

## **The social and cultural capital of refugee-background students: An Australian case for an ‘asset view’**

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This study proposes a more nuanced understanding of the elements constituting refugees’ cultural and social capital to help education providers and policymakers develop a non-deficit view of refugees. Such an understanding, informed by empirical research, ought to shape the type of support that is offered to this cohort to facilitate successful participation in higher education. This paper deploys the concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus and field as articulated within Bourdieu’s theory of practice. The findings of this study favour an ‘asset view’ of refugees within the higher educational context. Using a qualitative research design, 20 participants who come from a refugee background were interviewed. It was found that cultural identity and embeddedness within community has a varied influence on the higher educational experience of people from a refugee background in Australia. Additionally, diverse learning environments and, even, generic support structures, help provide a positive higher educational experience for refugees. These findings complement current research suggesting that people who come from a refugee background possess a range of cultural and social capital which can be assets to their higher educational endeavours.

### **Introduction**

As a signatory of the UNHCR Refugee Convention, Australia resettles thousands of refugees every year. In 2022-2023, the Humanitarian Program granted 17,875 visas, with the majority (15,875) granted offshore (Department of Home Affairs, 2023a). This means that this country also needs to ensure a range of social policies which help to facilitate a smooth resettlement and integration process for the refugees and the wider community they settle in. High levels of education provide a great benefit to individuals and societies (Larsen & Emmett, 2023). Based on age, a large proportion of protection visas in 2022-2023 were granted to people most likely to engage with the education system, including higher education, in the near or medium-term: 0-17 (37.6%), 18-29 (26.9%), and 30-49 (25.2%) (Department of Home Affairs, 2023b). This reinforces the significance of the skills and knowledge learnt at universities which empowers individuals to become informed, contributing, and active members of the community and may promote refugees’ social integration (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014).

Young people who have come to Australia as refugees are under-represented in higher education (Molla, 2020). Mupenzi et al. (2020) found that pandemic-induced employment and income losses, and the intensification of online learning necessitating higher internet speeds and better computer equipment, has exacerbated the socioeconomic challenges faced by refugee students. Additionally, politically-motivated discriminatory and punitive approaches to refugees and asylum seekers have a negative impact on educational participation (Matthews, 2019). Reinforced through negative political rhetoric and media representation in many countries, refugees are often perceived as a security threat (San

Pedro Veleo et al., 2023). Despite such politicisation, Australia's exposure to refugee circumstances is relatively limited. Of nearly 30 million refugees and asylum seekers globally, the largest populations live in Turkey (3,568,300), Iran (3,425,100), Colombia (2,455,500) and Germany (2,075,500) (UNHCR, 2023). By contrast, Australia hosts 60,000 refugees and 80,000 asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2024). Further, while the United States received 730,400 individual applications in 2022 (UNHCR, 2023), Australia received 66,179 in 2023 (Department of Home Affairs 2023b).

This study examines how culture and cultural identity impact the higher educational experience of people who come from a refugee background. It is important to highlight that our study finds positive impacts of cultural identity and a sense of community on gaining a higher education. Identifying with a group or community implies a shared historic and current experience and set of dispositions, thus conferring social capital which is advantageous in specific social fields. All participants who took part in this study considered it important to maintain cultural traditions and the ability to speak the language of their parents. Not only did all participants consider such an endeavour to be intrinsically valuable, but they also understand it to foster a sense of belonging and support networks while pursuing their education. Additionally, the expectations of family and those belonging to the same cultural community were a source of motivation for higher educational and career pursuits.

When considering approaches to widen higher educational access, there remains inadequate understanding of the strengths and assets possessed by refugees. While there is increased recognition for non-deficit views about refugees, the details are rarely described and the implications of this understanding on the higher educational experiences of refugees are seldom considered. Instead, studies tend to focus on what it is that refugees need, thus refugees are framed in terms of what they are said to lack. This paper contributes to this topic by providing a sociological analysis, informed by the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, of empirical qualitative data which highlights the cultural and social capital that Indigenous/First Nations Aboriginal people possess when participating in higher education and attempts to reframe the discussion on refugee higher education within an 'asset' rather than 'deficit' view. This is achieved by addressing the following questions. What comprises the cultural and social capital of refugees who are participating in higher education? How can the way we understand the habitus, and cultural and social capital of refugees be used to develop an asset view of their higher educational participation and prospects? The findings of this study are relevant not only in an Australian context but also for many other countries which are also signatories to the Refugee Convention and resettle many refugees every year.

