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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Group social capital and the employment prospects of refugee women who experience domestic violence

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers research insights on how refugee women who experience domestic violence develop employment prospects. Guided by social capital theory and the concept of group social capital, the paper uses a qualitative approach to identify intrapersonal and interpersonal processes in a group intervention that assist women members to adjust their cognitive reasoning about their domestic violence experience and engage in behaviours that potentially enhance their employment prospects. The paper contributes to understanding how group processes can foster small wins that may enhance the employment prospects of this vulnerable group.

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Refugee women; domestic violence; group social capital; employment prospects

Introduction

Despite a decade of action that has eventuated in a formal recognition of domestic violence as a workplace issue in Australia (see APSC 2022), there persist groups outside of the workforce whose employment prospects remain elusive because of their experience of domestic violence. Refugee women are one of these groups. While the employment rate of refugee women is already four times less than of refugee men (Riosco and De Maio 2017), refugee women who experience domestic violence are likely to have even lower employment rates and experience a higher loss of employment than refugee women (Commonwealth of Australia 2015). In fact, employment can increase the vulnerability of refugee women to further acts of domestic violence, as perpetrators feel threatened by the loss of power and control as the woman earns an independent income and employment takes them outside the physical space which the perpetrator dominates (Commonwealth of Australia 2015, 31).

Yet, although there is research about adapting services to be culturally competent to support refugee women who experience domestic violence (Wachter et al. 2021; see Pokharel et al. 2021; Piquero et al. 2021; Pérez-Vázquez and Bonilla-Campos 2022; Mengo et al. 2022), there remains little understanding about how to assist refugee women who experience domestic violence to enhance their employment prospects. This research note aims to contribute to this gap. This is by describing research that focuses on a group intervention for refugee women who experience domestic violence. Findings from qualitative

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research with expert interviewees involved in this intervention show that by providing a 'healing space for the women' (SW) to develop trusting relationships and supportive networks (Larance and Porter 2004), the group assists participants to attain small wins (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000) that potentially enhance their employment prospects.

The research makes the following contributions to the literature: the first is empirical insights into how a group process promotes small wins (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000) in behaviour that may enhance the employment prospects of refugee women who experience domestic violence. The second is a contribution to the theorisation of the concept of group social capital (Oh et al. 2004) processes (Flasch et al. 2017), in the context of vulnerable groups. The research subsequently encourages re-thinking about how to enhance employment prospects for vulnerable groups, such as refugee women who experience domestic violence. After discussing the issues that influence the employment prospects of refugee women who experience domestic violence, this paper offers research insights by presenting the research approach, findings, and the implications of the research.

Refugee women who experience domestic violence

The concept of the 'canvas ceiling' (Lee et al. 2020), which is a systemic, multilateral framework of interrelated barriers that affect refugees employment, provides a framework to explore the issues that influence the employment prospects of refugees. Lee and colleagues (2020) describe three levels at which this ceiling operates: the institutional-level of regulatory influences and the socio-political climate; discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes at the organisational-level of employers and others; and individual-level factors such as personal trauma, language, motivations, and social networks. They argue that the interrelatedness of factors at these levels urges a consideration of the dynamics affecting workplace opportunities for refugees (Lee et al. 2020).

The framework similarly encapsulates the specific issues that influence the employment prospects of refugee women. At the institutional level, the inclusion or exclusion from social support in receiving host countries is generally reliant on visa status (Giralt and Sarlo 2017; Wilkinson and Craig 2011). However, because the residency of refugee women is usually on the basis that they are a 'partner' of a refugee male, their access to services also depends on the male (Grieco and Boyd 2004). The gendered nature of their lived experience is compounded by organisational-level influences embedded in norms in their own ethnic community about the role of women (Perales et al. 2021) that are often grounded in religious values (Choi et al. 2016; Gonçalves and Matos 2016; Ghafournia 2011). These combine to influence their employment prospects and ability to look for work, especially in the early years of resettlement (Khawaja and Hebbani 2018; Baker et al. 2021). Finally, individual-level factors such as language literacy (Vidales 2010) can funnel refugee women into informal poor-quality jobs even when they do find work (Senthanaar and MacEachen 2022). In fact, although the canvas ceiling is a useful framework to disentangle issues that affect refugee women's employment opportunities (Lee et al. 2020), the lived experience of these issues culminates in refugee women encountering a 'floor effect' in pursuing employment prospects (Perales et al. 2021).

