

Refugee immigrants: addressing social exclusion by promoting agency in the Australian VET sector

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Abstract

Refugee immigrants' past traumatic personal histories as well as their present social exclusion experiences are likely to adversely affect their exercise of personal agency and resettlement in Australia. Efforts to improve their capability to exercise agency and resettlement should be premised on social structural affordances and environments that support their participation and contribution to Australian society. One way that these supportive affordances could be created is through refugee immigrants' improved access to and meaningful engagement with the Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector and its technical and further education (TAFE) institutes. This paper identifies significant agentic factors associated with refugee immigrants' past personal histories as well as social exclusion experiences linked to their present resettlement, and explores ways that the VET sector and publicly funded TAFE institutes could address these issues. In conclusion, a set of recommendations are provided as guidelines on how the VET sector and TAFE institutes could address personal agency and social exclusion challenges for refugee immigrants in Australia.

Refugees, resettlement and VET

Refugees are victims of war and violence who flee their home countries in search of peace and safety. After surviving war and violence, a few refugees get the rare opportunity to be resettled in a third country, where they are provided with permanent protection as well as offered opportunities to be nationals of that country. In Australia adult refugee immigrants, like any other Australian, have opportunities for education and training through the higher education and VET sectors.

Refugees

Refugees are individuals who have fled their home countries, escaping war, violence, persecution, or torture. The 1951 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) *Refugee Convention* defined a refugee as a person who, 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2007, p.16), has fled from their country of origin. Furthermore, focusing more on the local situations confronting refugees, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) – now the African Union (AU) – described refugees as individuals whose public order has been seriously disrupted due to war and violence and who are forced to leave their place of habitual residence 'in order to seek refuge in another place' (Organisation of African Unity 1969, p.2) outside their countries of origin or nationality. During such wars and violence, victims often flee from their home countries as a matter of urgency, marking the beginning of their transition to being refugees in search of peace and safety in other countries.

A common characteristic for many refugees is that their personal histories are likely to be laden with traumatic and distressful life experiences that other people may not have experienced. Refugee life experiences have been characterised as having the following typical series of events:

exposure to political, religious or intercultural violence, persecution or oppression, armed conflict or civil discord which incorporates the following basic elements: a state of fearfulness for self and family members; leaving the country of origin at short notice; inability to return to the country of origin; and uncertainty about the possibility of maintaining links with family and home.

(Coventry et al. 2002, pp.14–15)

These typical refugee life experiences, or 'the stages of refugeesim' (Keller 1975), have been acknowledged by authorities tasked with assessing, granting protection, and offering resettlement opportunities to refugees. Furthermore, refugee life experiences may also mean that refugees can become trapped in the protracted encampments of living in unsafe and sub-human conditions in refugee camps (Zeus 2011). Typically, before being trapped in these protracted encampments, many refugees could already have been 'subjected to rape and torture, witnessed friends being murdered or been separated from their families when fleeing their homes' (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009, p.7). These traumatic personal histories encountered by many refugees characterise some of the typical refugee life experiences.

The process of becoming a refugee could also be seen through the concept of a triple trauma paradigm (Center for Victims of Torture 2005), which advances that refugees often encounter three traumatic phases of pre-flight, flight, and post-flight experiences. This means that, during the 'pre-flight' phase, refugee victims continued to perceive threats after surviving war and violence; during the 'flight' phase, they decided to flee to safety often to a neighbouring country under extremely dangerous and volatile environments; and during the 'post-flight' phase, they reached relative safety and started living as refugees often in challenging sub-human living conditions in refugee camps (Center for Victims of Torture 2005; Keller 1975; Stein 1981). As discussed in the next section, after experiencing such traumatic refugee life events for a number of years, a few refugees get the rare opportunity of permanent protection and resettlement in a third country like Australia.

Provisions for resettlement

Resettlement for refugees provides permanent protection to victims of war and violence through an immigration process that gives them opportunities for living and being nationals of other countries (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2011). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees coordinates with governments around the world in an attempt to provide refugees with long-term protection and safe living environments through promotion of a three-option solution of: voluntary repatriation to their home countries when deemed safe; local integration in the country of first asylum, usually countries within the same region; and resettlement in a third often Western country (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2010). The third option, that is, permanent resettlement in a third country, is both an international responsibility as well as a national objective of that country to offer sanctuary to refugees. Most refugee immigrants in Australia are classified under this third option of providing permanent protection and resettlement.

Despite these provisions, the resettlement of refugee immigrants in third countries has been described as a 'complex and gradual process, comprising distinct but inter-related legal, economic and socio-cultural dimensions' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2010, p.10). Moreover,

basic resettlement of refugees in a third country involves providing them with the protection and rights enjoyed by nationals of that country:

Resettlement involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status. The status provided ensures protection against *refoulement* and provides a resettled refugee and his/her family or dependants with access to rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Resettlement also carries with it the opportunity to eventually become a naturalized citizen of the resettlement country.

(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2011, p.3)

This process of resettlement can be challenging to both refugee immigrants and the protecting third countries due to factors like the politics of the host country, traditional and sociocultural dissonances between immigrating refugees and the host population, and the social exclusion¹ experiences that the new immigrants encounter (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2010). These challenging resettlement issues can be redressed to attain a changed and more meaningful resettlement for refugee immigrants. In Australia, meaningful resettlement or *good settlement* (Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues 2006) for refugee immigrants can be described in terms of settling well, that is, 'living comfortably' (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011, p.1), and can be measured against a set of indicators of integration (Ager & Strang 2008), including their opportunities to access education and training. This means that one of the key indicators of successful resettlement for refugee immigrants is their levels of access to and participation in education and training in their new countries. The next section therefore is a discussion of refugee immigrants' experiences and outcomes of their engagement with the higher education and VET sector in Australia.