## **Background**

Researchers and educational practitioners are increasingly aware of "a pervasive deficit mindset" (Shapiro, 2022, p.1) towards refugee students (Damaschke-Deitrick, 2023). Fagan et al. (2018) reported that many challenges faced by refugee students Australia are due to unspoken assumptions by policymakers and teaching staff. Similarly, Baker et al.

(2018) concluded that the dominance of Western paradigms in the higher education system may lead to the exclusion of the cultural knowledges, experiences, histories and practices of students who come from a refugee background. In this way, other knowledges are positioned as being inferior to the dominant paradigms reproduced within higher education, resulting in marginalisation.

Themes such as the trauma, helplessness and loss are a frequent focus in media and educational discourse and can detract from the skills, experiences and knowledges brought to schools and communities by refugees. According to Shapiro (2022) and Naidoo et al. (2018), in addition to the potential to marginalise, educational policies and curricula based on deficit discourses are less efficacious as they fail to account for the long-term educational needs, assets and goals of refugee-background students. Where educational disparities are caused by educational policy and practices, deficit discourses attribute blame for these disparities to students (Shapiro, 2022). While support staff tend to be more aware of the learning differences and needs between cohorts of refugee background students, mainstream teachers tend to speak of them in very general and homogenous terms (Naidoo & Adoniou, 2019).

A study by San Pedro Veledo et al. (2023) asserted that pre-service teachers benefit from being taught to think critically when consuming media. Saldiray and Meydan (2023) emphasised that teachers must embody an inclusive education paradigm which incorporates critical thinking, empathy and communication at the outset of their practice, to facilitate the integration and positive learning outcomes of refugee students. Complimenting this, San Pedro Veledo et al. (2023) recommended further research into how programs using contextualisation and historical empathy, in addition to primary testimonies, could contribute to facilitating positive attitudes towards refugees among teachers and their students. Rogers and Anderson (2019) argued that much educational research reinforces “constraining discourses” (p. 538) about students from less privileged backgrounds by fixating on “social and material barriers” (p. 535) and neglecting to identify the strategies and resources that many students use to overcome and navigate those barriers.

While Naidoo and Adoniou (2019) found that teachers tended to conflate “English” with “language”, it was also found that refugees possess linguistic capital by being proficient in other languages, potentially enhancing their ability to learn English. Recognising refugees’ linguistic capital can broaden awareness of other languages among their monolingual English-speaking peers (Naidoo & Adoniou, 2019). The cultural knowledge and experiences of refugees is underacknowledged, presenting the opportunity to broaden intercultural understanding between all students by acknowledging these experiences. This complements the documented pedagogical, cognitive and social benefits of diverse learning environments for university students generally (Marangell et al., 2024). Refugee students lamented the loss of their former identity as “good students” because of teachers being unable to look past their level of English language proficiency to recognise their knowledge and skills (Naidoo & Adoniou, 2019). An asset-oriented framework discussed in Shapiro (2022) is that of “community cultural wealth” (p. 1), which is defined as the “array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilised by communities of

colour to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression” (p. 2). These assets constitute a part of cultural capital because they are also valued by more privileged people in society and can therefore be useful to success in education and beyond.

Some universities are working to address barriers to refugees’ participation in higher education. For example, in collaboration with the federal and state governments, non-profit groups and the Refugee Council of Australia, the Australian National University (ANU) leads a consortium of 12 universities to create higher education opportunities for refugees. Aligned with Australia’s increased refugee intake, and that only 6% of young refugees are enrolled in higher education, the Consortium aims to address barriers to access (Tremaine, 2023). This is consistent with implementation of policies intended to increase higher education participation of equity groups (Marangell et al., 2024). However, it should be noted that of the at least 40 higher education providers in Australia, less than half (19) offer dedicated refugee and asylum seeker scholarships covering full tuition and a stipend (Refugee Education, 2024).

## Theoretical framework

This study uses Bourdieu’s social theory as an analytical lens. Bourdieu asserted that his concepts of habitus and capital explain the social processes in real world cases (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Not only can such concepts be deployed to highlight the forms of capital which refugees do not possess, they can also be used to highlight the forms of capital which they do possess. This may help to realise the ‘asset view’ as beneficial to learning processes within higher education.

