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‘You have to start from the beginning’: The job search experience of skilled dual-career migrant couplesⁱ

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‘You have to start from the beginning’: The job search experience of skilled dual-career migrant couples

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Abstract

Immigration policy in Australia emphasises skilled, humanitarian and family-reunion based intakes. In recent years the main focus has been on skilled migrants, as this group have become critical to filling gaps in the labour market. There is little research on what happens to migrants and their families after arrival, especially their job seeking experiences. This paper focuses on the job seeking experiences of skilled migrant couples, including those who have children. It reports on exploratory research with 10 skilled migrants from Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) countries. The key findings show that barriers such as language and lack of local work experience persist. The research also reveals that these migrants manage and negotiate job acquisition as couples, rather than as isolated individuals. Skilled dual-career migrant families make choices within the family in the process of seeking employment, and this raises additional barriers to their successful engagement with the labour market.

Introduction

Australia’s Skilled Migration Program is designed to attract migrants to fill recognised skill shortages within the national labour market. Since the mid-1990s labour shortages have influenced changes in immigration policy with the result that there have been increases in the number of migrants with higher skill levels and qualifications (Connell & Burgess 2009, p. 413; Productivity Commission 2007, p.1). Currently, this group is larger than migrants gaining entry on humanitarian and family reunion grounds (ABS 2008a, p. 209; Teicher, Shah & Griffin 2002, p. 218). In Australia in 2006, it was estimated that approximately four and a half million people were born overseas (approximately 22 per cent of the population) and it is estimated that the Australian population is now made up of approximately 200 different nations (ABS 2009, p. 1; ABS 2006, p. 3). In 2008 the majority of immigrants were from the ‘United Kingdom (14.2 per cent); New Zealand (11.7 per cent); India (10.8 per cent); China (excluding Special Administrative Regions and Taiwan) (10.1 per cent); South Africa (5.0 per cent), and the Philippines (3.8 per cent)’ (DIAC 2009, p. 1). In 2008, 26 per cent of all employees were born overseas, with over 58 per cent of this group coming from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). These NESB workers make up approximately 15 per cent of the Australian workforce (ABS 2008b, p. 18). In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of migrant women arriving in Australia as principle visa applicants (Iredale 2005, p. 161). This may be due to their skill and qualification levels meeting immigration criteria ahead of their male partner.

There has been an abundance of research examining migrant employment issues around the globe, focusing on migrants as vulnerable workers in low-paid occupations (Alcorso 1991; Datta, McIlwaine, Evans, Herbert, May & Wills 2007, p. 405; Holgate 2005; Renzulli, Grant & Kathuria 2006; Wright 2007; Zuberi 2007). Historically, NESB migrants in Australia have occupied jobs in low-paid sectors of the workforce such as the textile and clothing industries, labouring and cleaning (Alcorso & Ho 2006). The increased emphasis on skilled migration programs suggests a potential for better employment outcomes for migrants than in the past (Hawthorne 2005). However, this notion assumes that migrants can move freely into employment without facing barriers such as language and lack of local job experience

(Alcorso & Ho 2006; Birrell & Rapson 2005, p. 17). Yet skilled migrants are not necessarily able to transfer their experience and skills easily into the Australian labour market (Ho 2006). Issues of disadvantage, barriers, and poor employment outcomes remain, and these issues are more likely to be experienced by women (see Fang, Novicevic & Zikic 2009, pp. 474-75; Ho & Alcorso 2004; Shamsuddin 1998). In addition to the well-documented barriers to employment, further difficulties arise for these migrants. For example, the affordability of providing basic necessities (that is rent, food and paying bills), and the ability to pay for further education and/or training (where required) have a direct impact upon access to the labour market and in gaining a job in their respective field.