While many of these dynamics also apply to refugee women who experience domestic violence, there are additional specific issues that influence their employment prospects (Rees and Pease 2007). The twin effects of homelessness (Tually et al. 2008) and being cut

off from social networks when they leave the perpetrator (UNHCR 2016) restrict access to crucial information that can help them to navigate support to overcome the experience of domestic violence (Wachter et al. 2021). For instance, refugee women are often unable to access trained language interpreters outside of their own communities (Vidales 2010), making it difficult for them to secure trusted, reliable information to help in their recovery. Lack of familiarity with social services because of their own lived experience in their home country is a further factor affecting their help-seeking behaviour when they experience domestic violence (Kim et al. 2015). However, of great concern is the fact that the influence of cultural norms and values can leave refugee women unable to differentiate between the violence that they are experiencing as illegal domestic violence from 'normal' violence to be endured (Flood and Pease 2006). Often described in terms of the influence of patriarchal values (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005), refugee women who experience domestic violence grapple with the effects of not just issues associated with the canvas ceiling (Lee et al. 2020) or even a 'floor effect' in pursuing employment prospects (Perales et al. 2021), but a unique conflation of issues that reflect an intersectionality of ethnicity and gender (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005).

Conceptual framework

Conceptually, the research blends social capital theory with the concept of group social capital (Oh et al. 2004). The concept of social capital has been widely used in research about phenomena similar to that studied here (for a review see Adler and Kwon 2002). Social capital is prompted by the stability of continued interactions over time between those within a group or network that is 'closed' because members share common characteristics (Granovetter 1985; Coleman 1988). The central proposition of the theory is that networks of relationships, of mutual acquaintance and recognition, provide members with obligations, a sense of identity, shared understandings, trust, reciprocity, friendships, and other valuable resources (Bordieu 1985; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). The network, in turn, can foster supportive ties between actors to create change in their status quo (Boland and Tenkasi 1995).

In an extension of social capital theory, Oh and colleagues (2004) propose the concept of group social capital. This refers to how the social relationships of group members 'within and outside of their groups and across multiple types of boundaries are related to group effectiveness' (Oh et al. 2004, 860). Like social capital, network ties are crucial to the development of group social capital with time, interaction and interdependence being key influences in fostering a fabric of social relations that, in the framework of group social capital, foster within-group exchanges that can assist members to change their status quo (Oh et al. 2004).

Research approach

A hermeneutic research approach guides the study because ethics clearance restricted access to service-providers only. The devastating experience of domestic violence and the potential for creating additional harm for individuals when recounting stories further justifies this approach (Hyden 2008). A hermeneutic research approach offers an interpretation of the phenomenon under study that is grounded in the data but, unlike other qualitative traditions, does not follow a template in interpreting how the data illuminates

a phenomenon (Mees-Buss et al. 2022). The approach relies on the 'interpretation of interpretations' of 'texts' such as interviews (Feil and Olteanu 2018). Thus, the understanding derived using this approach is non-linear (Mees-Buss et al. 2022) and 'merely (indicates) that something *may* be' (Peirce et al. 1974: CP 5.171 as quoted in Golden-Biddle 2020), rather than *will* be in explaining a phenomenon.

Sample

Confidence, when using a hermeneutic approach, relies on the quality of the informants providing the data (Dibley et al. 2020). Using a purposeful sampling strategy (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007), the data was collected from expert interviewees working with the women's support group. An expert interviewee possesses practical insider knowledge and is interviewed as a surrogate for others, when it is difficult or inappropriate to access to participants in a particular field (Bogner et al. 2018).