### Habitus

Bourdieu (1984) posited that power is created symbolically and culturally and that it is the interchange of agency and structure that legitimises and re-legitimises power. According to Bourdieu, this creation of power occurs through the internalised, embodied and socialised dispositions that guide the way people think and behave, also called habitus. Wacquant (2005, p. 318) stated that habitus is “the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them.” It is these social processes which lead to patterns of thought and behaviour that are both durable and transferable between social and temporal contexts. Rather than being fixed or permanent, habitus can adapt when subjected to unexpected circumstances over a long period of time (Navarro, 2006). Habitus is also neither the result of free will nor determined by structures alone (Bourdieu, 1984). Instead, habitus is created by the interplay between free will *and* structures over time. Therefore, habitus is the dispositions that shape current practices and structures and are shaped by past events and structures and conditions the way individuals perceive these factors. Bourdieu (1984) stated that the creation of habitus occurs “without any deliberate pursuit of coherence [. . .] without any conscious concentration.”

## **Cultural capital**

Beyond mere notions of economic assets, Bourdieu (1993) described cultural, social and symbolic forms of capital. Cultural capital is formed by experiences in one's home environment and it bestows some individuals with a social advantage. Bourdieu (1993, p. 9) posited a "correlation between educational achievement and social origin." In stating this, Bourdieu clarifies social origin as referring to cultural capital which is inherited from one's family. It is possible, of course, to acquire cultural capital by engaging in social interactions throughout one's life. Refugees tend to experience generally lower socioeconomic status and previous experiences with trauma and persecution, could be considered as disadvantaged compared to non-refugee prospective or current university students. However, capital can be understood to operate in different ways. Erel (2010) proposed an alternative reading of the concept of cultural capital, describing most understandings of migrants' cultural capital as being oversimplified into two categories. Specifically, it simplistically is assumed that the migrant's cultural capital is either compatible with the culture and norms in the host society or is not. However, Erel (2010) argued that moving to another society results in new ways of (re)producing cultural capital. Further, he argued that their cultural capital builds upon, rather than mirrors, the power relations of either their country of origin or the host country. It also should be noted that social origin does not always necessarily reflect one's cultural capital, as someone from a working-class background (disadvantaged social origin) may graduate from a renowned university and secure gainful employment (an expression of higher cultural capital).

## **Social capital**

According to Bourdieu (1993, p. 9), social capital "is what ordinary language calls 'connections'." Social capital refers to the resources that individuals gain by participating in social networks (Naidoo, 2009). People's educational achievements are related to the forms of capital that they possess (or do not possess) (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). Individuals with access to more forms of capital tend to gain greater educational achievements (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). Within Bourdieu's (1986) social reproduction theory, social capital acts as an intergenerational carrier of other forms of (social and economic) capital, thus perpetuating social inequalities. Bourdieu (1986) further suggests that people can use the relationships they have with other people (social capital) to achieve goals, such as educational achievements (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016). Even the capacity for individuals to "aspire" is linked to social capital. The social capital possessed by refugee-background students shapes their life choices because individuals are more predisposed to assist others who belong to their own social networks (Harris et al., 2018).

## **Methods**

This study used a qualitative research design comprising recorded in-depth face-to-face interviews as the data collection method. Qualitative methods facilitate the creation of descriptive narratives of participants' lives and their social and cultural contexts. As a

qualitative study, the aim of this research was to deepen understanding of how and why, rather than generalise beyond the sample.

Twenty adult individuals from a refugee background were interviewed in 2018, as part of the first author's doctoral study (Hayes, 2021). Details about the initial sampling, Australian state, and university location remain confidential to protect anonymity. Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants with the required selection characteristics. In addition to expedient recruitment of participants, snowball sampling highlights important characteristics of the population being sampled (Noy, 2008).

