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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### The New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy: implications for identity, acculturation and civic participation

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The process of resettlement as a refugee often involves adapting to, and reconciling with, a new social reality. The complexities associated with acculturation across age, gender and family dynamics are navigated within greater social contexts that may encourage or hinder the processes of adjustment and settlement. This paper addresses the recent New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy in light of contemporary theoretical developments with regard to the segmented assimilation thesis and the forms of social capital that, when available, may be mobilised to help refugee-background individuals, families and communities to forge new routes for participation and belonging. In particular, we examine the strategy and its five main goals of self-sufficiency, participation, health and well-being, education and housing as these relate to the possibilities and tensions at play in the wider acculturation experiences of New Zealand's diverse refugee populations.

**Keywords:** acculturation; culture; language; policy; refugee; resettlement

#### Introduction

New Zealand has a rich history of resettling people from refugee pathways informally since 1944 and has maintained a formal commitment to resettle up to 750 refugees on an annual basis since 1987. Mortensen et al. (2012) note that more than 50,000 people have been resettled in New Zealand since the Second World War, and in the past decade 7305 people from 55 countries have resettled here through the quota refugee programme with the seven top source countries being Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, Somalia, Bhutan, Iran and Ethiopia. Such diversity is an indication that the process of adjusting to life in a new country will be varied as people will come to New Zealand with different linguistic competencies, gender and family roles and expectations, cultural traditions, age-related considerations and rich social histories, in addition to varying levels of human,

cultural and social capital. The notion of acculturation suggests that the process of settling into a new locality will often entail an experience of compromise, negotiation, protection and possibly abandonment of particular cultural traditions and practices to 'fit in' within a new host society. With reference to local and international theoretical and empirical literature on acculturation, this paper examines the potential tensions and possibilities within the recently developed New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy, which aims to increase civic participation and encourage social and economic integration to create a sense of belonging within people's own communities and to New Zealand.

#### Identity and acculturation

Numerous writers have theorised the tensions of forging a new identity in resettlement contexts. Some

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authors note that people may become ‘hybrids’ where they incorporate parts of their past with the present (Bhabha 1994; Papastergiadis 2000). Others discuss the strategic choices that migrants may make in relation to acculturating and addressing the tensions between maintaining origin cultural practices and incorporating the values and practices of the wider host society (Berry 1997; Portes & Rumbaut 2006). As the prevalence and affordability of digital technologies increases, these forms of communication are also being considered as important considerations in the experience of settlement and construction of identities (Gifford & Wilding 2013). Post-colonial writers provide an important reminder that is not just about understanding the ‘other’ and that there is a pressing need to maintain a critical perspective on how particular communities, wider society, the media and government define and engage with migrant groups (Said 1993; Hage 2003; Chowdhry 2007). Greater structural critiques have emerged that ask more critical questions about the opportunities afforded to migrant communities by the wider society and powerful institutions (Fraser 2003; Fozdar & Hartley 2013). This paper does not have the scope to detail the multiple complexities of these arguments but it does illustrate the contested terrain and discourse around notions of what integration and acculturation might represent. Further, there is, at times, an inherent tension in identification as a ‘refugee’ where people try to incorporate their past within a settlement context which is often due to the prevailing discourses about forced migrants (particularly asylum seekers). At times, people may identify as former refugees, but what is particularly important to highlight is that the ‘refugee’ identity is only one marker of many that can impact on a person or family or even a community’s settlement experience and associated self-defining processes.

A particular person’s experience of integrating into a country means reconciling one’s age, gender, cultural background, ethnic identity, education and other forms of history in a new context that may have new social constructions on parenting, gender roles, work, community and many other practices. This means that a family may have to renegotiate new familial roles and rules while also working to maintain important aspects of their past in a new

present (Lewig et al. 2010; Deng & Marlowe 2013). However, each family member might experience this process differently which might have considerable impact on the family system (Nesteruk & Marks 2011). Typically, children adapt to the new cultural context—and achieve linguistic acculturation—more readily than their parents. This can create a complex range of tensions, especially if generational role-reversal occurs, where the gaps in cultural capital between the first and second generation require parents to rely on their children for guidance and as cultural brokers (Portes & Rumbaut 2001a; Bush et al. 2010).