The first expert interviewee is the group's clinical psychologist (CP). CP had founded the group in 2015. CP counsels the group members about their experience of domestic violence and facilitates discussions in the group. The second expert interviewee is the group's support worker (SW) who is the co-facilitator of the group. SW further assists the women with material needs, such as housing and childcare. SW has also been involved with the group since its inception.

Data collection

Following an initial recount of how the group emerged, the nature of funding and a review of logistical matters such as frequency of meetings, the data collection process probed the interviewees understanding about the women members and incidents about how the group assisted women to overcome their experience of domestic violence and engage in behaviours that potentially enhance their employment prospects. This was by using the following questions: 'tell me about ____? Can you tell me about ____ experience of domestic violence? Can you tell me how the group has helped ____ in her recovery pathway, including to employment?'

Although interviews were the principal data source, the researchers also engaged in observations by conducting the interviews at the workplace where the group was held and attending a group session. These observations complemented the interview data in two ways: the first was to develop an empathic understanding of the physicality framing the group's operations while the second was to enable the researchers to privilege the voice of the participants in analysing the data (Onwuegbuzie and Frels 2013). That is, although unable to interview the women group members, by observing the group session the researchers were able to connect the expert interviewees account with women members, thus contributing to a richer understanding of the narrative that the expert interviewees recounted.

Data analysis

A research assistant transcribed the interviews which were between 45–90 minutes (n = CP, 4; SW, 5). Guided by the literature review and conceptual framework, the data

was categorised into units of analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79) before the transcripts were read several times to identify examples of the women's experiences, as well as behaviours that may enhance their employment prospects.

However, strategies were adopted to safeguard bias given that one of the researchers was also an expert interviewee. One was the observations of the group process that the researchers were able to undertake. Another was to use the second expert interviewee's data to cross check the data for coherence and consistency (Bogner et al. 2018), while the third was to exclude this researcher in any data analysis or writing.

Findings

Contextualising the group

SW recounts that the group 'came about because of the women who were coming to the front desk asking for help'. Originally funded by a nongovernment grant for an 8-week period, the host organisation attracted further government funds, and the group has continued. Importantly, the host organisation provides child-care for members, which gives the women the 'freedom' to speak, 'the kids are not there so they're able to cry and you know just express themselves through tears' (SW).

The experience of domestic violence

CP and SW summarised the women's refugee migration experience.

- IR1 and IR2 had arrived in Australia 'through Indonesia, then from Indonesia they took a boat and put all the money they ever had to the smugglers, and they came to Australia' (CP). Both women and families also spent time in Australia's Immigration Detention Centre on Christmas Island.
- E1, I1 and I2 had also been in refugee camps in the Middle East before being relocated to Australia.
- S1 had also been in a refugee camp before settling in Australia, S1 subsequently relocated again in Australia to get away from the perpetrator.

The women had different experiences of domestic violence. IR1 endured abuse from her husband, mother-in-law and sister-in-law who were also refugees: 'The mother-in-law perpetrated a lot of emotional, physical, and verbal abuse. IR1 was like the Cinderella of the house; they slaved her basically' (CP).

IR2 'lived in domestic violence for 30 years. And quite extreme domestic violence ... And I'm talking about you know financial, emotional, sexual abuse and physical abuse. But the physical, not as often as the other forms of abuse' (CP).

In E1's case, CP says that 'it came out that he always disabled any kind of Internet on her phone, so she had a smartphone, but she didn't even know how to use any of the apps on the smartphone'.

I1 'lived in domestic violence from the first day that she married' (CP), and in S1's case, 'he imprisoned her in the house for 3 months with the children' before she ran away (CP).

Finally, CP was unable to recount the violence that I2 experienced. However, CP said, 'I2 was also quite traumatised with the domestic violence'.

Interpersonal and intrapersonal processes

Art therapy was the medium used in the group. CP recounts,

"To (initially) educate women from different cultural backgrounds about domestic violence, what it looks like and what rights the women have in Australia and provide the women with a chance to express what domestic violence is to them".

However, as SW notes, the interpersonal processes that were facilitated through the art therapy helped the woman members to both recognise and understand their experience of domestic violence. SW says,

"Everyone was kind of shy but very emotional. And we could see that each one of them was fragile and they deemed they were shamed to talk about their issues. The therapy itself really, really works because it lets them bring up what they are feeling".