Table 1: Participant information

Pseudo-nym	Gender	Age	Age on resettlement	Religion	Ethnicity	University participation	Parent/s with degree
Betty	F	22	15	Catholic	Burundian	BA (enrolled)	No
Matilda	F	32	26	Orthodox Christian	Ethiopian	BA (enrolled)	No
Mary	F	19	7	Christian	South Sudanese	BA (enrolled)	No
Katherine	F	35	25	Catholic	Yugoslav	BA (enrolled)	No
Jennifer	F	19	6	Muslim	Afghan	BA (enrolled)	No
Allison	F	29	24	Christian	South Sudanese	BA (enrolled)	Yes (father)
Amy	F	20	7	Muslim	Somali	BA/LLB (enrolled)	Yes (father)
Lorraine	F	24	14	Muslim	Somali	BA (enrolled)	Yes (father)
Sally	F	19	1<	Muslim	Iraqi	BBus (enrolled)	Yes (father)
Victoria	F	20	6	Muslim	Somali	BA (enrolled)	No
Jessica	F	21	5	Muslim	Afghan	BA (enrolled. Plans to pursue PG study)	Yes (both)
Matthew	M	29	15	Christian	South Sudanese	BA (enrolled)	No
James	M	37	18	Muslim	Somali	BSc (completed)	No
Robert	M	30	6	Muslim	Iraqi	BEng (completed)	No
Archibald	M	37	25	Muslim	Sierra Leonian	BCom (completed)	No
Stuart	M	25	1<	Muslim	Afghan	Pre-application stage	No
Samantha	F	23	3	Muslim	Afghan	Pre-application stage	No
Saul	M	28	10	Muslim	Iraqi	Pre-application stage	Yes (father)
Raymond	M	45	30	Muslim	Somali	MSc (completed)	Yes
Henry	M	50	30	Muslim	Somali	MBA (completed)	Yes

Note: Eligibility as refugees was based on participants' assurances.

Table 1 provides demographic characteristics of each participant. The sample was nearly evenly split between those who identified as male (9) and those who identified as female

(11). Most participants (16/20) came from one of four countries (Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq). Twelve participants were enrolled in an undergraduate program at the time, five had already graduated from university, and three had thus far been unable to attend higher education despite their desire to do so. Inclusion of three participants who had not engaged in higher education helps to identify further obstacles to those refugees who wish to undertake a higher education but have yet been unable to. To protect anonymity, participants were assigned a pseudonym. The use of 'Western' pseudonyms was deemed appropriate as this study was conducted in an English-speaking country where such names facilitate anonymity.

After receiving research ethics committee approval, interviewing proceeded. All interviews commenced with a list of starting and guiding questions as is typical for semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked about their experience of resettlement, community embeddedness, educational experiences and the support they received in their previous and current educational endeavours in Australia. They were then asked about their life and career goals, and the support that their parents gave them and their siblings. Participants were also asked about their relationship with family members, as well as their parents' education and employment history. Interviews ranged from 1-2 hours in length.

Data analysis and thematic open coding methods were adapted from O'Reilly (2009). This involved assigning codes to each category, thus producing numerous codes (Urquhart, 2013). The approach was inspired by Dunn (2000) and Creswell (2005) and was a three-step process: open coding, charting, and expansion of key themes. Analysis uncovered three broad themes: culture and community; diversity and discrimination; and university supports. In this paper we report the findings related to the theme of culture and community.

### **Findings: The complex interrelations of culture, identity and community**

Embeddedness and sense of identity within community can act as a motivational influence on the educational endeavours of people from a refugee background. Participants who identified as embedded community members felt highly motivated to attend university, with some stating that the pursuit of an education is a significant aspect of their culture. Younger participants in this study felt that their parents, who may embody the traditional values of their cultural heritage, encouraged them to gain a university education because of the emphasis placed on educational attainment within their community. Therefore, the cultural capital of people from a refugee background may be sufficient to afford them access to, and complete, higher education. Four participants, from different genders, religious belief or country of origin, stated that their culture has a positive impact on gaining an education. Muslim participants linked an emphasis on educational attainment to their religious beliefs. Sally, a Muslim participant from Iraq, described an Islamic principle which is understood to be a directive for all Muslims to seek education. She said, "There's even a verse in the *Hadith* (Prophet Muhammad's collected teachings) which says

basically that being well educated puts you at a higher level than someone who's pious but doesn't value knowledge".

### **Tensions and negative impacts of family and culture**

There seems to be a contradictory tension between cultural values and identity, and participation in higher education. This study adopts an understanding of culture as encompassing the amalgamation of societal enculturation that shapes individuals into specific roles and personas within a society (Wickham & Evers, 2007). Merton (1968) defined culture as a structured framework of norms and values governing a group, determining acceptable behaviours and thoughts. Waters and Crook (1996) elaborated on the intricate relationship between culture, social structure, and personality, influencing human behaviour and the translation of values into social dynamics. Institutionalisation, the gradual formation of powerful institutions rooted in values and norms, is an ongoing process within this framework. Individuals assimilate cultural knowledge and values through internalisation and socialisation, respectively known as the process of role learning. This internalisation does not always align with societal values, creating a scenario where dominant culture holds sway over an individual's personality. Social control mechanisms, such as societal expectations and laws, enforce conformity, solidifying the connection between culture, social structure, and personality.