Australian higher education and VET

Higher education in Australia is mainly offered at universities, where students study towards an associate degree and above, or diploma, or an advanced diploma qualification, while the VET sector is designed to provide students with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes for work mainly through a system of TAFE institutes (Bradley 2008). Importantly, for many refugee immigrants, engaging in education and training offers opportunities for them to learn and advance their skills, as well as providing an imperative resettlement basis for socialising with the wider Australian society. However, it is well documented that refugee immigrants attending higher education and VET institutes face a host of challenges, for example, sociocultural dissonances, distress due to personal histories, academic and financial challenges and experiences of social exclusion (Joyce et al. 2010). Refugee immigrants also engage in unfamiliar pedagogical practices that ignore their personal histories and sociocultural backgrounds, as well as experience racial discrimination at TAFE institutes (Correa-Velez & Onsando 2009; Onsando & Billett 2009). Such challenges in higher education and in VET institutes are often specific to refugee immigrant learners; hence, the provision of supportive learning environments that address these challenges would significantly contribute to their successful resettlement in Australia.

Many refugee immigrants interact with the Australian VET sector through their enrolment at TAFE institutes (see for example, NSW Department of Education and Communities 2011) as well as by participating in Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) courses, which are mainly offered at TAFE

¹ The term 'social exclusion' in this paper refers to experiences of individuals who would like to participate and contribute in key activities of their societies, but for reasons beyond their control, they cannot participate in such activities (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud 1999, 2002).

institutes (TAFE Queensland 2013a). It is therefore important to focus on how the VET sector caters for refugee immigrants' unique and challenging education and training needs. It is also worthwhile to understand how these challenging educational and training experiences for refugee immigrants could be transformed into opportunities for the VET sector and TAFE institutes to offer appropriate support to these students. Furthermore, understanding refugee immigrants' past and present life experiences could be a basis for improving their education and training outcomes as they resettle in Australia. This understanding of life experiences is important because particular life experiences foster significant changes in individual's lives (Habermas 1978; Mezirow 1991). For these reasons, refugee immigrants' resettlement should seek to redress the issues arising both from the personal histories of their past refugee life experiences and the present societal challenges they encounter. Their participation in and contributions to society should be enacted in a safe and productive environment premised on their developing the capacities that encourage them to engage in productive lives in Australia.

This paper argues that the VET sector, through its TAFE institutes, could create supportive and empowering environments for refugee immigrants as they resettle in Australia. The paper explores personal agency² and empowerment issues as well as the discrimination experiences confronting refugee immigrants, with the objective of identifying ways by which the Australian VET sector and TAFE institutes could provide meaningful support. The paper also offers innovative contributions to knowledge by providing empirical propositions and recommendations that advocate for refugee immigrants' access to and engagement with the VET sector and TAFE institutes. Furthermore, the paper also contributes to one of Australia's national research priorities for tertiary education and training, that is, *The contribution of education and training to social inclusion: To explore the reduction of disadvantage through education and training* (NCVER 2010, p.13). The next section is a discussion of the methodology used in the study's philosophical approach and how data were collected and analysed.

Methodology

This study adopted transformative philosophical assumptions (Mertens 2009) and participants were recruited and selected through careful purposive sampling procedures (Schutt 2006), which identified them as refugee immigrants resettling in Australia. The data were collected from these participants by conducting two distinct personal interview sessions, and then analysed using grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008), which explored their experiences as well as their capacity to exercise personal agency.

Philosophical approach

The transformative philosophical assumptions (Mertens 2009) that formed the basis of this study recognised participants' personal refugee histories as well as their experiences of social exclusion in Australia. The recruitment of participants was aimed at understanding how their past refugee experiences as well as their present resettlement experiences could possibly affect their access to and participation in the Australian VET sector. For these reasons, the concepts of beneficence, social justice, respect, and cultural sensitivity were enacted when approaching and engaging with participants. This approach was based on assumptions that individuals construct specific perspectives as a consequence of their experiences (Aerts et al. 2007; Billett 2009; Koltko-Rivera 2004; Mezirow 1997). Potential participants were approached via the already established networks with local refugee

² The term personal agency or agency in this paper refers to the capacity and ability of individuals to intentionally influence their life circumstances and exercise control over their actions (Bandura 1986, 2006).

immigrant communities and augmented with the support of local refugee immigrant community leaders as well as the non-governmental community-based services that support refugee resettlement in Australia.

Data collection

As foreshadowed, data collection in this study was achieved by conducting face-to-face interviews with individual participants. Interviews in research provide a listening environment whereby knowledge is constructed through an exchange of verbal viewpoints between the researcher and participants (Schutt 2006). The eight selected participants – five males and three females – were originally from the Middle East, Africa, and South East Asia, where they lived as refugees for an average of 14 years and had resettled in Australia for an average of seven years. The interviews comprised two separate sessions conducted with each of the eight participants. The first interview session focused on participants' past refugee life experiences, while the second session concentrated on their present resettlement experiences in Australia. Additionally, in line with the study's transformative assumptions (Mertens 2009), the participants were given an opportunity to choose a preferred interview site to ensure that the conversations were held in comfortable environments. All interview sessions were electronically audio-recorded and verbatim transcriptions produced for the purpose of data analysis.

Data analysis

Data collected during the interview sessions were analysed using grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008), with the objective of understanding the factors that had contributed to participants' becoming and living as refugees and thereafter refugee immigrants, as well as their capacity to exercise personal agency in these environments. It was worth exploring, in some general sense, their access to and engagement with VET institutes in Australia. In the next section, findings from this group of refugee immigrants are presented and discussed in terms of their (a) past refugee life experiences and the effects these experiences had on their capacity to exercise personal agency, and (b) their current resettlement and VET experiences in Australia.

Past refugee life experiences

It is important to understand the extent to which past refugee life experiences affected refugee immigrants' present resettlement experiences, specifically their access to and engagement with the VET sector in Australia. This knowledge would assist the VET sector to provide meaningful support to refugee immigrants attending TAFE institutes and other registered training organisations (RTOs). Refugee life experiences were often characterised by a perception of a threat due to experiencing war and violence, a decision to flee to safety in extremely dangerous environments, and living in relative safe refugee camps (Keller 1975; Stein 1981). For participants of this study, such refugee life experiences created social structural affordances³ that affected their capability to exercise personal agency of improving their wellbeing. In this study, participants described their past refugee life experiences, which included (a) experiencing war and violence, (b) fleeing to safety often to a neighbouring country, (c) living as a refugee in challenging conditions, and (d) the occupational opportunities they had as refugees. In the next sections, these factors are explored by focusing on

³ The term social structural affordances or affordances in this paper refers to the provisions of social and physical contexts or environments that allow or invite intended actions to happen (Billett 2009).

how each may affect participants' capability to exercise personal agency, including their subsequent engagement with the VET sector in Australia.