From the 1990s, Alejandro Portes and a range of collaborators developed, and empirically tested, the theory of segmented assimilation to account for a range of acculturation trajectories based on an interplay of factors as children of immigrants acculturate, or resist acculturation, in consonance (or in dissonance) with their parents (Portes & Rumbaut 2001b, 2006; Waters et al. 2010; Prieto-Flores et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup> Portes and Rumbaut suggest that consonant acculturation occurs when the acculturation of the second generation is guided or accompanied by the acculturation of the first generation. Selective acculturation (which results in upward mobility and the maintenance of bicultural identities) occurs in the context of a robust ethnic community in which the second generation is embedded, while they are simultaneously encouraged to pursue successful adaptation to the dominant language of the host society and cultural capital acquisition, especially in terms of educational success. They suggest that two essential resources for selective acculturation are levels of parental human capital (in the form of parents’ education and income) and robust ethnic bonds that allow for the maintenance of origin language and cultural norms beyond the boundaries of the family home (Portes & Rumbaut 2001b). These bonds may be reinforced by ethnic markers that lead to the maintenance of social boundaries between migrant communities and host society (Prieto-Flores et al. 2012).

Waters and her collaborators highlight how the notion of selective acculturation challenges both conventional assumptions that ‘successful’ adjustment to the new society is best done quickly

and also policies aimed at encouraging such adjustment:

Where segmented assimilation departs from these standard interpretations is in predicting two specific outcomes as in part the result of intra-family dynamics—that downward assimilation occurs not because of the failure to Americanize, but of doing it too quickly (dissonant acculturation), and that upward mobility is possible for those with low income or poorly educated parents who stay at least partially tied to the ‘ethnic’ community. (Waters et al. 2010, p. 1170)

The role of the host society within people’s acculturation is also central. The context of reception of newcomers by the host society, which Portes and Rumbaut term ‘modes of incorporation’, helps to determine the trajectories of acculturation for the first and second generations (Portes & Rumbaut 2001a, p. 307). The concept of ‘modes of incorporation’ includes considerations of how the state defines particular migrant groups, establishes welfare eligibilities and other social policies related to immigration (Waters et al. 2010), as well as the wider public discourses that shape host receptivity to different groups of new arrivals. The segmented assimilation thesis therefore looks at the interplay of parental human capital, family structure and the relationship with one’s ethnic community with the modes of incorporation available to the members of those communities.

Putnam’s (2000) work on social capital theory, in which bonding, bridging and linking capital are conceptualised as distinct patterns of relationships that influence people’s opportunities to participate in civil society, can be usefully applied to understanding the modes of incorporation available to members of refugee communities. Bonding capital refers to networks of people who are closely linked (possibly by ethnic identity, locality or religious affiliation) which can facilitate strong and supportive community relationships. These bonding resources are often seen in refugee-background communities where they identify through a common ethnic identity (Marlowe 2011). Bridging capital, on the other hand, relates to the power of ‘weak ties’ when people different from each other interact and facilitate potential access to new resources and opportunities

(employment, education, social networking and information). The opportunities for bridging capital for refugee-background communities can be limited by linguistic constraints and external factors such as discrimination. Finally, linking capital refers to the relationship that a person has to the structures and organisations that are built around a particular community. These three resources can be constructively used to further detail the modes of incorporation, as they have a direct impact on the possibilities for participation in civil society where individuals and those living around them influence the experience of acculturation.