CP and SW further note the influence of the group logistics in facilitating these interpersonal processes. That is, the women sit around a table when they meet. The use of the table is purposive because CP reflects that this creates a dynamic of 'speaking and listening' with 'others like themselves' (that is, refugee women who experience domestic violence). As SW recounts,

"They come in and when they start talking, they actually look at each other and say, 'so I'm not alone, there is another woman who's going through this'".

The analysis identified that these processes assisted the women to form supportive and trusted ties with other members. As CP describes,

"IR1 met IR2 and then they became very good friends. IR1 also formed a very close bond and friendship with the other women who were from a completely different cultural background".

However, the analysis further shows the influence of these interpersonal processes on the emergence of significant intrapersonal processes. Firstly, the supportive ties and trusted relationships that they developed with others assisted the women to identify behaviours of partners as manipulative of themselves. SW recounts:

"One of the ladies says, 'oh my husband has changed, he is trying' and this woman (IR2) laughs. CP asks IR2, 'why are you laughing?'. She says, 'because he's lying to you. Trust me don't believe him . . . I'm telling you I've been with my husband. I was with my husband for 30 years. He used to do that. Learn from me'."

Importantly, CP recounts how in the case of IR2, the group helped her to recognise that 'the law stands with her and that she has rights as a woman, even on a protection visa in Australia', and subsequently motivated her to act against her perpetrator:

"I (CP) asked IR2 at a meeting 'what news have you got for me' she said, 'well my husband tried to force himself upon me last night, and I basically told him to get off me', and she said that if he ever forces himself on me again, she told him she will bring a knife and cut off his penis".

Finally, CP summarises the significance of the group in facilitating intrapersonal processes in the women when noting that by ‘talking’ in the group, the women had ‘exposure to something that is considered to be extremely taboo in their culture’ that becomes ‘actually kind of normalised through the group’, that is ‘they can come together and talk about domestic violence, sex and what is right and what is not (without fear of retribution)’.

Adjusting cognitive reasoning: behaviours enhancing employment prospect

The findings here are presented in [Table 1](#) to more clearly indicate how the group process supported the women in adjusting their cognitive reasoning. The quotes also reflect how the group process triggered behaviours that potentially enhance

Table 1. Adjusting reasoning to engage in behaviours that enhance employment prospects.

Participant	Adjusting Cognitive Reasoning	Enhancing employment prospects*
IR1	IR1 became very friendly with IR2, who became ‘like a motherly figure to this woman and even looked after the children sometimes’ (CP). IR1 developed confidence in herself because ‘for the first time IR1 felt that she was in a very safe place where people were not judgmental. She was limited in what services she could access because of her visa. (The) VRIO (violence restraining order) instilled fear in her ex partner, he knows that the law is by her side. She wants to use her experience to teach other women that there is hope. She can’t afford childcare but her dream is to further her education, so she attends English classes’ (CP).	Attending English classes to do further education
IR2	IR2 is the ‘oldest member of the group’, and ‘gives a lot of hope to younger members of the group’. (by coming to the group) ‘for the first time, IR2 felt like a valued member of the community that she wasn’t just a slave or a dog or just a wife whose duties was to cook and clean and serve the husband and the family, and that gives hope to the younger members, she plays a significant role in being a pillar of the group and now goes to English classes’ (CP).	Attending English classes
E1	‘When E1 began in the group she had no idea, like she’s never accessed a bank account. E1 didn’t even know how to use an ATM even. I tried talking to her about catching buses or the trains you know, and E1 was very resistant. But E1 learnt a lot from the other women. They used to tell her, “no go there, go to this place” now E1 gets the bus to (places), E1 knows how to come to (places) she learnt how to use the ATM, and E1 is learning to drive’ (CP).	Learning to drive Learning to use social services
I1	“So I1 joined the sewing group that we used to run on a Friday. I1 met other women, so she made new friendships. I1 helps all the other women with the sewing . . . now ‘I1 drives, I1 has this very old Mercedes that she is very proud of, she keeps it so clean’ and ‘irons and cooks for others’ and ‘attends English classes’ (CP).	Learning to drive Learning to sew Attending English classes Developing new networks
I2	After attending the group, I2 did a ‘level 1 in childcare or something from TAFE. I2 did a course’ (CP) and now works as a casual creche worker for the host organisation.	Gained a childcare qualification
S1	By talking in the group, S1 ‘pluck(ed) up the courage, to use the phone, and make an appointment to see a lawyer about the domestic violence’ (CP).	Learning to use social services