Experiencing war and violence

A number of participants witnessed or experienced torture and killings of family members, friends, or fellow residents. For example, Naing Thein said that the killing of his close relative was the main trigger that forced his family to flee Burma into a refugee camp in neighbouring Thailand.

So later, I found out that actually my mum's younger sister was shot dead; she was pregnant about eight and a half months [participant pauses] just about to give birth, and was shot dead. From then I don't think my parents [participant pauses] didn't think it is safe anymore, so we decided to make a way to refugee camp, at the time I think I was about six years old; so we made our journey to the camp. (Naing Thein, Southeast Asia)

Naing Thein was only a child when his pregnant aunt was shot dead by armed military perpetrators. Not surprisingly, experiencing this tragedy was one of the main reasons that made Naing Thein's family flee from the volatility and insecurity in their village and home country. Similarly another participant, Angua from Sudan, narrated how she witnessed the torture of some of her acquaintances and fellow villagers.

And there is a shopkeeper who is a disabled man, one of his limbs was cut off. And the son, the head of the son was beaten, it was beaten almost to death, and the eyes turn red just like blood [participant sounds emotional] they were not killed, but they were really tortured, yes, not even good to look at them. (Angua, Africa)

After witnessing such traumatic torture and killings, Naing Thein, Angua and their immediate families were terrified and feared for their safety and had to flee and live in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Their violent experiences indicated the lack of normalcy in their home countries, the presence of indiscriminate threats, and victims being powerless to prevent these vicious attacks.

Such intense levels of war, violence, and torture were confronting experiences that rendered participants powerless to defend themselves and were likely to affect their subsequent resettlement, and engagement with the VET sector in Australia. Victims of war and violence often confronted years of societal chaos and escalation of traumatic events (Center for Victims of Torture 2005) because perpetrators frequently used torture to disempower and deny victims 'all powers of agency' (Vetlesen 2005, p.214). War and violence also rendered many refugees to be 'powerless objects rather than active agents' (Frost & Hoggett 2008, p.449); that is, being unable to exercise personal agency of peaceful living. War and violence in many refugees' home countries could not provide them with safe and peaceful living environments. However, while refugees were without agency and powerless to defend themselves from armed perpetrators, their survival was paradoxically dependent of their first-order agentic ability (Frost & Hoggett 2008) of fleeing to safety. The presence of war and violence was also an indication that refugees faced potent societal constraints and boundaries that severely limited their personal agency to act in any other way than to flee to find peace and normalcy.

In all, for many refugees, experiencing war and violence resulted in the loss of personal agency and the ability to exercise peaceful living in their home countries. This means that such intense levels of war, violence, and torture could render refugees susceptible to long-term distress that may affect their consequent resettlement outcomes, including engagement with the VET sector in Australia. As discussed in the next section, refugees' fled from war and violence hoping to find peace in neighbouring countries.

Fleeing to safety

During war and violence, refugees were forced to flee from their home countries and find peace and safety elsewhere. The fleeing to safety was often characterised by challenging and dangerous journeys towards neighbouring countries. For example, after Abdul-Jabbar's home was ambushed by Iraqi government agents, who forcibly took away his two brothers, he embarked on a one-month 'terrible journey' walking towards the Iranian border in biting winter conditions.

And then, after one or two weeks I was through that time I was looking for a way to go out. With the help of some friends I got away from the North side of Iraq, the Kurdish people paid some money actually a lot of money to get the way to the border between Iraq and Iran. And then I walked for one month on foot in the winter time and all the mountain about 1 metre ice, it is a terrible journey, it is a terrible journey. I never believed that I will be safe at the end, but thank God it is done now.

(Abdul-Jabbar, Middle East)

Abdul-Jabbar's 'terrible journey' as he escaped from war and violence in an attempt to reach a safe place was similar to those of many other refugees. For example Naing Thein, his parents, and siblings fled from Burma and travelled for a fortnight through dangerous terrain to seek safety in a refugee camp in neighbouring Thailand.

I had to travel for two weeks all the way to the Thailand refugee camp. My dad has to carry my sister, my mum had to carry my brother; and I was six, we had to travel for two weeks; all through walking, nothing more. And at some stage I just collapsed, like I can't walk anymore, and then I really wanted to cry; they say 'don't cry', as a kid you feel you don't even have the freedom to cry. As a kid I didn't know anything, and later I found out that because you can't cry the place where we were at that moment is very close to the Burmese military base. And if the kids cry, then there is no way out; if they caught it then we are all got in trouble.

(Naing Thein)

The extremely dangerous situations and environments surrounding Abdul-Jabbar, Naing Thein and their families forced them to flee and seek safety; otherwise, they were likely to be tortured or killed by the perpetrators of war and violence in their respective home countries. For them, fleeing from their homelands was the only way of saving their lives.

It is worth noting that the experiences of fleeing to safety could affect refugees' subsequent resettlement and their engagement with TAFE institutes because the traumatic distress they suffered at this stage was in addition to what they had experienced during the war and violence. Fleeing to safety was a necessary survival exercise that restored refugees' personal agency (Keller 1975), which was severely diminished during the war and violence. The action of fleeing to safety could last for a number of years and was usually characterised by profound uncertainty, whereby victims were constantly in hiding for the fear of being attacked again (Center for Victims of Torture 2005; Richmond 1993). Moreover, notwithstanding the many challenges arising from being in a war environment, refugees' ability to escape from their hostile home countries could be described from a personal agency perspective:

Despite the horrors undergone, there were beneficial aspects to being in a flight as compared to waiting at home for the axe to fall. Once more one became an actor, in many cases he regained the status of subject rather than object and was able to respond effectively to the dangers around him.