### **The New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy**

In 2012, the New Zealand government presented the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy with the overarching vision of refugees ‘participating fully and integrated socially and economically as soon as possible so that they are living independently, undertaking the same responsibilities and exercising the same rights as other New Zealanders and have a strong sense of belonging to their own community and to New Zealand’ (Immigration New Zealand 2012, p. 3). Within this vision statement, the strategy proposes five primary goals that are noted as ‘integration outcomes’:

- Self-sufficiency: all working-age refugees are in paid work or are supported by a family member in paid work.
- Participation: refugees actively participate in New Zealand life and have a strong sense of belonging to New Zealand.
- Health and well-being: refugees and their families enjoy healthy, safe and independent lives.
- Education: refugees’ English language skills enable them to participate in education and achieve qualifications, and support them to participate in daily life.
- Housing: refugees live independently of government housing assistance in homes that are safe, secure, healthy and affordable. (Immigration New Zealand 2012, p. 3).

This strategy is now being implemented progressively through 2014 with tenders for services currently being negotiated. While these goals are laudable, it is important to examine both the assumptions implicit in them and how they are going to be achieved, or at least pursued, both from the perspective of the individual but also that of the ‘mutual obligation’ of the state. It is worth noting that a focus on employment is actually implied in all five of the strategy’s stated outcomes—some are just more explicit than others. This focus and language around diminished social responsibility on the part of the state towards the individuals and families signals the imperative that refugees who settle in New Zealand be provided with meaningful opportunities to fully participate as peers in civil society. Part of this obligation is addressed by having a *continued* focus (meaning that these activities are not new) on offshore orientation programmes, six-week orientation at the Mangere Refugee Reception Centre and settlement support for another 12 months. The strategy’s focus on employment has a synergy with the international literature on refugee settlement which demonstrates that one of the most important aspects of individual, familial and community well-being relates to experiences of meaningful work and opportunities for self-determination (Potocky-Tripodi 2004; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006; Ager & Strang 2008; Correa-Velez et al. 2013). While the strategy therefore focuses on a key aspect that influences a person’s settlement experience, employment is not, in itself, a de facto measure of holistic settlement and acculturation. Thus, we suggest, employment must not become the implicit principal measure that eclipses other important considerations for defining ‘successful’ settlement for refugee individuals, families or communities.

It is also critical to acknowledge that the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy at the moment pertains only to refugees who come to New Zealand under its quota programme. Asylum seekers, convention refugees (those who arrive in New Zealand as asylum seekers and receive refugee status) and those classified under the Refugee Family Support Category are not eligible for the

support and services that come from this strategy (see Bloom & O’Donovan 2013).

This article briefly discusses these five goals separately in relation to acculturation, language and cultural knowledge to outline the possibilities and challenges associated with this settlement strategy. It is acknowledged that these five outcomes are closely interrelated at times and this article will conclude by bringing these together.

### *Self-sufficiency*

The primary thrust behind the integration outcome of self-sufficiency is that of being employed in paid work. The strategy itself notes two primary goals within this outcome as: (1) an increased proportion in paid employment (after 6 months, 2 years and 5 years); and (2) a reduced proportion receiving unemployment-related benefits (after 6 months, 2 years and 5 years). The New Zealand and international literature consistently demonstrates the importance of meaningful work and economic independence as key markers for successful settlement (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006, 2007; Pahud et al. 2009) and in this sense this outcome has a synergy with a key settlement indicator.

The influence of family dynamics is an important consideration as changing/re-negotiated gender roles and power relationships within the family may be present (Deng & Pienaar 2011). For men in particular, meaningful work can positively impact on their sense of self and place within the family (Marlowe 2012) and, conversely, the experiences of under- and unemployment can have negative effects (Pepworth & Nash 2009; Correa-Velez et al. 2013). Related to these considerations is the recognition (or lack thereof) of overseas qualifications and professional experience which can directly impact on people’s employment prospects in preferred areas of work.

The concept of self-sufficiency—or more precisely, economic self-sufficiency—*can* therefore play a role in developing upward mobility in terms of parental human capital and can assist with selective acculturation. Members of refugee communities may be supported in this goal by state agencies (and those non-governmental organisations



contracted by them) via facilitating forms of bridging and linking capital, maximising ‘weak ties’ to gain labour market opportunities for individuals as well as sharing successful strategies with other members of their communities.

