee women, employment transitions

Refugee Women, HRD, and Transitions to Employment:

A Summary of Methodological Approaches

In 2014, there were 59.5 million globally displaced persons, among them 19.5 million refugees, and half are women. Refugees are “persons outside of their country of origin who have a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group or political opinion, and unable or, because of such fear, are unwilling to return to that country” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Global Trends, 2014).

Prior to entering industrialized countries of asylum, most refugees typically spend years at a refugee camp, where they are processed for refugee status. Once granted refugee status by the government of an industrialized country, refugees are classified as part of the “immigrant” or the “foreign-born” population. If sent to the United States, for instance, they may apply for lawful permanent residence or green card after one year of continuous presence in the United States, and citizenship after 5 years (Lyons, 2008; Nwosu, Batalova, & Auclair, 2014).

Refugee resettlement programs in industrialized countries typically focus on refugees obtaining quick employment to become self-sufficient (Lyons, 2008). Refugee women have the potential to contribute to the social and economic development of countries of resettlement (Clayton, 2005; Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2011; Martin, 2004). However, refugee women who resettle in industrialized countries with languages and cultures markedly different from their own encounter many challenges that concern access to education and employment (Martin, 2004). They may be expected to contribute to their new lives in a productive manner, either as a sole breadwinner or as one of two income-earners (Davison, 1981; Spero, 1985). This expectation can be challenging to meet because, in addition to lower levels of English proficiency and formal education, and being more concerned about financial and social support

for childcare and transportation compared to men, refugee women are also concerned about the cultural expectations of the gender role (Davison, 1981; Magno, 2008; Martin, 2004; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Other challenges to education, employment, and career advancement include: 1) the non-recognition of professional qualifications, formal credentials, and work experience obtained from refugee origin countries prior to resettlement, 2) the lack of knowledge of host country culture, and 3) many workforce development programs focus on development projects that typically train and employ refugee men (Clayton, 2005; Manery & Cohen, 2003; Martin, 2004; Moran & Petsod, 2003; Spero, 1985; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Research on refugee populations is said to be “one of the most challenging in the field of human research since it poses many ethical and methodological issues” (Sieber, 2009, p. 2). To date, the literature on refugee women, though growing, remains limited (McPherson, 2005). A majority of refugee studies thus far focus on resettlement or mental health issues. There is also limited research on refugee women’s workforce development and employment transition issues, training, or organizing for it (McPherson, 2005; Tomlinson & Egan, 2002). Thus, in order to contribute to the developing area of research on refugee women’s employment transitions, there is a need to review the studies that have been conducted and to learn from the findings of each methodological approach moving forward.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize methodological approaches that previous studies have taken to examine employment transitions of refugee women, and to analyze some of the issues related to these methodological approaches. With the rising numbers of refugees, half of whom are women fleeing their home countries to rebuild their lives in industrialized countries,

it is important for researchers to examine appropriate research methods so as to generate authentic data that inform practice, policy, and advocacy related to the human resource development and employment transitions of refugee populations. Human resource development (HRD) plays a critical role in this context as an agent of societal and national development, functioning as “any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop adults’ work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity” (McLean & McLean, 2001; Swanson & Holton, 2001). HRD in this context is increasingly utilized to address societal, community, and national-level issues (Cho & McLean, 2004; McLean & McLean, 2001).

Method

Empirical studies on employment transitions of refugee women were reviewed. This process included selecting literature that described various education, training, skills development, learning processes and related activities that refugee women undergo or experience in transitioning to or preparing for employment. Empirical studies were also selected based on the following parameters: adult refugee women as participants of the study, resettling in industrialized countries, and studies conducted from 2000 to present. Goodkind and Deacon (2004), along with works cited from the late 90s, discussed the consideration of more rigorous research methods in studying refugee women. These include the construction of culturally relevant quantitative measures, the significance of language in measurement construction and conduct of research, benefits of including a member of the target population in the construction of measures, and ways in which a given method may be ineffective to particular cultural norms. From Goodkind and Deacon’s 2004 article, it was estimated that the period between 2000 and

present would be a sufficient timeline to examine if these suggestions have been considered in the methods of research with refugee women as participants.

The methodological approaches of empirical studies were also reviewed if the participants included a combination of the following: refugee men and women, a mix of migrant and refugee women, or refugee women and representatives of the education, training and/or employment service sectors. The strategies for searching and reviewing this literature are described next.