(Keller 1975, p.55)

Fleeing to safety was an exercise of personal agency dependent on the safety situations surrounding refugees at that time. Furthermore, individuals in imminent danger exercised personal agency to ensure that their exigent fleeing to safety was successful (Bandura 2006), depending on the

availability of supportive environments, as exemplified by the refugee participants. For many refugees and their families, the flight to safety from their home countries was a first-order agentic exercise (Frost & Hoggett 2008), which marked the beginning of their lives as refugees in neighbouring countries. The action of fleeing to safety involved the ability of refugees, often with the help of others, to successfully execute their plans for escaping the war and violence from their home country.

In all, fleeing to safety was a rare instance where participants exercised personal agency as they sought to find environments of relative peace to live as refugees. However, as discussed in the next section, the living experiences of many refugees were often challenging and distressing.

Experiencing refugee life

Victims' experiences of war and violence, and their escape from their home countries, often led them to living in neighbouring countries as refugees. For participants, the experiences of living as refugees were characterised by environments that were overcrowded, unwelcoming, and insecure. For example, Angua described the overcrowded, hostile, and desolate conditions in the camp where people used dirty water for consumption, with therefore many dying of water-borne diseases.

Water was also a problem at the beginning, we were taking dirty waters and it was too much crowded and so many lives were lost at that very moment. Some people died from diarrhoea, I think some from malaria, or what I don't know, it was really sad to look at every time carrying bodies for burial and what, for some period of time and then it started getting better. (Angua)

As indicated by Angua, refugee camps were overcrowded with very limited resources and facilities available for refugee populations, with regular outbreaks of fatal infectious diseases. Also, according to Naing Thein, who lived in a refugee camp in Thailand, refugees were always treated like unworthy human beings.

Life inside the refugee camp, there were a lot of restrictions and limitation in the camp. Because if I have to tell you everything, like in the camp, there is a group of people in the Thai village or Thai authorities; they cannot treat you as their level, to their level. And we had a lot of discrimination as well and we were treated very unfair, very disgraceful as some second status. (Naing Thein)

Naing Thein found it challenging living as a refugee because of such incidents of restriction and discrimination. For Zainab, as an Afghani refugee living in Iran, personal tragedy and loss struck when she and her siblings were attacked in a domestic dispute where three of her siblings were killed. Zainab and her younger sister survived, but were unconscious and hospitalised for months as they were treated of the injuries they sustained from the domestic attack.

I remember like one month later I was in hospital [participant sounds emotional], when I became conscious and know everything; and for a while I didn't even know that two of my brothers and one of my sisters they passed away [participant sounds emotional]. After that, me and my younger sister we were in hospital, my sister was really, really, bad injured, like I was injured badly too but we were long time in the hospital. (Zainab, Middle East)

Angua, Naing Thein, and Zainab have described some of the difficult and sometimes tragic events that characterised their personal living experiences as refugees. Often, such distressing refugee life experiences were laden with challenges that rendered them vulnerable to many potential dangers in their environments.

The difficult, distressful and traumatic refugee life experiences described by participants were likely to adversely affect their wellbeing, even after their subsequent resettlement and engagement with the VET sector in Australia. However, surviving such experiences unmistakably involved some form of resilience and first-order personal agency (Frost & Hoggett 2008; Jerusalem & Mittag 1995). This means that first-order personal agency was still imperilled in these volatile refugee environments, which were mainly characterised by restrictive personal, social, and institutional factors. Refugees were often trapped for decades in these protracted encampments of living in unsafe and sub-human conditions (Zeus 2011), necessitating the humanitarian intervention of others like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to provide basic living amenities. The high dependency on 'others' for survival and the basic living conditions and the lack of supportive environments (Bakewell 2010) significantly inhibited refugees' exercise of personal agency of taking charge of their living.

In all, the resilience displayed by participants in surviving war and violence, fleeing to safety, and living through distressing refugee life experiences was an agentic quality; however, their high dependency on others for survival significantly limited their personal agency of being self-sufficient. In the next section, the occupational opportunities for refugees are discussed, with a focus on the contribution of education and work to participants' life experiences and personal agencies.

Occupational opportunities

Engaging in an occupation, for example, accessing and engaging in education or work were some of the empowering ways that participants could reclaim their loss of personal agency while living as refugees. Naing Thein was excited about an opportunity for him to go to school.

I was kind of very privileged guy when I was born; since I was growing up as a kid, I wanted to study you know in the village we didn't have any opportunity to get an education. In the village it is really, really a challenge for the village people to get a teacher, you know; just to come and teach. So for us it is like a luxury to have a teacher come and teach in the village. For me the first time I remember as a kid, they were sent to the school; I was so overjoyed this was the first time to be able to study.

(Naing Thein)

However, Naing Thein's education in Burma was interrupted because his family had to flee across the border and become refugees in Thailand. On the other hand, Abdul-Jabbar was not keen on advancing his education while living as a refugee in Syria because he was satisfied with his engineering degree qualification, despite being unable to secure an engineering job:

No, I did not try because I have already got my Bachelor degree of engineering in Iraq from my country. But the things I am very sorry for, that time in Syria, I couldn't get a job as an Engineer with my qualification.

(Abdul-Jabbar)

Despite having no realistic work opportunities, other participants were determined to access and pursue employment activities to improve their socioeconomic lives. For example, Okayo, a refugee from the Sudan, could only find work as a labourer in Uganda; however, he was motivated to keep working because he realised the dangers of being idle and doing nothing in the refugee camp.

I used to be a labourer there, not in the city; in the district, the camp was very, very far from the city. My plan was to continue with studies, but I found it difficult. That's why, you know, sometimes if you are staying idle, it will lead you to somewhere not good, that's why I said, I should involve myself.

(Okayo, Africa)

Due to poverty and illness, Okayo couldn't continue with his schooling, so he ventured out of the refugee camp to look for work that would keep him occupied. Another participant, Angua, described

the concept of food-for-work where workers were remunerated by being given food. The limited and restricted access to work opportunities in refugee camps meant that Angua and other workers were paid by being given food.

And we were paid with 'food-for-work' [participant chuckles]. And that is because that is the environment, and there is nothing I can do, and the best thing is we were the workers who were only getting that 'food-for-work'. So, sometimes we can even sell them and we get money, depending on the situation. But sometimes we use it for our own consumption. (Angua)

The descriptions of Naing Thein's and Abdul-Jabar's education experiences and Okayo's and Angua's experiences of work exemplify the challenging and sometimes exceptional nature of engaging in an occupation while living as a refugee.