Culture, which is internalised into the 'common sense' of one's habitus, significantly impacts educational decisions among refugees, influenced by varied educational expectations across cultural groups and is transmitted intergenerationally (Waters & Crook, 1996). Intergenerational transmission perpetuates culture while also being subject to alteration by personal experiences, depicting the dynamic nature of cultures. Some cultures emphasise education, reflected in parental encouragement for academic success and university attendance (Kao, 2004; Leung & Karnilowicz, 2002). For instance, Ethiopian refugee parents prioritise education, leading their children to aspire to academic achievements for employment and societal integration (Bitew & Ferguson, 2010). However, despite the cultural emphasis on education, a refugee's socioeconomic status can hinder their access to and experience within university education.

Culture is a component within one's habitus and therefore shapes one's dispositions, and perceptions and understandings of the physical world. While the habitus of the participants is growing to incorporate elements of Australian society, the habitus of their parents often has not experienced such rapid adaptation. This is consistent with the notion that habitus is malleable but 'hardens' throughout one's lifetime, making it also somewhat resistant to rapid and significant changes later in life (Elias, 1994). It is structured by one's past experiences and influences one's future perceptions and actions. Six participants (five female, one male) stated explicitly that gender has the potential to present impediments for female refugees to gain a university education. Only three stated that culture, through gender, impedes their ability to participate in higher education, despite continuing their studies at university. Two female participants expressed that their previous domestic partners had discouraged them from participating in higher education. Discrepancy between the habituses of participants and their parents or domestic partners,



because of the embodiment of seemingly contradictory social structures, values and perceptions, can present negative impacts on higher educational participation and career choices.

In the event of clashes between habituses which incorporate seemingly opposing sets of cultural identity and associated values, these values can have an adverse impact on educational attainment. South Sudanese participant, Mary, said "My stepdad is very traditional. Women are subservient in our culture, and so he expects that we will follow that. My mum does, and that's why we're not that close now. We're in Australia now. I don't want to be like that". Evidently, Mary believed that the values espoused by her stepfather, particularly regarding gender roles, presented an obstacle she had to overcome to gain a higher education. Another South Sudanese participant, Matthew, discussed another aspect of the values regarding gender roles in his home country, stating that

Back home, parents expect their kids to do what they do. People follow what their grandfather and father did and the way they behave. I wanted to be a military man. There's the culture, men do what they should do. It's hard to break that. Here [in Australia], there is the opportunity to choose a different path.

He continued by expressing the challenges he faced in maintaining his academic progress at university while also financially supporting his family as the eldest male in his family, saying that "It's difficult because I have to support my family: my mum and my sister. My mum didn't have education, and my sister did not either". Matilda, an Ethiopian participant, expressed frustration about cultural traditions which can potentially limit educational and social choices, saying "Many Africans, especially the men, can be very controlling. They get it from their dad and granddad. It's hard to break that. As women it can be very difficult. I just tell you back there [in her home country] if a man wanna to kill you, he can do it, pay money and be free [from legal repercussion]". In explaining her reasons for separating from her husband, she stated that "It's not just because of I see the Western culture, it's because he doesn't wanna change. I am 100% sure if I am still with him, I would not go to uni". Additionally, Burundian participant Betty explained that

Girls from my country, they don't usually [undertake higher education] but I wanna be different. Some do want to study but lots get married early. There's some pressure for that but I'm careful, I think [marriage] shouldn't be in a rush about that. I don't plan to have many children so why rush.

Afghan participant Stuart believed that his parents' expectations of male children to seek employment and for female children to marry at a young age, made it difficult for anyone in his family to gain a higher education. He said

... we [Stuart and his brothers] had to help earn money and support the family. One of my brothers, he's studying accounting, but he's been studying that for years because he works two part-time jobs.

In the above examples, the roles of homemaker and financial provider are derived from the participants' parents' cultural traditions and represent the reproduction of culture. The

reproduction of culture does not mean that younger generations are merely cultural clones, and therefore tensions can arise between participants and other family members regarding their educational, career and life choices.