Much of the literature examines the migrant experience from an individual migrant standpoint of the migrating male (Alcorso 1989; Cobb-Clark, Connolly & Worswick 2001; Datta et al 2007; Hawthorne 2005; Kofman & Raghuram 2005, p. 151; Liversage 2009; Shamsuddin 1998), but, as this research has uncovered, migrant couples are involved in complex family negotiations about the issues they face in their new country. For example, migrant couples make decisions as to which partner will seek out entry into the workforce ahead of the other, while the remaining partner undertakes employment in a low-paid occupation just to get by. Through a series of interviews, this paper examines the job seeking experiences of skilled migrants, including the issues faced by skilled dual-career migrant couple job seekers (with or without children) as they negotiate their way into the job market here in Australia.

Skilled Migrants: Immigration and Employment

The acceptance of migrants based primarily on skill level has been the focal point of Australia's immigration policy since 1996. Migrants from Mainly English Speaking Backgrounds (MESB) and NESB backgrounds are now more likely to hold tertiary level qualifications, and have much higher skill levels compared to native-born workers (Castles et al 1998, p. 57). Some commentators argue that the change in policy, which has increased skilled migration has proved beneficial for Australia economically as it has led to a decrease in migrant unemployment (Hawthorne 2005, pp. 688-90). However, some researchers question whether migrants are achieving better labour market outcomes that properly recognise their skill and education levels (Ho & Alcorso 2004; Cobb-Clark 2000). Reports also suggest that, regardless of visa category, migrants, skilled or otherwise, were just as likely to be unemployed six months after arrival with the exception of those who migrated under the Business Skills/Employer Nomination Scheme programs. Interestingly, men who had arrived on humanitarian or family migration visas had the same participation rate as those who had migrated via the skills category. Lower participation rates were recorded for women in all visa categories (Cobb-Clark 2000, p. 22). Ho and Alcorso (2004, pp. 238-40) raise concerns over whether current immigration policy has improved labour outcomes for both female and male migrant workers.

It is clear that the well-documented barriers to migrant employment still persist. These barriers include an absence of jobs available for those who hold certain types of qualifications; insufficient English language skills; a lack of familiarity with the Australian economy and labour market, local employers not understanding, or being aware of, the migrant talent available within the workforce; and finally outright discrimination (Castles et al. 1998, pp. 53-58). The main issues centre on language fluency and the transfer of educational achievements for NESB workers (Castles et al. 1998, p. 5; Hugo 1994, p. 27; Wooden 1994, p. 223). Hence, despite having more human capital than Australian born workers, migrants' employment outcomes are worse than for Australian born workers.

The Experiences of Skilled Dual-career Migrants and their Families

Very little is known about the experiences or outcomes of migrating families (Cobb-Clark et al 2001, pp. 1-2). While significant research has examined the ways that families in general 'juggle' or 'balance' work and family issues (Charlesworth, Campbell, Probert, Allan & Morgan 2002; Greenhaus & Parasuraman 1997; Morehead 2001, p. 355; Pocock, 2003; 2005), there appears to be little research examining the work/family nexus within the context of the migrating family in Australia. One reason for this is that 'the worker' in migrant research has been defined as male (Alcorso 1989; Cobb-Clark et al 2001; Datta et al 2007; Hawthorne 2005; Kofman & Raghuram 2005, p. 151; Shamsuddin 1998). Liversage (2009, p. 121) states that 'high-skilled international migration to date has had a male gender bias'. One of the reasons for this is that the division of labour within households has traditionally been weighted towards the male as breadwinner based upon gendered family roles configured to fit the context of an industrialised society (Beauregard, Ozbilgin & Bell 2009, p. 47; Pocock 2003, pp. 43-45; Watson, Buchanan, Campbell & Briggs 2003, pp. 13-14).

