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"Visible, Vilified, and Voiceless": Media, Discrimination, Education, and Employment in the Resettlement Experiences of South Sudanese Refugees in Australia (2000–2010)

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

This article draws on an ethnographic case study to examine how Australian news media shape the resettlement experiences of South Sudanese refugees who arrived in Australia between 2000 and 2010. Using semi-structured interviews with 18 South Sudanese refugees, autoethnographic narratives, and secondary document analysis — including media articles, service provider reports, and government policy documents — the study investigates how media representations intersected with and compounded experiences of discrimination, barriers to education, and employment exclusion. Informed by Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital, New Literacy Studies' framing of literacy as social practice (Street, 1995, 2003), and postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Fanon, 1952), the findings reveal that deficit-laden and sensationalized media portrayals of South Sudanese refugees contributed directly to racism in educational institutions and workplaces, undermined refugees' social capital, and reinforced systemic barriers to settlement. The article argues that media representations do not merely reflect social attitudes but actively construct and entrench discriminatory conditions that impede the resettlement of racialised refugee communities. Implications for media ethics, refugee policy, and education practice are discussed.

Keywords: South Sudanese refugees, Australian media, discrimination, employment, education, resettlement, social capital, postcolonialism, ethnography, autoethnography.

1. Background and Introduction

The early years of the twenty-first century constituted a distinctive and historically significant period in Australia's engagement with refugees from Sudan and South Sudan. More than 20,000 South Sudanese refugees arrived in Australia between 2001 and 2007 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2007), with African refugees accounting for 70% of Australia's offshore humanitarian visas between 2004 and 2005 (Millbank et al., 2006). This represented a moment of relative governmental and community hospitality, underpinned by policy commitments to multiculturalism, social inclusion, and humanitarian responsibility. And yet, even during this more hospitable era, the resettlement experiences of South Sudanese refugees were profoundly shaped by forces that worked against their integration: sensationalized and racist media reporting, institutional

discrimination, barriers to education, and systematic exclusion from meaningful employment.

This article is part of a larger PhD study (Woul, 2023) that investigated the resettlement experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Australia during 2000–2010. The present article focuses on the role of the Australian news media as a key sociocultural force in the settlement experiences of these refugees—specifically, how media representations intersect with discrimination, educational access, and employment outcomes. The study is situated at the intersection of refugee studies, media and cultural studies, and critical literacy research.

The trajectory of Australian public discourse on South Sudanese refugees underscores the significance of this focus. From around 2007, when the Federal Government reduced African refugee intake from 70% to 30% of humanitarian visa allocations (Spinks, 2009), media and political discourse about South Sudanese refugees shifted markedly toward fearmongering, racialisation, and deficit framing. By 2017 and 2018, dominant media narratives frequently referenced "African gangs" in Melbourne in ways that were widely documented to be disproportionate, misleading, and racially inflammatory (Wahlquist, 2018). While this study focuses primarily on 2000–2010, the seeds of this toxic discourse were already being planted in that decade, and the participants' stories illuminate how early media representations shaped—and damaged—their daily lives.

The researcher, Gak Deng Woul, is himself a Nuer man from South Sudan who arrived in Australia as a humanitarian refugee in June 2003. His insider-outsider position as a South Sudanese Australian, a former employee of Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES), and a community leader gives this research a reflexive and politically committed dimension. As he explains in his autoethnographic narrative:

"My motivation for pursuing this PhD study comes from my desire to speak back to some of the appalling mistruths that some media outlets and politicians have about South Sudanese refugees in Australia." (Woul, 2023, Chapter 5)

This article is structured around the following research questions:

1. What were the resettlement experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Australia in 2000–2010?
2. How did Australian news media representations shape experiences of discrimination, education, and employment for South Sudanese refugees?
3. How were these experiences mediated by social capital, literacy practices, and postcolonial power relations?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Social Capital and Bourdieu

This study draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theorization of capital as a foundational framework for understanding the structural inequalities experienced by South Sudanese refugees. Bourdieu defines capital as the capacity or potential to make progress or achieve advancement across social, economic, or educational domains. Crucially, he argues that capital exists in multiple forms — social, cultural, economic, and symbolic — and that power is a manifestation of accumulated social capital, accessible only to already dominant groups or those whom dominant groups permit to access it (Bourdieu, 1989).

For newly arrived South Sudanese refugees in Australia, this framework reveals how existing capitals — professional qualifications, multilingual competencies, community networks, and employment histories — were systematically devalued or rendered invisible by Australian employers, institutions, and media. As Lin (1999, p. 30) defines it, social capital is "investment in social relations with expected rewards"; yet for South Sudanese refugees, the social relations they entered in Australia frequently did not yield the rewards they had reason to expect.