In searching for empirical studies, the following search databases were used: Academic Search Premier, Gender Studies Database, Business Source Complete, Worldcat, and Google Scholar. Key subject terms were used to identify relevant literature. Literature on employment transitions of refugee women was identified using 33 key subject terms. The search considered scholarly journal articles, dissertations/theses, book chapters, and empirically-supported and relevant technical and research reports directly sourced from the websites of independent research centers, federal agencies, and non-profit organizations. A majority of the key subject terms were not listed in the databases' descriptors, thus the 33 key subject terms were also used to search databases in addition to the subject descriptors the databases had provided. A list of the 33 key subject terms used to search relevant literature is available from the author upon request.

In the next stage of the review, each piece of literature was examined and critically analyzed on its methodological approaches. This involved examining and critiquing the strengths and weaknesses of its methodological approach, including (but not limited to) research paradigms, sampling, and data collection. Literature was not selected if it did not meet the selection criteria listed above, even if it was identified as relevant using the key subject terms. The outcome of this review provides a summary of methodological approaches used from 2000

to present in the research of refugee women and their transitions to employment, and a discussion on some of the research-related issues. Considerations for future research will also be discussed. A total of 22 pieces of literature were selected as key sources and examined for this review of methodological approaches, a great majority of which are scholarly journal articles.

Findings

This section of the paper will discuss the overall methodological approaches utilized to study employment transitions of refugee women. This analysis is limited to the 22 key pieces of literature identified and selected for this review. Some aspects of the methodological approaches that are found lacking, in need of more clarity, or pose some ethical considerations will also be discussed.

Methodological Approaches and Countries of Research Conducted

Of the 22 studies in this review, half of the studies employed a qualitative approach. There were 4 quantitative studies typically employing survey questionnaires to collect data. Four studies did not mention what methodological approach was used. However, upon closer examination of these studies' data collection methods (many of which were interview methods), it is observed that they were probably qualitative studies as well. Only 3 authors noted that they had used multi-methods approaches. A majority of the 22 studies in this review were conducted in the United States of America, with 9 studies. The next country with the most research conducted, with 5 studies, was the United Kingdom.

Sampling and Participant Profile

Fifteen studies noted the use of non-random sampling when recruiting and selecting participants. Six studies did not mention what type of sampling was used, while only one study used random selection for a quantitative study.

For the studies that mentioned the nationalities of their participants, 12 of the 22 studies had refugee participants in their sample originating from the African countries, namely Somalia, Sudan, Congo, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe. There were 6 studies researching Iraqi refugees, and 6 studies researching refugees from Afghanistan. Participants from Southeastern European countries like Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia were included in 5 studies. Among the least studied were refugees from Burma, Bhutan, and Syria.

Most participants in the 22 studies reviewed were of working age (between 18 and 60 years old) and were in their respective industrialized country of resettlement 5 years or less when the study was conducted. Participants with high educational attainment (i.e. has a high school diploma, or a college, graduate or professional degree) were noted in 2 studies from the United Kingdom, and 1 study from Australia.

Data Collection

It was noted in 9 studies that interview and/or survey materials were translated to the respondents' native language prior to its administration. In addition, 4 studies described the authors employing a bilingual research assistant of the same nationality as the participants to assist with various activities such as participant recruitment, orientation, and follow-ups, conducting focus group discussion and interviews, and translating interview transcriptions. Two authors also employed an interpreter to sit with them in interviews, in case participants needed help in explaining or preferred to speak in his/her native language. Most of the data collection was conducted in the homes of the participants or in a place comfortable to them.

It was not mentioned in 8 studies whether or not the authors had data collection materials translated. Three studies conducted interviews in the authors' native language only. In addition, 6 studies described and addressed issues related to cultural nuances and sensitivities related to

data collection, such as interviewing with a White interviewer, and consulting with leaders of the refugee community.

Data Analysis

Most of the studies described how they analyzed their survey or interview data using appropriate techniques and tools, such as using NVivo software to code themes in qualitative analyses, or regression analyses for 2 of the quantitative studies. Four qualitative studies did not describe how data was analyzed.

It is noted that the data was not analyzed separately for studies with mixed participants, namely for those that mixed refugee women with men, other migrant women, or asylum seekers. Of the 14 studies that had refugee men and women as participants, only 2 studies highlighted significant findings and comparisons between refugee men and women. Two studies with refugee men and women as participants did not analyze data separately between refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, in the 8 studies that had refugee women as participants, only 1 study did not separate analyses for migrant women and refugee women.