* References discussed in the literature review inform this categorisation, particularly (Kim et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2020; Perales et al. 2021; Wachter et al. 2021).

** CP = clinical psychologist.

the employment prospects of these refugee women who experienced domestic violence.

Discussion

Network ties are crucial in the employee job search process (Porter et al. 2022). However, the stability and time that forges the trust and network ties that foster employment prospects is problematic for refugees because these are severed during the refugee experience (Beaman 2011; Fozdar 2012). Although similar, the implications of a lack of network ties for refugee women who experience domestic violence are possibly greater. When overlaid with their experience of domestic violence, the interplay of institutional challenges that emerge with arrangements (such as the linking of their visa to that of the male perpetrator) with organisational effects (emerging from cultural norms) and individual factors relating to their language competency (Lee et al. 2020), interplay to minimise both the scope and the access by refugee women who experience domestic violence to network ties that can assist in their recovery (Wachter et al. 2021).

However, the research shows that a group intervention that is prompted by interpersonal and intrapersonal processes can stimulate the formation of new group social capital (Oh et al. 2004) that forges network ties that are both trusted and supportive. The research further shows the importance of this newly formed group social capital in adjusting the women members' cognitive reasoning to engage in behaviours that potentially enhance their employment opportunities. For instance, CP recounts the case of SI (who enhanced employment prospects) by 'pluck(ing) up the courage, use the phone, and make an appointment to see a lawyer' (see Table 1), and who pointed her hand at IR2 and said,

"I look at all of you but I look at her ... I think because we are similar age with similar aged children, and I just want to follow her ... I want to become her friend ... I want to follow her because I feel our story is very similar ... and I just can't believe that this woman comes here and she is very capable, and I just want that to be me".

As Table 1 shows, the behaviour by SI in terms of enhancing employment prospects is categorised as 'learning to use social services'. The table further shows that other categories are attending English classes, learning to drive, learning to sew, and developing new networks. Of all the women, only one has engaged in behaviour that is traditionally viewed as enhancing employment prospects, namely I2 who gained a childcare qualification that has since enabled I2 to get work as a childcare worker.

Thus, the 'wins' by the women members in terms of behavioural changes that enhance employment prospects are 'small wins' (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000). However, these are remarkable in themselves. That is, given their 'refugee' status (see UNHCR 2016) and the complexity of their experience of domestic violence that is not just restricted to the perpetrator but also reflects an intersectionality with their culture (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005), refugee women have a multilevel lived experience of violence that makes a 'small wins strategy' (Meyerson and Fletcher 2000) a relevant and appropriate approach. As Meyerson and Fletcher suggest (2000: 235–236) a small-wins strategy is one whereby each small win is not an end in itself but is, instead, an 'investigative tool for learning' to achieve 'big gains' slowly but surely. The precarious existence facing refugee women who

experience domestic violence suggests that this slow but sure approach may be culturally suitable and appropriate in advancing their employment prospects.

Limitations and further research

Although the major limitation of the research is the small sample size, the sensitive nature of the topic (Hyden 2008) creates challenges in envisaging how this limitation may be overcome. Perhaps a more promising road lies in the recommendation that future research consider adopting a longitudinal perspective that can follow the life of a refugee woman who experiences domestic violence to understand how changes at the multiple levels of the canvas ceiling (Lee et al. 2020), may not only adjust the 'floor effect' in pursuing employment prospects (Perales et al. 2021) but also cognitive reasoning that stimulates engagement in behaviours that enhance employment opportunities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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