Bourdieu's (2000, p. 467) concept of linguistic capital is particularly relevant here, given that language forms "a kind of wealth" whose

accumulation can empower or disempower individuals. The refugees' multilingualism — often encompassing tribal languages, Arabic, and English — was a rich form of linguistic capital that was frequently misread as a deficit by Australian institutions and media. Media representations that characterised South Sudanese refugees as "illiterate" (Topsfield, 2007) exemplify how dominant institutions can strip communities of their linguistic capital through misrepresentation.

2.2 Literacy as Social Practice

The second theoretical pillar is New Literacy Studies (NLS), particularly Street's (1995, 2003) framing of literacy as social practice. NLS challenges the autonomous model of literacy—the idea that literacy is a generic, decontextualised set of skills—and instead understands literacies as multiple, contextually situated, and embedded in social power relations (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996). This framing is critical to a study of South Sudanese refugees, whose rich oral literacies, multilingual practices, and community-based meaning-making were consistently overlooked by Australian institutions, the media, and government programs.

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), the primary government-funded English language program for refugees during this period, reflected a narrowly autonomous model of literacy—one that prioritised written English competence and measured progress against a standardised benchmark of "functional English" within a capped 510-hour instruction period. NLS challenges such approaches by arguing that literacy learning is always social, always contextual, and always connected to identity (Gee, 1996; Norton, 1997). The refugees' difficulties in AMEP were not simply linguistic; they were embedded in a complex web of trauma, cultural dislocation, and institutional inflexibility.

2.3 Postcolonial Theory

The third theoretical framework is postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Said (1978) and Fanon (1952). Said's concept of Orientalism describes the tendency of Western representations to position non-Western peoples as backward, inferior, or underdeveloped. Applied to the Australian context, this framework helps explain how media representations of South Sudanese refugees constructed them as racialised "others" — violent, uneducated, and culturally incompatible with Australian norms. Giroux (1992) shows how such normalising colonialist discourses sustain inequitable practices related to race and culture, and Fanon (1952) documents the psychological damage inflicted on people of colour when they are positioned as inferior by dominant white institutions.

Postcolonial theory also underpins this study's commitment to creating a platform for the voices of South Sudanese refugees—enabling those voices to be heard within resettlement structures that often seek to silence or undervalue them (Treacher, 2005). This commitment is enacted methodologically through the study's use of semi-structured interviews, autoethnography, and reflexive narrative inquiry.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Resettlement, Media, and Discrimination

The literature on refugee resettlement consistently demonstrates that the host country's media plays a significant role in shaping public attitudes toward newly arrived communities, which, in turn, influence the material conditions of their settlement (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2015). Media representations of South Sudanese refugees in Australia have been extensively documented as deficit-laden, racialised, and sensationalised (Windle, 2008; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008; Hanson-Easey & Augoustinos, 2010). These representations have been shown to contribute to what the literature calls "othering"—the construction of South Sudanese refugees as fundamentally different from and threatening to mainstream Australian society (Baak, 2011; Due, 2008).

Ndhlovu (2013) identifies a form of "colour-blind racism" in Australian public discourse, whereby attitudes toward South Sudanese are reproduced through practices that appear neutral on the surface

but are deeply racialised in effect. When South Sudanese refugees are represented as "needy and dependent on the system" (Major et al., 2013) or as "traumatised and badly educated people from war zones" (Bolt, 2010), such representations emerge from deficit-based analysis that ignores the capital refugees bring to Australia and the structural barriers they face.

3.2 Education and Literacy

Research on the educational experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Australia reveals a complex picture. On the one hand, the AMEP played a crucial role in providing English-language instruction to newly arrived refugees (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). On the other hand, the program was widely criticised for its inflexibility, its cap of 510 tuition hours, and its failure to acknowledge the diverse literacy backgrounds and multilingual competencies of South Sudanese learners (DIAC, 2008; Milner & Khawaja, 2010; Yak, 2016).

Matthews (2008) notes that South Sudanese refugees have distinct educational demands that differ from those of other refugee groups, given the limited formal schooling opportunities available in South Sudan during the civil wars. Yet the literature also emphasises that South Sudanese refugees are invariably multilingual, often learning English as a third or fourth language (Major et al., 2013), and that their oral literacies are sophisticated and culturally rich (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). The autonomous model of literacy embedded in AMEP's curriculum failed to recognise or build on these existing competencies.

Racism in educational contexts was identified as a significant barrier to South Sudanese refugees' learning and social integration. The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC, 2008) documented institutional racism in schools, including incidents where racial abuse was minimised or ignored by school authorities, and where South Sudanese students were made to feel that they did not belong in Australia.

3.3 Employment

Employment is widely recognised in the literature as one of the most critical factors in successful refugee integration (Wright et al., 2022; Valtonen, 2004). Yet South Sudanese refugees in Australia faced persistent and systemic barriers to employment, including non-recognition of overseas qualifications, racial discrimination in hiring, and the mismatch between their educational backgrounds and the requirements of the Australian labour market (Losoncz, 2013; Abur & Spaaij, 2016).