Methodological Challenges

Some of the authors also noted some of the methodological challenges encountered with their respective research studies. In 2 studies utilizing a qualitative approach, it was reported that a majority of the participants did not want to be audiotaped due to confidentiality fears. In one of these studies, it was also noted that the Somali participants preferred to speak with same-gender Somali researchers, as well as conduct interviews in a more conversational manner vis-à-vis what they perceive as interrogation.

Two studies utilizing survey questionnaires had some issues with response rate and quality. In one of these studies, 25% of the participants refused to cooperate, 15% were

unreachable at the time of the study, 5% had language difficulties and did not continue, and the rest had either moved or had passed away. In the other study using a survey questionnaire, the participants were potentially wary of outsiders, and the author noted that this may have had an effect on the quality of the survey responses. A qualitative study also reported recruitment issues, having difficulties achieving initial access to potential participants due to refugee support organizations acting as gatekeepers of their clients.

Ethical Considerations

There were 12 studies in the 22 pieces of literature reviewed that were of some ethical concern with regard to translation issues. Eight of these authors did not mention whether or not their data collection materials were translated. In addition, three of these studies conducted interviews and focus group discussions in the author's language, and an interpreter was not present during said interviews and focus group discussions. One quantitative study did translate the survey questionnaire into 3 languages, none of which were first languages of the sample participants.

Discussion and Implications to Future Research Conduct

The purpose of this paper was to summarize methodological approaches that previous studies have taken to examine employment transitions of refugee women, and analyze its methodological issues. It is evident from the examination of the 22 studies that the majority of the studies are qualitative in approach. Many of these authors have also encountered various methodological challenges, did not provide clear descriptions of their methodological procedures, and, in a handful of cases, appear to employ practices that may be of ethical concern.

With most refugee research being qualitative in approach and using small samples, Jacobsen and Landau (2003) raised concerns about the lack of rigor in refugee research. The authors state that rigor requires research to be clearly articulated and open to scrutiny, reproducible, free of bias, and designed to suit a practical purpose, such as generalizability for policy use. However, Rodgers (2004) argues that small-scale qualitative approaches and methods are more responsive to and ethically critical for refugee environments, since information from these approaches are “generated largely through intensive, informal, and interpersonal interactions between researchers and the forced migrants” (Rodgers, as cited in MacKenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007, p. 17). McPherson (2005) adds that even a post-positive approach is prone to bias if methods are not “transparently presented in a manner that articulates strengths, limitations, and connection to outcomes” (p.107).

With regard to methodological challenges, Kabranian-Melkonian (2015) states that research on diverse groups will inevitably be methodologically and ethically challenging. Researchers have to contend with issues that make it challenging to carry out refugee research, such as 1) trust issues between the researcher, participants, between participants themselves, the refugee community, and the organizations that support them, 2) not being culturally competent

enough to understand and navigate through cultural nuances and sensitivities, 3) designing data collection tools that address language needs, and 4) going through proper standard procedures with necessary authoritative figures, such as refugee support organization or leaders of the refugee community, to gain access to participants. In addition, refugees bring with them cultures, traditions, and problems encountered during their tribulations, such as trauma, poor health, poverty, and unemployment, which all create ethical challenges in research.

Based on the summary of the 22 studies, and the inevitable challenges noted by Kabranian-Melkonian (2015) while working on refugee research, what are takeaways for future refugee researchers? Before this question is addressed, I take a step back and ask: what is the purpose of refugee research? Jacobsen and Landau (2003) state the refugee research should have a dual purpose: 1) “research into others’ suffering can only be justified if alleviating that suffering is an explicit objective”, resulting in practical outcomes that improve refugees’ lives (p.1), and 2) to conduct research with academic quality as information gathered has the capacity to provide evidenced-based information for policy and practice.

With this dual-purpose in mind, future researchers interested in HRD issues of refugee women, such as their education, training, and employment transitions, can consider the following in the conduct of research with refugee women.

Participatory Action Research

If researchers choose to use qualitative research designs in refugee research, they may consider a participatory methods approach. Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales (2007) define participatory action research (PAR) as “a qualitative research inquiry in which the researcher and participants collaborate at all levels in the research process (participation) to help find a suitable solution for a social problem that significantly affects an underserved community

(action)” (p. 255). A key feature of PAR is that it involves the conduct of research *with* the immediately affected persons, versus conducting research *on* them as research objects, so as to share knowledge, stimulate action to challenge social inequities, and facilitate positive development of the target group (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Collie, Liu, Podsiadlowski, & Kindon, 2009; McTaggart, 1991). PAR is rooted in principles of inclusion, participation, valuing all local voices and community-driven sustainable outcomes (Fals-Borda, 1988). PAR brings together theory and practice, with the primary aim of developing solutions for affected individuals through a participatory process (Ganehspanchan, 2006). This process is especially significant for marginalized groups whose views are seldom sought, and have little opportunity to articulate and assert their interests, or are in a poor position to initiate projects of interest on their own (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). PAR methods may be suitable for the study of refugee women as they represent a group that is particularly marginalized in discussions involving human resource development issues such as education, training, and employment transitions.