### **Positive impacts of culture and family**

However, while many participants' parents and family members held the traditional values common in the culture of their home country, many were themselves highly educated and even those who were not as highly educated also had high hopes and expectations for the future of their children. In fact, eight participants stated that they were encouraged to seek a higher education specifically because education is valued in their culture. South Sudanese participant Mary credited her effort to gain a higher education to her mother who "spoke a lot about education, more than my stepdad. My mum never went to school. But she really encouraged the kids to go learn. She made sure we went to a good school". Jennifer, from Afghanistan, said that her parents "have high expectations 'cause this is pretty much the first time people, our people, have the opportunity, the chance, to be successful".

A participant from Sierra Leone, Archibald, expressed his strong motivation to complete his university education while also providing financial stability to his wife and child in Australia and his extended family in Sierra Leone. He said, "I didn't want to be on Centrelink payments when my child was born. I also had to take care of my family back home". Sally, a participant from Iraq, discussed her family's attempts to strike a balance between ensuring a high level of education for the children while also ensuring that they start families of their own while still young in accordance with the customs of their family. Amy, a participant from Somalia, stated that her family places a high value on education and that her family expect her and her siblings to gain a higher education. She stated, "They [her parents] expect us to go and get a degree. Education is very important in Somali culture, and they care about it a lot". Sally and Amy were born in Australia to recently resettled refugee parents, however, like other participants who resettled in Australia as refugees, their respective families expected their children to gain a higher education.

### **Development of habitus and forming new identities**

According to Bourdieu's (1990) cultural reproduction model, cultural artefacts such as norms, values and practices are intergenerationally transmitted, thus ensuring persistence of cultural experiences across generations of people in societies. However, this does not make people cultural clones of their parents and ancestors. While the participants in this study have learned the cultural norms and traditions from their parents and family, their habituses have developed to incorporate seemingly opposing cultural perspectives and practices, thus forming a unique cultural identity. This may explain why the participants had been able to overcome the challenges presented by their cultural heritage, by adopting the empowering elements of their heritage culture and that of the host society, thus successfully participating in higher education. A cultural emphasis on the importance of gaining a high level of education can interact with, and overcome, traditional norms which may inhibit such achievements.

Henry, a Somali participant, discussed this very situation when he stated that "many women, when they finish school, some of them they get married, but some of them enrol to nursing or teaching, some they enrol to other studies other than going to university". As a child, Matthew dreamed of having an honourable career, specifically in the armed forces. He said, "When I was young, I wanted to be a military man because that's what I saw the other men doing. But when I got older, I looked for another way to help people and improve their lives". It is evident that in adulthood, he now believes that there are other ways in which he can contribute to society, and it is this that is his motivation to pursue an education and career in community development. It is, therefore, possible for seemingly restrictive or opposing views within a cultural tradition and community to be reconciled.

Being able to identify with a group or community implies a shared historic experience and set of dispositions and affords one social capital which provides advantages within specific fields. All participants in this study believed that maintaining cultural traditions and having the ability to speak their parents' first languages are important because they foster a sense of belonging and community of support and shared experience. Jennifer, an Afghan female participant, believed that it was essential to be fluent in speaking Hazaragi (the language spoken by the Hazara people of Afghanistan), as it allows for better integration within the Hazara Afghan community in Australia. While acknowledging potential negative aspects of feeling unduly pressured by family and community expectations, she also conceded that the expectation for young Afghans to be successful in their education and professional careers has a positive motivational effect on her pursuits personally. She said, "There is a lot of pressure. Competition even. In our community, education is a big expectation for us [the youth]." She also reiterated the benefit that could be realised for young Hazara Afghans if there were a formalised community association and physical centre as she felt this would better unify her community and provide better support to young people in her community. She explicitly stated that "a weak aspect of our community is we don't have any kind of community centre or mosque for our community to gather together and connect and share experiences." Jennifer's comments may suggest that being able to identify with 'heritage' culture in the host society can foster mental wellbeing and the social integration of people who have come from a refugee background.

James, a Somali male participant, stated that "Identity is a major issue for people in my community, especially the youth. They find they cannot fully connect with the wider Australian community, but they can also feel disconnected from their own community because they can't speak Somali very well. They feel Australian but then [white] Australians say they are not Aussie because they look black. They feel they don't belong anywhere. This is when they can fail studies or go astray and get in trouble". Therefore, according to James, having a sense of belonging to the Somali community and having a sense of belonging within the wider Australian society are equally important and shape the wellbeing and choices made by people in his community. However, he also felt that becoming more aware about, and having a better understanding of, other cultures would facilitate greater levels of social harmony and equality of opportunity for all Australians. He said, "Many Australians don't understand our culture. There needs to be more effort to understand one another. We can improve the relationship between us [Somali and

wider Australian communities]”. Maintaining ties with their parents’ cultural and religious communities could be a manifestation of the various dynamics between habitus, cultural capital and social capital within the host society.