The increase in women entering the labour force since the 1950s has meant a concomitant rise in the number of dual-career couples (Green 1997, p. 642; Morehead 2001, p. 356). This has led to research on the negotiation and decision-making processes of couples, including decisions about whether they will both pursue their careers at the same time or whether one person's career should take precedence over the other (Green 1997, p. 642). However, while many of the issues faced by dual-career migrant worker couples are the same, there may be additional and/or different issues that are encountered upon entering into the labour market in their new country. In short, there is a gap in the literature on the experiences of dual-career migrant couples, which may be analysed using the broader literature on dual-career couples. As with other kinds of barriers to workforce participation and advancement, the impact of multiple barriers (such as, in this case, both migrant and dual-career-couple status) may not simply be additive: such barriers may intersect in complex ways to create very difficult issues of adjustment for these workers. Further, Iredale (2005, pp. 156, 162) states that a skilled migrant woman's ability to return to the workforce is dependent upon 'familial responsibilities and re-negotiations within the household unit'. This paper examines the barriers faced by migrant couples.

Method and Data

The research reported in this paper forms part of a larger PhD research project focussing on the employment experiences, expectations and outcomes for skilled migrants from NESBs, and whether there are similarities or differences between the job search experiences of women and men. Qualitative research techniques were chosen for this project as they allow for the exploration of everyday life (Fontana & Frey 2003). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to enable participants to share their lives and events through telling their own stories (Bryman 2004, p. 412). The research is to be conducted in two phases. The first phase interview is designed to understand the experiences that each migrant has faced in their search for work. This includes gaining an understanding of any barriers experienced by them, together with learning about the strategies they will undertake to assist them in finding work. The second phase interview, conducted 12 months after the initial interview, is designed to understand how participants have implemented their strategies and whether they have been successful in their job search. The process of using two interviews at two different points in time means that more detailed stories about the migrant experience can be gathered to allow in-depth analysis of each person's experience. To date, 24 interviews have been conducted in the first phase.

This paper analyses 10 semi-structured interviews with skilled NESB migrants, and forms part of a larger number of interviews that have been conducted in phase one of the research. The participants were sourced from a large Queensland Government department. They were identified from a departmental database and recruited via a letter mailed from the organisation advertising the research. A total of 80 letters were mailed with 14 responses received and ten of these interviews are discussed in this paper. Six of the participants are female and four are male. Table 1 below provides a summary of the interviewees, their country of origin, sex, visa details, qualifications, and experience.

Table 1: Details of Participant Group

Name=	Country of Origin	Sex	Visa Type/Time Since Arrival	Qualifications/ Experience
Fareeza	Iraq*	F	Hum^/6 mths	B Civil Engineering Civil Engineer: 15 yrs
Khalid	Iraq*	M	Hum/6 mths	B Agriculture Landscaping: 2 yrs
George	Albania	M	Skilled Designated Area/2 yrs	Diplome: Enriching Engineer Enriching Engineer: 10 yrs
Nairi	Indonesia	F	Spouse/1 yr	Diploma: Accounting Accountant: 7 yrs
Nareem	India	M	Skilled Independent/1 yr 4 mths	Engineering Mechanic II Petty Officer: 15 yrs
Andrei	Russia	M	Spouse/1 yr	B Mgmt; B Social & Regional Planning Accountant: 6 yrs
Jasmin	India	F	Spouse/9 mths	BSc Ind Microbiology M Ecology & Env'ment B Education Teacher: 6 months
Debbie	China	F	Spouse/1 yr	B Econ/Accounting Accountant: 9 yrs
Sunita	Bangladesh	F	Spouse/1 yr	B Business Admin; MBA Accounting/Admin: 4 yrs
Hayat	Iraq	F	Hum/1 yr	B Civil Engineering Civil Engineer: 5 yrs

= Participant names are pseudonyms

* Iraqi Couple participated in a joint interview

^ Humanitarian

Initially, the research called for NESB migrant participants who had arrived on Skilled Independent Visas (subclass 175 visa). However, interest in the research was also received from skilled migrants who had arrived on Humanitarian grounds (3) or had arrived as a spouse of a 175 visa holder (4). In addition, there was one person who arrived on a spouse visa because she had married an Australian born man. As can be seen in Table 1, most members of this cohort are highly qualified with lengthy work experience.