### ***Participation***

As a result of the relatively homogeneous nature of New Zealand’s historical immigration stream and in contrast to most other countries of immigration, permanent residents in New Zealand have all the same social, political and civil rights as those enjoyed by citizens (Bartley 2010). This means that there are no legal barriers to full civic participation for quota refugees (see Bloom & O’Donovan 2013, which details the limitation for convention refugees). On the other hand, New Zealand’s immigration history is such that, until the late 1980s, the country’s demographic composition reflected relatively little diversity. There were few ‘visible’ minorities that were not Māori or Pacific Island Polynesians. With the shift in 1987 to an immigration policy that explicitly promoted multiculturalism, New Zealand’s population—especially in the urban centres—has quickly become much more diverse. Public receptivity to that diversity has not been universally positive, however, with persisting claims that newcomers to New Zealand remain vulnerable to discrimination (Human Rights Commission 2013). Refugee groups from countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, Somalia, Bhutan, Iran and Ethiopia carry ethnic markers that distinguish them, physically (i.e. as ‘non-white’) as well as culturally, from most of the host society. Thus, for these and other groups, the potential remains for the persistence of social barriers to participation and belonging. Finally, some cultural groups may exercise forbearance and be less likely to directly seek assistance when needed so the outcome of participation will require different approaches depending on culturally informed ways of communicating.

### ***Health and well-being***

All publicly provided health services in New Zealand are available to quota refugees under the

New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act 2000. The two primary goals within the health and well-being outcome are increased quota refugee children receiving age-appropriate immunisations (6 and 12 months after arrival), as well as increased utilisation of general practitioner services and increased access to mental health services. A key focus to achieving these goals is about addressing English language competencies and improving the health literacies of particular communities. Annette Mortensen (2008) and her collaborators (Mortensen et al. 2012) note some of the associated complexities where gender and age can play an important role in particular health outcomes.

The health and well-being outcome is intricately linked and intersects with broader social realities and the social determinants of health where documented housing issues, unemployment and experiences of discrimination also impact on health rights and the principle of experiencing the highest attainable standard of health (see Hunt et al. 2009). This outcome is therefore dependent on the other arms of the strategy and represents the need to consider settlement holistically.

### ***Education***

New Zealand citizens and permanent residents have the right to free primary and secondary education; therefore, children and young people from refugee backgrounds who have resettled in New Zealand have the same access. The challenge for refugee families lies in meaningful access, however. Children from families where English is limited face considerable disadvantages at school, at least initially. The New Zealand government has already acknowledged the challenges for refugee-background youth by creating refugee education coordinators and offering English language support. The efficacy of these supports, however, is yet to be evaluated. On the other hand, successful adaptation at school may bring other challenges. The complexity of family dynamics, where children may be speaking a different language at home and English in the schooling system, may potentially be a source of considerable family dissonance, particularly if families lack strong co-ethnic support. Situations

where parents do not speak English and so cannot assist children with homework easily, nor engage meaningfully with the school community, risk the dissonant acculturation trajectory posited by Portes & Rumbaut (2001b), where members of the second generation are at odds with their parents and disengaged from the co-ethnic community, and are thus left socially vulnerable and on a pathway towards potential downward social mobility.

It would be useful for refugee education coordinators to be engaged, not only with the students and their families, but also the wider community, to maximise the potential for the building of bridging and linking capital, and to ensure that children's adjustment to New Zealand language and culture is supported, if not matched, by their parents.