Trust-building is Key

A handful of the 22 studies reviewed in this paper described methodological issues that concerned access to potential participants, participants being wary of the interviewer, refusing to cooperate, and refusing to be audiotaped due to confidentiality fears. These behaviors may be due to issues with trust in interacting with researchers that the participants and their community are not familiar with. Kabranian-Melkonian (2015) noted that to guarantee the authenticity of information gathered, researchers must strive to build trust among the community or group members intended for research. This can occur by reaching out to persons or organizations deemed as gatekeepers and trusted community members who can serve as a bridge between the

researcher and the target group. Building trust with support communities could take time and effort but is essential in refugee research.

Some of the studies in this review employed bilingual research assistants who helped researchers with interpretation, translation, recruitment and orientation of participants, and conduct interviews. Employing such trusted research partners may be helpful for researchers in connecting with communities and participants, but also has its own risks of which researchers may not be aware. Kabranian-Melkonian (2015) noted that it is possible that a research assistant may be associated, through his/her accent, appearance, or name, with a group that respondents may fear or despise. This will certainly influence the quality of the data collected.

Aside from consulting and seeking the collaboration of trusted community members and bilingual research assistants, it is noteworthy that researchers themselves reflect on their own motivations for conducting refugee research and strive to commit to the trust they have been given. One of the studies in this review is of particular ethical concern, as the authors had randomly chosen their participants from a list of refugees residing in the area, and translated survey questionnaire items into 3 languages, none of which were first languages of the target participants. The same study also reported experiencing low response rates due to refugees' refusal to participate, difficulties reaching participants at the time of the study, and participants dropping out due to language difficulties.

Refugees Have Many Layers

Some of the studies reviewed in this paper grouped together migrant women and refugee women, refugees and asylum seekers, and refugee women and men. While it is true that refugees and asylum seekers are referred to as migrants, persons with refugee status have distinctly different needs compared to the rest of the foreign-born population. Refugees are

unwilling or unable to return to their home countries due to the fear of prosecution, and upon arrival at resettlement countries, are authorized to work and are eligible for public benefits and services as the country's citizens (Lyons, 2008). In contrast, other migrants may not be eligible to work nor receive public benefits, have made a conscious choice to enter the country, or can always return to their countries if they get homesick. The experiences of non-refugee migrants and refugees will be different, and conclusions reached from research combining them may not be as accurate.

It is also possible that refugees from the same country have different backgrounds and experiences. Some refugees from well-educated, prominent, or well-off families often have the resources to leave the country comfortably (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015). Their experiences may largely differ from those from the same country who are not as well-off, or have been victims of invasion, rape, or persecution. In addition, refugees who have not received formal education and are illiterate even in their own language may not be able to sign forms for informed consent, in which case research could become ethically challenged. Researchers may need to consider other ethically-acceptable ways to achieve informed consent for participants who cannot read nor write. Depending on cultural standards, some alternatives to the written informed consent include obtaining the informed consent of trusted community leaders or spokesperson in addition to individual participants, deferring to other non-participating individuals who are culturally expected to be involved in decision-making, and giving the participant many opportunities to re-evaluate their consent (Ellis, Kia-Keating, Yusuf, Lincoln, & Nur, 2007).

Gender-Specific Perspectives

Research suggests that while quantitative and qualitative methods have been used to explore the experiences of refugee women from diverse backgrounds, little attention has been given to the discussion regarding gender-specific challenges encountered during the conduct of research (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004). For instance, cultural norms on gender may influence the types of items the participant will respond well to. It is important for the research design to adequately capture women's voices. Thus, in studying refugee women and pertinent issues such as education and employment transitions, Goodkind and Deacon (2004) suggest that researchers consider gendered decision-making structures in the lives of refugee women and how these structures may impact the research process.

Conclusion

Research on refugee women is severely lacking in the areas of their HRD issues, such as employment transitions, education, training, and workforce development. Research on such vulnerable and diverse groups can bring many methodological and ethical challenges, and researchers must be aware and prepare for these issues. With further inquiry to methodological approaches in refugee research, this emerging field of research has great potential in presenting meaningful, useful, and accurate information for policy, practice, and advocacy.

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