Prior to interview, each participant was asked to fill out a short demographic survey to collect some background information consisting of arrival and visa details, qualifications and employment experience gained within their home country, and employment experience, qualifications or courses undertaken since arrival, and whether the interviewee had other

family and children that had arrived with them. Semi-structured interviews of between 45 minutes to 1 hour were then conducted. Questions were developed to explore their migration decision, and to seek information about the experiences they have gained in seeking employment since arrival.

The Persistence of Barriers: Language, Local Experience, and Skill Recognition

The most common barriers that face migrants as they seek entry into the labour force consist of language, local work experience, and skill and qualification recognition. These interviews confirm that these barriers to employment continue to persist for skilled migrants. From this interview data it is evident that many of the barriers canvassed in the literature continue. For example, language and lack of local work experience as documented by Alcorso and Ho (2006) is problematic for skilled migrants. It is almost impossible to gain local work experience without being given a job. Skills and qualifications recognition is yet another barrier as we see in the example of the hairdresser with 19 years experience who cannot find work. Finding work that is comparable to previous employment is also a problem. Migrants fear that they will lose their skills if they are not able to commence work in their chosen occupation. Examples of the well-documented barriers discussed by participants in this research such as language, lack of local work experience, finding comparable work and issues with the recognition of skills and qualifications are provided below.

Language

English language proficiency was one of the main barriers reported by each participant. George, an Albanian engineer, felt that he was disadvantaged because he was not a 'native English speaker' and Sunita could not understand why, with an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6, that her English was not considered 'good'. Khalid and Fareeza are both skilled migrants, and they each arrived on a Humanitarian visa. Khalid and Fareeza have two children, one is school age, and the second is at kindergarten. Each has experienced difficulties as they pursue their careers. Fareeza a qualified civil engineer with 15 years experience, and currently out of work explains: 'I have been working in my profession for 15 years. I like it soooooo much!... and I am good in my profession. I came to Australia to develop my skills in my profession...I'm trained but I need strong English to communicate with people.'

Hayat, a qualified civil engineer from Iraq arrived in Brisbane eleven months ago with her husband Zameer and two young children. They arrived on a humanitarian visa and they both have been looking for work since their arrival. Zameer is a qualified English teacher with three years experience and has been successful with gaining registration in Queensland, but has been unsuccessful in finding work. Hayat said that 'He tried to find a job as assistant, teacher's assistant but nobody accept him.' Interviewer: 'And does he feel that he is not finding a job because of language or, what are the reasons?' Hayat replied 'I think so...'

Local Experience

The need to gain local work experience remains problematic. Khalid explained that he and his family came to Australia because of the circumstances in Iraq. He is an agricultural engineer/landscaper, and held a job in his field for two years. He was excited to be in his new country, however he was frustrated with trying to find work:

I heard here in Australia, they need long experience, evidence and skills, full language and skills, as well as overseas assessment qualified [as equivalent]. Now we find some barriers. Some difficulties to get long experience. How can we submit this experience? Even if we got it, this experience, the companies in Australia or some jobs they say that the work as an engineer in Iraq is different...

You need experience here in Australia... how can you get experience here in Australia? This is a problem for us, you know?

Finding Comparable Work

Nareem and his wife arrived in Brisbane at the end of 2007. He is a skilled independent migrant with many years experience as an engineering mechanic. Nareem's wife is a qualified teacher but is unable to get work in her field. He explains the difficulties they have faced, he said: 'I have to apply through Trades Recognition Australia, and waited two months to get my qualifications recognised... why can't they do this [issue him with a certificate] before I arrive?' Nareem said that the waiting time prevented him from gaining work in his field straight away. After undertaking a course in security, as well as a certificate as a Marine Engine Driver he was able to gain work in a similar area to his qualifications. He said how difficult it was to get a job, and felt that skilled people in general cannot get a job. His wife had similar problems and took a job working as a customer service officer at a local supermarket. Nareem laments: 'You have to start at the beginning in this country.'