### ***Housing***

The New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy likely has fewer links with selective acculturation in the housing area. The clearest link to the previous discussion is the explicitly stated outcome that refugees will decreasingly rely on government support over time (at 2 year and 5 year intervals), which therefore again assumes self-sufficiency and employment. However, it must be noted that quota refugees are initially allocated a home rather than having a choice of where to live and the tight private rental market in the predominant settlement centres does not offer many options. If they come to New Zealand as a family (or later start a family) there may be a number of adjustments that need to be made. While refugees are often resettled in localities where other members of their ethnic group live, there is no guarantee that they will be placed in close proximity to each other and this can create fragmented communities, limiting bonding capital resources (at least as defined by a particular ethnic grouping).

### **Tying the threads of the strategy together**

The New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy sets out a vision for the integration of refugee populations. The need for such an intentional strategy is manifest: evidence from New Zealand and internationally makes it clear that the social,

economic and civic integration of newcomers often does not 'simply happen'. At the same time, much of this strategy is aspirational in terms of outcomes that are to be worked towards progressively, and potentially constrained by caveats relating to the means at the state's disposal. Clearly the success of such a strategy requires not only the personal accountability of individuals but also a signalled and ongoing government commitment to its social obligations in relation to domestic law and the international treaties and covenants to which it is signatory that relate to resettlement obligations and protection of refugees.

One of the most cited papers in the study of the impact of forced migration on integration is by Ager & Strang (2008) who posit several domains for successful integration. The first four presented are known as 'means and markers' and are: housing, health, education and employment. The 'social connections' under this model relate to the previously discussed role of social capital where bridging, bonding and linking capital are key. Obviously, the opportunities for means and markers are directly impacted by the social capital resources that are available across society. Those developing and implementing the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy would do well to extend its vision (focused as it is on individuals and households) to consider, and to support, the value of those social capital resources and the sources from which they come.

The segmented assimilation thesis (in which selective acculturation is posited as the most promising option) suggests several elements that are essential to help the second generation to fulfil their parents' and communities' aspirations of educational success and upward mobility. Of these, parental human capital (in the form of educational attainment, labour market position, information literacy, etc.) can be a mixed proposition for refugees. Part of this variation can be due to the reasons that a particular group of people became refugees and the pathways they took to resettle in New Zealand. For instance, people coming from countries that have had protracted civil unrest and wars (sometimes for decades) may have had fewer educational and employment training opportunities compared with those from a relatively stable country that may have had a rapid escalation of a conflict. Whether the



family has been able to remain together during their forced migration journey and the amount of time spent displaced in refugee camps or in urban centres can also impact on such human capital resources.

The second essential element for selective acculturation to occur involves the social capital available in a co-ethnic community. Again, there is considerable diversity across the various refugee populations in New Zealand, but the practice among resettlement agencies of geographically co-locating members of the same refugee communities allows for at least the potential for those communities to maximise (or to develop) levels of bonding capital to provide mutual support and to validate and reinforce cultural norms and practices among the second generation. This form of support is vital, not only in terms of reinforcing feelings of belonging, but the literature from the Canterbury earthquakes has demonstrated the role of ethnic communities in responding to and supporting one another in a large-scale disaster (Osman et al. 2012; Marlowe & Lou 2013). However, strong bonding capital can also be problematic when there is limited bridging and linking capital as it can potentially have negative implications through local power structures that reinforce oppressive practices. Putnam (2002, p. 350) cautioned this as the ‘dark side’ of social capital and other writers have also noted how bonding capital by itself can create greater isolation for particular communities from the wider society and subsequently on the acculturation experience (see also Portes & Landholdt 1996; Portes 1998; Allen 2009).

In response to this concern, the third critical element that shapes the settlement outcomes for second and subsequent generations involves the modes of incorporation at play in the wider social environment into which newcomers arrive, whether as migrants or refugees. Here, too, the picture in New Zealand is not straightforward. Individuals and families from refugee backgrounds are often ‘visible’ minorities, possessing features and exhibiting styles of presentation that mark them as different from the vast majority of the New Zealand population, even in the more diverse urban centres. Discrimination, suspicion and hostility may threaten successful settlement. On the other

hand, many New Zealanders view with pride the country’s humanitarian impulse with regard to refugees over many decades, and view with distaste the alarmist and stigmatising discourse that confronts refugees (and asylum seekers) more commonly in Australia. In this regard, refugee communities may find in New Zealand a more receptive environment, and thus opportunities to develop bridging capital—although whether that generalised receptiveness translates to actual neighbourliness is another question.