Involvement with an occupation while living as refugees was likely to form participants' basis for their subsequent VET and employment outcomes during resettlement in Australia. Engaging in education was also likely to be an exercise in restoring participants' capability to exercise personal agency and enhance their wellbeing because 'the fundamental goal of education is to cultivate human agency' (Bai 2006, p.7). Indeed, there is relational interdependency between personal agency and the affordances created by engaging in an occupation (Billett & Smith 2006; Billett, Smith & Barker 2005). Education can be an empowering agency that assists people to shape and gradually transform their lives and regain feelings of self-worth (Santibáñez 2008; Yamazumi 2007). Similarly, engaging in work and being in employment or working through learning and education also generated personal agentic feelings of self-worth (Billett 2011; Kallinikos 2003). However, despite being in an occupation, the magnitude of adverse and challenging refugee life experiences could not afford participants the adequate agentic empowerment required to solve their deprived wellbeing as refugees.

In summary, participants' past refugee life experiences were likely to adversely affect their exercise of personal agency. It is these kinds of significant and distressing experiences that refugees undergo before immigrating and engaging with the VET sector in Australia. This means that refugee immigrants' subsequent resettlement and engagement with education and training are likely to be affected by these significant personal histories. The next section therefore is a discussion of participants' immigration and resettlement in Australia, including their access and participation in the Australian VET sector and TAFE institutes.

Resettlement and VET experiences

Resettlement for refugees provides permanent protection to victims of war and violence through an immigration process that gives them the opportunities of living and being nationals of other countries (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2011; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2011). Each year the Australian Government, through its Humanitarian Program of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and with advice from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provides resettlement opportunities to a number of refugees from different parts of the world. However, it is well documented that refugee immigrants in Australia regularly confront social exclusion experiences (Campbell & Julian 2009; Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham 2009; Taylor 2004). Social exclusion denies individuals the capability to exercise the personal agency of participating and contributing to different aspects of society (Hayes, Gray & Edwards 2008). Despite being in relatively safe environments, participants reported experiencing incidences of social exclusion in Australia. In contradiction to the very objective of granting them resettlement, social exclusion experiences were an additional burden acting against many participants' efforts of recovering from their past distressing

refugee life experiences. Participants described their present resettlement experiences of social exclusion in terms of: (a) confronting racism and racial discrimination, (b) difficulties with literacy and English language proficiencies, and (c) experiencing sociocultural dissonances. In the next sections, each of these refugee resettlement factors is discussed by considering how the VET sector could provide meaningful supportive environments for these new Australians.

Racism and racial discrimination

The social exclusion experienced by refugee immigrants, often through racial discrimination, created social barriers that adversely affected their resettlement in Australia. Perhaps the most significant social exclusion experiences that affected refugee immigrants are the incidents of racism and racial discrimination they regularly encountered. For example, according to Abdul-Jabbar, discrimination incidences towards refugee immigrants seemed to be on the rise in Australia.

I am surprised of for 10 years till now I found the rates of discrimination going up; up, up, unfortunately. And everywhere, not in a certain place, sometimes when you are walking with your wife or your daughter who wearing *hijab*, and Australian people passing through in their car, they just yelling to you some very bad words or 'go back to your country!' or sometimes they throw something. And that happened to most of the refugees, especially for the women wearing *hijab*, and especially for the black people. (Abdul-Jabbar)

Another participant, Nahimana from Burundi, described about an incident where he and a fellow African were racially taunted and abused while travelling by train. They were expressly told that 'black' immigrants like them came to Australia to drain financial resources.

So you guys just eating our money! You black! He started shouting, abusing say 'what are you guys coming to do here?!' Argh! On my side for that day really I was very angry until I was not happy to hear the way he was just talking. (Nahimana, Africa)

Nahimana was upset because the person taunting them, like many others, thought of him and other 'black' immigrants as a burden on the Australian society. While Abdul-Jabbar and Nahimana described their experiences of racism and racial discrimination in public, Bizimana from Burundi, described feeling threatened and discriminated against while he was studying at a TAFE institute. He described feeling uncomfortable when the teacher always sat close behind him during assessments and told him that he (Bizimana) was likely to cause accidents and destroy the laboratory.

'I sit behind you always because you are not confident'. I said 'I didn't invite you'. 'No, I must sit to you because when you burn the lab, is me I can be in trouble'. So that teacher was sitting behind me, and I didn't pass! I got scared to go back there because of that teacher. She made me angry. (Bizimana, Africa)

Bizimana did not perform well in that specific subject, so he decided to find another TAFE institute where he could continue with his studies. He advised his fellow refugee immigrants studying at TAFE institutes to speak out if they felt that they were being discriminated against, especially during assessments.

What I used to tell our community, our black people studying at TAFE, 'Don't be scared, don't be angry', if you see the teacher is discriminating you; tell him 'You are discriminating me, you are not marking me very well', don't scare! (Bizimana)

These descriptions by Abdul-Jabbar, Nahimana and Bizimana exemplify how social exclusion experiences of racism and discrimination could be offensive as well as threatening to the victims, and could abate their personal agency of participating and contributing to the Australian society.

Such social exclusion experiences could adversely affect educational outcomes for refugee immigrants attending TAFE and other educational institutes in Australia (Matthews 2008; Olliff 2004; O'Sullivan & Olliff 2006). Social exclusion and racial discrimination, however dysfunctional and distorted (Collin III & Preciphs 1991), were likely to prevent refugee immigrants from experiencing meaningful learning at TAFE institutes. Moreover, the Australian Government has identified that refugee immigrants have in the past suffered grievously through victimisation (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009); therefore, that recognition needs to be extended to ensure that further victimisation by social exclusion be avoided. However, this issue can be addressed with the understanding that socially excluded members of society could be re-engaged and assisted to participate in the wider society through provision of agentic opportunities and access to resources (Robinson 2004). For example, VET authorities, in conjunction with local refugee immigrant communities, non-governmental organisations, and governments, could regularly organise and host education and diversity programs that aim at educating society about the social exclusion practices of racism and racial discrimination. The objectives of such proposed diversity programs could focus on the unlawful nature of social exclusion, racism, and racial discrimination, as enshrined in the *Australian Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, *The Racial Hatred Act 1995*, and the *Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 (Qld)*.