### **A hybridised habitus**

The participants above have developed a hybridised habitus by adopting the cultural norms and ideals from both the culture of their parents and that of the host society. Their habitus is more adept at negotiating apparent tensions between multiple cultures. A further example is Sally, a female participant from Iraq, who seems to have developed multiple cultural identities. Throughout adolescence and young adulthood in interacting with the diverse Australian society, her parents also instilled in her traditional Iraqi and Islamic values which were further reinforced through her interaction with people in the Iraqi Muslim community. For people from a refugee background, such as Sally, the development of multiple cultural identities can be largely a positive experience and an asset. She said that

I really want to make sure I’m a part of the greater society. My parents taught us that the best way to integrate is to be successful and contribute to the community. You can be a Muslim, Arab and Australian. There doesn’t need to be a separation between these identities.

This excerpt from Sally’s interview indicates that being able to maintain her complex identity as a Muslim Australian of Arab descent has positive impacts on the way she perceives herself and her place in Australian society while as she pursues her education and career.

Allison, a female Somali participant, expressed difficulty in adapting to Australian social values while maintaining her own Somali culture, which she considers important for herself and for her child. She said, “It’s challenging, it takes time to adapt to a different culture but not lose my own culture.” Further, Allison said, “I do have some [white] Australian friends, but I generally feel I can develop closer relationships with other Africans.” This might suggest that her sense of wellbeing and ability to integrate with greater Australian society benefits from having a close relationship with other people within her own cultural community. However, there was also an implied tension in her effort to exist within two cultural contexts.

### **Discussion: Moving towards an ‘asset view’**

Refugees experience a complex range of social processes which both facilitate and discourage participation in higher education. These influences include culture, identity, a sense of embeddedness within community and the formation of a hybridised identity within a multicultural societal context. As discussed, some participants’ parents encouraged their children to pursue higher education by framing the value of this pursuit in a normative context. Additionally, encouragement was also framed in a pragmatic sense, as possessing a higher education unlocks career opportunities and financial security.

However, examples of cultural norms being an inhibiting force were also found, such as promotion of the traditional role of young women as wives and mothers, and the role of young men to seek paid employment as quickly as possible. Normative diversity in multicultural societies further adds a layer of complexity to the impact of seemingly contradictory normative forces within one's cultural traditions. However, refugees can negotiate these apparent contradictions and successfully participate in higher education.

Refugees negotiate complex and contradictory social forces through the formation of a hybridised identity. As the embodiment of social structures, and personal habits, dispositions and perceptions of the world, the habitus of people from a refugee background grows to incorporate and embody the social structures of society before and after resettlement. Therefore, their habitus embodies the reconciliation of traditions, values practices, perspectives, and dispositions common in both societies. The combination of seemingly contradictory values shapes a complex habitus, leading to a hybridised identity, creating the opportunity for a more complex relationship with their family, all of which shape their experiences within higher education. However, with continued growth of their habitus to incorporate a broad range of values, along with the cultural and social capital possessed through active embeddedness in their community, the formation of hybridised identity acts as assets for refugees to pursue and successfully complete higher education.

While habitus does not stop evolving during one's life, the participants who had resettled at a younger age and had more time since resettlement would have possessed a habitus which was less "hardened" and thus more malleable to quickly internalise the social structures of Australian society. Higher levels of education of their parents also accounts for the possession of cultural capital and a habitus inclined to the pursuit of higher education. Bourdieu's theories tell us that refugees suffer as their capital and habitus is unrecognised. Students who come from a refugee background possess forms of capital which may assist them in higher education (Fagan et al., 2018) and by emphasising the forms of capital which people from a refugee background possess, we can understand how they overcome barriers to gaining a higher education. For example, consistent with research by Fagan et al. (2018), our study found that participants had strong aspirations which motivated them to desire a higher education and overcome barriers to accessing university study and completing their degree. Support received from their family appeared to also strengthen and inform their aspirations. As discussed earlier and as highlighted by Fagan et al. (2018), the significance of possessing a sense of identity was expressed by many participants. They believed that being able to speak their parents' language and be a part of a community, including a part of the wider Australian community, was important in their sense of belonging and connectedness and provided further motivation to pursue their education and career objectives as members of those communities.