Skills and Qualifications not Recognised

Andrei migrated from Russia with his wife and two children in order to enjoy a better life. He felt that if they could both find work, they would be 'alright'. Andrei's qualifications were not assessed as equivalent to a Bachelor degree, and he was undertaking additional courses to reach this level, as well as English language courses. Andrei's wife was the primary skilled visa applicant. He was confused as to why his wife, a hairdresser with 19 years experience, was unable to find work: 'She tried to find a job, but it doesn't work. She, her qualification was not recognised... it looks strange... in Russia, we want to move here, we suppose that it will be just an exam here, some practical exam.' Andrei goes on to say: 'She wants to work, she can work, and, but nowhere to begin (pauses), I don't know?' Andrei and his wife were both unsure as to what to do and had approached a government organisation for assistance. They advised that she should apply for an apprenticeship: 'So she's applied for many, many, positions as an apprentice, and has been unsuccessful. ...but you need Australian qualification, Russian qualification does not meet... this profession [is] in shortage list, this was the main reason to give us visa.'

Additional Barriers for Dual-Career Couples

During the interviews it became clear that the experience of job seeking was a joint one. Decisions were taken within the family and priorities discussed. While there is literature that examines how dual-career couples and families balance potentially conflicting responsibilities (Morehead 2001; Pocock 2003, 2005), migrating couples and families face particular issues in the context of seeking employment in their new home country. The interviews raised the question as to how skilled migrant couples and families manage to re-establish their careers upon arrival in Australia. For skilled dual-career migrant couples, there are additional issues that are negotiated when attempting to re-establish their career when compared to couples established in the Australian community.

For these couples, lack of local job experience means that both need to undertake some further training to assist each of them with the process of obtaining employment, and this was evident in each case. Some identified that they needed to undertake additional language training or other courses through Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges or university to become confident and equipped in their ability to find employment. In the following section, participant responses to the difficulties and barriers faced in seeking employment together with the experiences of their spouse/partners are discussed in more

detail. The themes included here highlight the issues of managing on a low income and the juggling of work and/or study with childcare needs.

Couples Managing on a Low Income

Nareem is unhappy with the cost of living expenses. He and his wife share a two-bedroom unit with another family in Brisbane's inner city. He said that the realities of daily life are hard and he explained 'my full-time job is not sufficient; ... I am driving a taxi so that I can afford to pay the rent. ... I work 38 hours in my full time job, then I do one day driving a taxi. Sunday is the only day I have off.' Nareem and his wife's combined wage were just enough to be able to cover their basic needs and pay for the repayments and insurance on his car. He also said that as he is the oldest son in his family he is expected to meet cultural obligations and provide for his living parents.

Jasmin had arrived from India on a skilled visa with her husband and a young child. The couple's first priority was to put food on the table and to pay rent for their home. They also had a young child who required care. Jasmin's occupation was a primary school teacher but she had been unable to register with the state professional body, a prerequisite to obtain work, and was advised that she required additional training. The problem is that the cost of undertaking the additional training is prohibitive. Jasmin had taken a job in the hospitality industry to be able to gain local work experience, and her husband, a skilled carpenter, had undertaken work as a meat packer in the meat industry, but the situation was less than ideal as Jasmin explains: 'it is very difficult that we first undergo all that training... first I have to do training if I want to get a job, then he [husband] may undergo the training, because we won't go at the same time... because we need money to survive here.' Due to financial constraints the couple has decided that Jasmin would pursue her career ahead of her husband, and she was looking at ways she could do this. Jasmin was worried that if she did not pursue her career now, she would lose her skills, and this would make it even more difficult to find work in her chosen field. However tuition costs were yet another worry.

Work, Study and the Childcare Juggle

Khalid and Fareeza explained that they were completing courses in English and computing through a TAFE college, however, once they found employment, they were unsure about how they could take care of the children. Fareeza explains: 'But the day job in Australia here, it is very long. From 9 o'clock to 5 o'clock. And what about the people who have children at school? I don't know, I don't know (laughs). But we can manage this problem at the moment.'