It is however appreciated that the Australian VET sector has acknowledged the importance of cultural and racial harmony at its institutes, as provided by the 'discrimination' clauses in the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) code of conduct document. The *TAFE Queensland Student Rules* has also identified discrimination as an unlawful activity:

Discrimination occurs when a person is treated less favourably than another person because of perceived attributes such as age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, cultural background, disability status, or socio-economic status ... Acts of discrimination will be considered as acts of behavioural misconduct and will result in disciplinary action, and may be reported to the appropriate authorities. (TAFE Queensland 2013b, p.4)

Cultural, racial, and religious harmony would provide supportive learning environments, which will assist refugee immigrants to regain their diminished personal agencies and re-engage with the wider society. Furthermore, social exclusion in the VET sector could be tackled like other social vices that require a concerted effort by society. For example, refugee resettlement stakeholders could come together and offer practical measures for tackling this social problem by conducting public education forums and debates broadcast in the traditional as well as social networking media. These forums, programs, and debates could also serve to inform the general public about circumstances that refugee immigrants have undergone prior to their immigration, as well as educating members of public about the refugee life experiences that other society members have never experienced.

In all, the VET sector should ensure that these proposed programs that address social exclusion, racism, and racial discrimination in TAFE institutes have the clear and measurable objectives of restoring refugee immigrants' capability to exercise personal agency and to fully participate in Australian society. The next section is a discussion of another possible dimension of social exclusion, that is, the likely low proficiency levels of literacy and English language skills amongst refugee immigrants in Australia.

English language proficiencies

The possible low proficiency levels of literacy and English language skills amongst refugee immigrants could be a barrier to their resettlement because such skills are required for social engagement in

Australian society. For instance, Abdul-Jabbar wanted to improve his literacy and English language skills so that he could easily communicate with the community and also assist him in his daily activities.

I would just like to improve my [English] language, and it is compulsory you know to get 500 and some other hours for English. So I attended level III, certificate III directly and then I finished certificate III and certificate IV. And then, of course it is not enough, but I felt that for my job, for my writing, for my reading, for my dealing with the people. (Abdul-Jabbar)

On the other hand, Okayo was taking his Certificate II in Access 10 course at a TAFE institute and was aiming at advancing his education to either university or other VET courses. He was looking forward to furthering his education with a diploma or degree qualification in readiness for other opportunities that may come his way.

I have since, I think go back to academics and do more, because I am reflecting about my future, maybe things will change, maybe in future they will need somebody who completed year 12 [participant chuckles]. I am currently doing Certificate II in Access 10. After finishing it, I can still do year 11, year 12, and after that I can go to Uni or do any diploma course. It will open for me ways. (Okayo)

For Abdul-Jabbar and Okayo, their engagement in different courses at TAFE institutes to improve their literacy and English language, among other skills, was important because this would assist them in 'dealing with people' and 'opening ways' for them respectively. However, without attaining such key skills, they could easily be socially excluded and disengaged from society.

Literacy and English language skills are a basis for communication and social engagement in Australia (New South Wales Government 2006), and the possible lack of such skills amongst refugee immigrants could socially exclude them from participating and contributing to society. For refugee immigrants, having good English language skills were important to their successful resettlement in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2012) because such skills would assist in their communication and social engagement with society. Furthermore, when individuals acquire communication, social, and occupational skills, they consequently are empowered to exercise the personal agency of participating and contributing to society (Zimmerman 1995). As such, these communication aspects of the social exclusion facing refugee immigrants could be addressed through the provision of targeted literacy and English language skills, mainly through TAFE institutes. In an attempt to tackle this communication issue, the Australian Government requires newly arrived refugee immigrants to participate in Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) courses, which are mainly offered by TAFE institutes (TAFE Queensland 2013a). In the state of Queensland:

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is provided by TAFE Queensland to help migrants and refugees to learn how to read, write, speak and understand the English language. Eligible migrants and refugees can study English with the AMEP for up to 510 hours or until they reach functional English, whichever comes first. All AMEP students enrol in the Certificates in Spoken and Written English (CSWE). (TAFE Queensland 2013a)

These Adult Migrant English Program courses are designed to address the possibility that migrants and refugee immigrants were likely to have certain inadequacies in their English language skills (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2012). For many refugee immigrants, this inadequacy could be as a result of English not being their native language as well as the possible lack of educational opportunities to learn the English language due to the challenging refugee life experiences.

Low literacy and English language abilities have been cited as some of the contributing factors that prevented refugee immigrants from gaining meaningful employment in Australia (Multicultural Affairs

Queensland 2001). The acquisition of English language skills could therefore improve refugee immigrants' chances of gaining employment, which in turn will build their agentic capacity of fully participating in shaping Australia's future. For these reasons, TAFE institutes could ensure that refugee immigrants acquire literacy and English language skills, not only for social engagement purposes, but also as a fundamental exercise of agency in their participation and contribution to society. However, while designing and implementing TAFE institutes' English language curriculum, it is important for VET authorities to understand and acknowledge these new Australians' difficult past refugee life experiences as well as the challenging present resettlement experiences. In doing so, it would assist them to understand why it could be a daunting task for some refugee immigrants to learn a new language like English (Miller, Mitchell & Brown 2005). It is expected that when the VET sector understands refugee immigrants' backgrounds and is therefore able to adequately meet their literacy and English language needs, these new Australians could acquire the capacity to exercise the personal agency that will assist in their communication and social engagement in Australia.

In all, the provision of literacy English language skills in TAFE and other institutes could significantly contribute to addressing the social exclusion experiences that refugee immigrants regularly encounter. The next section is a discussion of how sociocultural dissonances are likely to contribute to refugee immigrants' social exclusion experiences in Australia.