Our research supports a non-deficit view of refugees, as articulated by Nunn et al. (2014) and Harris et al. (2015). It also adds a further layer of complexity to the discussion by exploring the contradictions within culture, and indeed the interactions between heritage and host cultures, and the formation of new identities upon resettlement. Participants in this study felt that they benefitted from their cultural knowledge and previous experiences

and that their educational prospects were enhanced by the intermingling of values between their culture and that of the host society. Consistent with the findings of Nunn et al. (2014) and Naidoo (2015), participants placed great value on support they received from their parents and other family members. This suggests that refugees, parents and children, are highly motivated and supportive of each other to gain a quality education and elevate their quality of life. This occurs despite seemingly opposing values within their cultures and within the context of a host society with differing values. Therefore, it would be beneficial for refugee intake policies to better facilitate bringing in family units rather than isolated individuals.

This study elaborated the complexities of culture while also acknowledging and respecting the agency of participants within their lived realities. As Gateley et al. (2015) and Baker et al. (2018) argued that the failure to acknowledge other forms of knowledge, lived experiences and practices can perpetuate marginalisation, our study asserts that the habitus and cultural capital possessed by people from a refugee background should not be considered of lesser standing. Our findings build on those previous studies by identifying and articulating a complex and sometimes contradicting relationship between the culture and identity derived from the participants' ethnic and cultural background, and their experience taking part in higher education. By understanding and elaborating the complex relationship between culture and identity, and higher educational participation, the agency and lived experiences of people from a refugee background can be respected. It becomes possible to move beyond discourses of deficit and vulnerability and recognise refugee-background people as individuals within society who express and act on their ambitions.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study has two main limitations. First, a larger and more diverse sample would have allowed greater examination of differences between specific ethnic and cultural groups. Second, including more participants who chose to not attend higher education would have possibly led to new insights. Future research could address these limitations by creating larger and more diverse samples. Further research that incorporates perspectives from other fields of study, such as history, economics and politics, would facilitate a 'multi-pronged' approach in support of an 'asset view' of people from a refugee background in higher education. Finally, future research could also examine the gendered cultural norms that present barriers to both male and female individuals seeking higher education. Our study found that expectations to financially support their families can make the attainment of higher education difficult for some male individuals. This finding was unexpected and has not been explored in much depth in the research literature. Whether expectations for males to be bread winners negatively impacts higher education ambitions and attainment, and whether these gendered norms vary by social class and ethnicity/culture, would be particularly interesting.

### **Conclusion**

Refugees possess a range of assets which empower them to gain a higher education. Our study contributes to scholarly understanding of the experiences of refugees in higher

education by finding that possessing a sense of embeddedness within community, as well as a sense of identity within their community, can act as a motivational influence on the higher educational endeavours of the refugee-background participants. Often, the parents of participants possessed a university-level education or held education in high regard due to traditional cultural emphasis on education. In accordance with Bourdieu's assertion that the education of one's parents informs one's cultural capital, this suggests that some people from a refugee background possess cultural capital which enables them to readily adapt to university learning contexts. Additionally, intergenerational transmission of cultural value placed on educational endeavours shaped the habitus of participants who possess a habitus which inclines them to seek higher education. Therefore, cultures and communities which value education, and possessing a sense of identity as part of a community, can encourage refugees to seek a higher education through the possession of favourable cultural and social capital.

However, despite the motivational influences which are conferred upon refugees, this study further contributes to scholarly knowledge by identifying potential avenues for adverse influences on their educational endeavours. Tensions between family members can occur when there is an apparent incongruence between normative elements derived from the host society which have been adopted by the habitus of the participants, and the traditional norms embodied in the habitus of their parents. The habitus of refugees grows to adopt social structures of the host society, and this can be a smoother process for younger refugees whose habituses have yet to become as hardened as their parents. Importantly, as people are not simply social and cultural clones of their parents or contemporaries, our research finds that the reshaping of their habitus through resettlement means that people from a refugee background develop a hybridised identity, in which they can reconcile norms and traditions which may impede gaining a higher education with those that help to facilitate such educational endeavours.

#### *Disclosure statement*

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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