Nairi is an experienced bookkeeper and had worked in small businesses in Indonesia. She had completed Diploma level qualifications in her home country. She arrived here with her Australian husband and two children. Nairi's concern was that the family settle first, finding a school for her children and for her husband to find a job that he liked. Nairi was worried about the future, how they would pay for food, school uniforms and other expenses, and they could not afford a car. It took a few months for Nairi's husband to find work so she decided that 'Before my husband get job, so I thought ok, I'd decided, I'd do anything I can do... so I worked at a retirement village [as a cleaner].' She explained that her husband had found work three weeks after she had started working there and he told her 'Ok, I don't like to see you work there because it is so hard... he said ok, ... come back to study at TAFE, and after that you can look for a job that you like.' Nairi explained that her qualifications from Indonesia were not considered equivalent to Australian qualifications and, as a result, she was undertaking a diploma through TAFE.

Debbie is a trained accountant from China with nine years work experience. She arrived here with her husband, John, and young daughter 12 months prior to the interview. Both Debbie and John are trying hard to enter their professional fields in Australia, and both have sought ways that they can make this happen. John is undertaking further study at a local TAFE college, and is working up to 20 hours per week as a casual cashier at a local supermarket. Debbie had recently been accepted into a local council initiative that provides training and work experience for skilled migrants, and was undertaking the program on a full-time basis. When I asked how Debbie and John managed childcare arrangements around school pick-up times, Debbie replied 'Umm, at the moment, we don't have any trouble because my Mother-in-Law is here... She comes [here] taking care of my daughter. She will go back to China in August, because of the visa.' Debbie and John found that with help from family, they were able to have more flexibility with seeking employment and undertaking programs and/or training to assist them into employment. However, balancing work, study and childcare would become more problematic once John's mother returns to China.

Sunita has juggled childcare, a casual job and study. She had some difficulties in her casual work and felt that she had been discriminated against on the grounds of race. She left her job and is continuing her studies in accounting at TAFE. She was concerned also about having another child and did not know what to do:

I don't know actually, you can understand Susan, it's time for another kid. My son is 4 now...but I, I, I can't understand what I have to do? I have to finish my study, I have to get a job. I want a little one!... It's all the pressure comes to our, girl [to us as women]. Husbands, they are very much relaxed about their job, they haven't much tension...[it is a] difficult strain on everything to take another baby.

Conclusion

While there has been a wide range of research conducted on the individual migrant experience from a male perspective (Alcorso 1989; Cobb-Clark 2001; Datta et al 2007; Hawthorne 2005; Kofman & Raghuram 2005; Liversage 2009; Shamsuddin 1998), the experience of the migrating family unit has not been well documented (Cobb-Clark et al 2001, pp. 1-2). This research illustrates the experiences of migrants who have arrived in Australia as part of a couple or family unit, and has revealed the complexities that migrant couples and families face in both the settlement and employment seeking processes. Therefore, while the earlier research has been more consistent in raising the well-documented barriers to employment, this research brings to light the multi-dimensional experiences of the migration process of NESB migrant couples and families, which can now be analysed within the contexts of the dual-career and the work/family discourse.

This small study has extended upon the more commonly known barriers and raises additional barriers that affect the experiences of dual-career couples and families. For example, couples negotiated between each other in order to decide who would pursue their chosen career ahead of the other (Green 1997). The burden placed upon women migrants' ability to leave the home and enter the workforce, an issue documented by Iredale (2005), was highlighted in several cases where women are made decisions based on family needs. Issues concerning the financial difficulties faced, and managing childcare were also experienced by immigrant families. This paper contends that examining issues for migrants as single individuals, and particularly as single male individuals, is not sufficient to understand the issues they face when settling and looking for work in their new country. There are additional issues for migrating couples, particularly women, to negotiate as they seek employment upon settlement. It is hoped that this paper will contribute towards a more in-depth analysis and

understanding of these complex issues faced by skilled migrant couples as they seek entry into the Australian workforce.

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