Sociocultural dissonances

As new Australians, refugee immigrants are likely to feel socially excluded if the wider society does not understand, acknowledge, and appreciate their sociocultural backgrounds, and vice versa. For example, Abdul-Jabbar stated that no cultural activities took place at his TAFE institute and some teachers were insensitive to refugee immigrants' religious beliefs.

And the social activities are not so good especially in TAFE, so there are no any cultural activities, there is no encouragement for the people to express their culture and to be proud of the culture or the religion or the thoughts. And some of the teachers are actually very tough against some religions, against Islam; so they are always making some jokes about Muslims or about the Muslim man can marry four to five women and also which is not suitable; not suitable. It put a barrier between the teacher and the student. (Abdul-Jabbar)

The sociocultural 'barrier' Abdul-Jabbar is referring to was an example of instances where refugee immigrants felt socially excluded as they participated in learning activities at TAFE institutes. However, despite participants having many other challenges, Bizimana said that a few teachers at his TAFE institute were quite supportive. For example, he described being provided with an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher to assist him during an assessment.

I found some teachers there they helped me, because I didn't have enough English — like Biology was hard to pass, I got lots of, I repeat like 4 times, they are tolerating me that I don't know English. While doing exams they provided me another teacher, ESL teacher, doing exam with them. And I got that ESL teacher, asked me my background, he was really happy but said 'this guy is trying', he was helping me and giving me enough time. (Bizimana)

According to Bizimana, the English as a Second Language teacher was understanding and helpful to him. Similarly, Nahimana was impressed by the professionalism displayed by teachers at his TAFE institute. He described the good relationships with the teachers and was appreciative that some teachers at the institute went beyond their normal classroom teaching duties to become mentors.

What I have realised, all teachers it seems they have been trained; they are well trained because the way they treat, they treat according your level. Teachers they will help you, and they will support you really for what they know how they can treat people. And they can try to advise, not only teach you, they advise. (Nahimana)

Despite Abdul-Jabbar's experiences of sociocultural dissonance at a TAFE institute, Bizimana's and Nahimana's experiences of being assisted and supported indicated that there exists capacity for TAFE institutes to provide supportive environments for refugee immigrants.

For the VET sector to assist refugee immigrants to deal with the sociocultural dissonances they encounter, TAFE institutes could create supportive affordances that advance quality and beneficial 'social relationships' (Jerusalem & Mittag 1995). For example, it would be necessary for teachers at TAFE institutes to modify their teaching approaches to acknowledge and accommodate refugee immigrants' sociocultural and religious backgrounds. However, it is understandable that the teaching approaches at TAFE institutes are guided by the Australian VET sector, whose curriculum does not necessarily contain elements of cultural competence (Blunt 2007; Mertens 2009). The concept of cultural competence is described as:

a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes and regulations that connect entities, an agency, or individuals, which enables that system or those individuals to bring about efficacy in multicultural situations as well as the ability to operate within the realm of culturally integrated patterns of human behavior defined by a population. (Blunt 2007, p.99)

In plain terms, cultural competence practices create supportive environments where individuals from different sociocultural backgrounds can exercise personal agency and be socially involved with society. The proposed cultural competence practices at TAFE institutes are likely to be meaningful if teachers applied 'multicultural' teaching approaches of integrating diverse sociocultural activities when engaging with refugee immigrants. The Australian VET sector could encourage teachers at TAFE institutes to familiarise themselves with diverse sociocultural practices to enable them to understand refugee immigrants' sociocultural backgrounds and to provide them appropriate and valuable learning experiences. Such sociocultural environments and interactions at TAFE institutes could inculcate empowering personal agencies to both teachers and the refugee immigrants. It is however acknowledged that cultural competence practices may be challenging for teachers at TAFE institutes to implement because most of them do not possess such lived sociocultural backgrounds.

The Australian VET sector could therefore encourage the creation of learning environments where refugee immigrants and teachers at TAFE institutes exchange sociocultural experiences that support diversity and social integration. Such learning environments would create affordances of mutual understanding, clarity, and social consensus (Giroux 1988) between refugee immigrants and teachers at TAFE institutes. These mutual sociocultural exchanges could encourage understandings that foster culturally competent learning environments at TAFE institutes. Another possible intervention to address the sociocultural dissonances experienced by the refugee immigrants at TAFE institutes could be through organising mentorship programs whereby students are partnered with role models from their own communities who would offer advice on a range of issues, including about resettlement and learning in Australia. These mentorship programs could ease refugee immigrants' sociocultural dissonances at TAFE institutes because they would provide them with the motivation to excel, as well as afford them a broad understanding of education and training challenges in Australia.

In summary, refugee immigrants' social exclusion experiences limited their exercise of personal agency to attain meaningful education and training outcomes at TAFE institutes. The proposition that the Australian VET sector could provide support to refugee immigrants is discussed in the next section.

Australian VET sector support

Refugee immigrants' personal histories were characterised by experiences of war and violence, fleeing to safety often to a neighbouring country, and living as refugees in difficult conditions. Their subsequent resettlement in Australia is characterised by experiences of social exclusion due to racism and racial discrimination, possible low levels of proficiency in literacy and English language skills, and sociocultural dissonances. Evidently, a combination of refugee immigrants' past as well as their present resettlement experiences largely restricted their capability to exercise the personal agency of fully participating and contributing to the Australian society. However, refugee immigrants' resettlement in Australia could be improved by acknowledging, understanding, and accounting for these complex sets of challenging and significant experiences. Specifically, the Australian VET sector through TAFE institutes could assist refugee immigrants' resettlement by (a) enacting practises that could restore their capability to exercise personal agency, and (b) creating supportive sociocultural affordances that acknowledge and recognise their diverse sociocultural backgrounds. In the next sections, each of these propositions is discussed in detail.

Exercising personal agency

The extent to which refugee immigrants' diminished personal agencies could be restored by education and training can be determined by the extent to which the Australian VET system understands and acknowledges their backgrounds and experiences. Moreover, refugee immigrants have the desire to participate in and contribute to Australian society. However, if they are not appropriately and adequately supported by the VET sector, their capacity to exercise the personal agency of participation in and contribution to society would continue to be diminished. Granting these new Australians with opportunities to realise fulfilling lives – the very purposes of granting them resettlement in Australia – may not be attained unless adequate resources are used to secure this humanitarian goal. This means that refugee immigrants require particular provisions to assist them to overcome the disadvantages of their past refugee experiences as well as the current social exclusion experiences they regularly confront. Exploring the personal agency and social exclusion issues facing refugees immigrants is a predicament to which the Australian Government, VET authorities, and TAFE institutes should give due consideration.