The five goals of the strategy represent critical components of a person or family’s settlement experience. The ways in which these five goals are evaluated and what constitutes ‘success’ will play a key role in how the strategy impacts on people from refugee backgrounds and also the organisations that are funded to work alongside them. In response, we argue that a human rights lens represents a helpful way of evaluating these goals in a more holistic manner which provides a framework to move beyond what could be relatively rigid markers and established outcomes. The Human Rights Commission (HRC 2010) delivered a detailed report on human rights in New Zealand and presented a number of key rights that provide a useful framework to consider refugee settlement *generally* and the strategy *specifically*. The report presents 22 essential rights, including the right to work, the right to education and the right to health. One of the key frameworks that this report used to examine each right more specifically is through what is often referred to as the ‘4A standards’ (this was done most particularly with education but derivatives are available with other rights such as health and work). For instance, the 4A standards relate to the concepts of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability as noted below:

- Availability: ensuring free and compulsory education for all children and respect for parental choice of their child’s education.
- Accessibility: eliminating discrimination in access to education as mandated by international law.
- Acceptability: focusing on the quality of education and its conformity to minimum human rights standards.

- Adaptability: ensuring education responds and adapts to the best interests and benefit of the learner in their current and future contexts (HRC 2010, pp. 169–170).

These standards provide a critical lens to examine what it might mean to have the right to education, particularly as it intersects with cultural and linguistic diversity. While these four standards are related to education, a similar analysis is available within the HRC (2010) report to other rights relevant to the strategy that focus on housing, work, health, disability and gender. Relating to the right to work, the HRC (2010, p. 185) maintains that this right needs to be considered within a framework that includes: protection from unemployment; pathways to work; transition from the labour market; and on-the-job issues. Within these four domains, it is then possible to consider the contextual implications and possibilities of empowerment, participation, non-discrimination and accountability. This level of analysis helps to move beyond what could possibly be fairly rigid markers and pre-established outcomes (although these can be useful and important) to consider context and the mutual obligations between refugees, society and the state. Similar considerations and a human rights analysis can be made within the other arms of the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy that relate to housing, self-determination and health and well-being. These perspectives provide a useful framework to consider the interplays of context, meaning and power between the numerous actors involved in the settlement experience (individuals, families, communities, wider society, non-government agencies and the state).

In the context of this analysis, the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy identifies a number of issues that refugee-background communities themselves also would like to achieve. The larger question is to ascertain what policies will be specifically developed and what the associated services to deliver them will look like. There are both tensions and possibilities here. The literature clearly demonstrates the challenges of acculturation and this strategy will need to be flexible in its approach to address the rich cultural, social, spiritual and

historical backgrounds that refugees bring with them while also being holistic in its analysis around ‘outcomes’. A necessity within this is to soften the primary focus on individuals and households currently inherent in each element of the strategy, to promote *within the strategy* forms of bonding and bridging capital in refugee communities to provide a secure base in which positive acculturation is most likely to be achieved. It will be necessary also to consider the very important contribution that linking capital makes to positive employment outcomes and thus to the success of the strategy overall. To achieve ‘success’, then, the focus of government and non-government agencies must broaden beyond interfacing with and working alongside refugee-background individuals, families, groups and communities; their focus must incorporate the host society as well, to promote and mobilise wider social capital resources to inculcate the strong sense of belonging to which the strategy aspires.

#### Note

1. The authors acknowledge that the term ‘assimilation’ tends to be used more critically in Australasian contexts than in the US, the context in which Portes and his collaborators write. The politics around the term, and the policy settings informed by it, are outside the scope of this article.

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