The VET sector should recognise refugee immigrants' traumatic personal histories for the purpose of providing supportive measures to restore their personal agencies. For example, TAFE institutes could offer specialised ongoing professional psychosocial counselling services, which refugee immigrants could easily access in an attempt to address their difficult personal histories and challenging resettlement experiences. In supplementing these services, TAFE institutes' personnel could be trained in basic trauma therapy concepts (Allender 1998) so as to provide immediate assistance prior to referring students for further specialised support. Furthermore, the learning and training activities at TAFE institutes could be informed by a curriculum whose contents recognise refugee immigrants' past and present challenges. This means that educators at TAFE institutes could create learning environments that will address the students' particular learning circumstances (Tisdell 1995), including acknowledgement of their challenging personal experiences.

Refugee immigrants' personal efforts and their readiness to engage in learning activities at TAFE could also contribute to the restoration of capacity to exercise personal agency. For any form of learning to take place effectively, the learner's readiness to engage in the learning activities is paramount (Knowles 1990). For refugee immigrants, the lack of this preparedness could be a barrier to effective participation and learning in TAFE institutes. The concept of readiness to learn involves assessing whether learners are able to 'cope effectively' (Knowles 1990, p.60) with learning activities. It is therefore important for the VET sector to understand refugee immigrants' significant experiences so as to assist in exploring effective ways of providing them with the capability of exercising personal agency to cope effectively with the learning activities at TAFE institutes. This means that the enacted curriculum at TAFE institutes and the learning activities involving refugee immigrants could be designed purposely to motivate and empower them. As discussed in the next section, the Australian VET sector could also provide support to refugee immigrants by creating supportive sociocultural affordances in TAFE institutes.

Supportive sociocultural affordances

There is a possibility that refugee immigrants could be psychosocially distressed, given their difficult personal histories and challenging resettlement experiences (Cassity & Gow 2005; Miller, Mitchell & Brown 2005). For these reasons, resettlement should offer them safe environments to enable them to fully participate in the Australian society. These social inclusive affordances could have significant and primary implications for refugee immigrants' education and training outcomes because perhaps for the first time, they would have real opportunities to access and engage with life pathways of empowerment. Therefore, for refugee immigrants, engaging in education and training activities is an important agentic process (Bai 2006) that could transform them from being socially excluded dependent individuals into productive and empowered members of Australian society. To assist in this personal agentic process of refugee immigrants' transformation, the VET sector could ensure that the learning environments at TAFE institutes created supportive sociocultural affordances. For example, educators at these institutes could adapt transformative learning (Giroux 1988; Mezirow 1990) principles, which aim to empower learners with the capacity to exercise personal agency as they negotiate through life challenges.

It is important to remember refugee immigrants' resilience and the committed resolve to engage in learning at TAFE and other institutions, drawing from the difficult and often atrocious experiences that they have undergone in the past. This resolve should be harnessed so that their difficult past refugee experiences could be used as a motivation for them to exercise agency and shape their present resettlement experiences in Australia. The distinct differences between many refugee immigrants' sociocultural backgrounds and Australia's ways of living are likely to have particularly challenging implications for how they engage with learning. Consequently, when engaging in learning activities at TAFE institutes, refugee immigrants are likely to be exposed to an Australian curriculum that reflects and fosters Western cultural values that they may not be used to (Trevino & Davids 2001). As a result, refugee immigrants would find it quite a demanding task to engage in the learning if the VET sector cannot create supportive sociocultural affordances in TAFE institutes.

To address these sociocultural dissonances, many refugee immigrants require supportive affordances at TAFE institutes because effective learning takes place in environments that are socioculturally supportive to learners (Billett 1992). Therefore, socially structured supportive environments at TAFE institutes could accommodate refugee immigrants' sociocultural practices, while encouraging them to experience new ways of living in Australia. These sociocultural interactions can be achieved without refugee immigrants losing their sociocultural identities, while at the same time are able to fully

engage with the wider Australian society. In the next section, a set of recommendations for the Australian VET sector, drawn from the discussions in this paper, is provided.

Recommendations for VET sector

The following set of recommendations, drawn from the study, aim at providing guidelines on how the Australian VET sector and TAFE institutes could address personal agency and social exclusion issues for refugee immigrants. It is recommended that:

- 1 Tutors and teachers at TAFE institutes engaging with refugee immigrants make the effort to be culturally competent so as to understand and acknowledge the students' sociocultural backgrounds. This understanding and acknowledgment will assist in removing the sociocultural barriers that exist between teachers and students, therefore providing refugee immigrants with a socioculturally supportive learning environment.
- 2 The VET sector could provide professional development opportunities for teachers and personnel at TAFE institutes aimed at enhancing their knowledge and understanding of refugee immigrants' past personal histories as well as the current social exclusion experiences they regularly confront. The knowledge of students' past and present experiences will assist TAFE institute personnel to be more understanding and sensitive and hence providing a curriculum and teaching activities aimed at restoring refugee immigrants' lost personal agencies. Such professional development programs could be conducted in partnership with refugee resettlement services like the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASST) and its constituent bodies.
- 3 TAFE institutes could organise orientation programs where a diversity of learners and educators freely exchange knowledge about their basic sociocultural backgrounds, practices, and experiences. If this two-way process of exchanging knowledge is effectively conducted, it may result in the VET sector providing more culturally appropriate support to students from a diversity of sociocultural backgrounds.
- 4 The VET sector through TAFE institutes could be proactive in curbing the social exclusion practices of racism and discrimination by encouraging multicultural events in campuses. This promotion of social harmony could be achieved by developing regular public education programs in partnership with local communities from refugee backgrounds, other communities, governments, and non-governmental services. These stakeholders could form working partnerships that would assist in consulting, identifying, and implementing practical measures aimed at solving the social exclusion problems affecting refugee immigrants attending TAFE institutes.

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