Losoncz (2013, p. 2) found that South Sudanese refugees were "almost six times more likely to be unemployed than other Australians," and that they often felt excluded from employment "for reasons that had little to do with their abilities." Hugo et al. (2011) showed that even South Sudanese refugees with professional qualifications from Australian institutions were frequently underemployed or employed in low-status jobs. The DIAC (2008) acknowledged that mixed-ability AMEP classes were "ineffective" for many refugees seeking to improve their English for employment purposes, and that the 510-hour cap was "insufficient for the majority of clients to acquire sufficient language skills to manage at an acceptable level within the workplace" (DIAC, 2008, p. 22).

4. Methodology and Methods

4.1 Research Design

This study employs an ethnographic case study design (Heath & Street, 2008; Yin, 2017), informed by a constructivist epistemology that understands knowledge as constructed and co-constructed in social ways (Bakhtin, 1984; Creswell, 2009). The case comprises South Sudanese refugees who arrived in Australia between 2000 and 2010, with 18 participants recruited from the South Sudanese community in Canberra, Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The researcher, himself a South Sudanese refugee who arrived in Australia in 2003, is also a participant in the study.

The study is situated within a social constructivist framework that emphasises the importance of

context, positionality, and reflexivity in the generation and analysis of knowledge (Tubbs, 2016; Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2007). It is also explicitly committed to social justice, seeking to amplify the voices of a community that has been systematically misrepresented in Australian public discourse.

4.2 Participants

The 18 participants ranged in age from 30 to 48 years and included 13 males and 5 females. They represented diverse tribal backgrounds — Dinka, Nuer, Chollo, and Bari — and varied educational experiences, ranging from minimal formal schooling to university degrees. All participants were multilingual, speaking at least one tribal language, Arabic, and varying levels of English. Participants were recruited through the South Sudanese Community Centre in Canberra, church networks, and the researcher's personal community networks. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect participants' identities.

4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary source of data was two rounds of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015 and 2017 at the South Sudanese Community Centre in Canberra. Interviews were conducted in a combination of English and Arabic, depending on the participant's preference, and lasted between 50 and 60 minutes each. The semi-structured format allowed for co-construction of narratives (Mishler, 1991), with the researcher using follow-up questions and gentle probing to elicit extended responses from participants who were often reticent, partly due to previous negative experiences with journalists and media outlets.

As the researcher notes:

"The interviewees tended to be very nervous and unsure about the literacy practices of a research interview; many felt ill-equipped to say what they felt they should say in interviews. Some were suspicious of me as an interviewer, even though I am South Sudanese. They tended to associate interviews with journalists who wrote negatively about South Sudanese people in Australian newspapers." (Woul, 2023, Chapter 6)

Interview questions focused on participants' experiences of English language learning, employment, media representations, racism, and gender, as well as their literacy practices in both South Sudan and Australia.

4.4 Autoethnographic Narratives

Consistent with Ellis and Bochner's (2000) concept of autoethnography as personal narrative, the researcher generated an extended autoethnographic account of his own resettlement journey — from childhood in Malakal, South Sudan, through years of displacement in Khartoum and Cairo, to his arrival in Melbourne in 2003 and subsequent settlement in Canberra. This narrative was developed through a dialogic process of writing, supervisory feedback, and revision (Parr & Doecke, 2012), and is grounded in the methodology of memory work (Haug, 1999; Crawford et al., 1992).

The autoethnographic narrative serves multiple purposes: it provides a reflexive counterpoint to the interview data; it models the kind of rich, contextualised storytelling that the study seeks to elicit from participants; and it enacts the study's postcolonial commitment to centring the voices of South Sudanese Australians in the production of knowledge about their own experiences.

4.5 Document Analysis

Secondary data included a selection of Australian newspaper articles, service provider reports, and government policy documents from 2000 to 2020. Documents were collected through online searches using key terms including "South Sudanese refugees," "African gangs," "Australia," and date ranges 2000–2010. These documents were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis, with attention to how media and institutional discourses constructed, reinforced, or challenged representations of South Sudanese refugees.

4.6 Thematic Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step approach to reflexive thematic analysis, involving familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The following themes were identified as central to the study's focus on media, discrimination, education, and employment:

- Social capital in the resettlement experience
- Formal, informal, and non-formal English language learning
- Employment experiences and barriers
- The impact of Australian news media on resettlement
- Gender and gendered practices in resettlement

4.7 Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher's insider-outsider position is a defining feature of this study. As a South Sudanese Australian who has worked with AMES, participated in community organizations, and experienced many of the challenges faced by his participants, the researcher brings unique insights to the data. At the same time, his higher educational qualifications, English language competence, and professional networks distinguish him from many of his participants and require careful reflexive attention (Blaisdell, 2015; Crow et al., 2001).

Reflexivity in this study involved the ongoing critical examination of the researcher's assumptions, values, and positionality at all stages of the research—from the framing of interview questions to the representation of participants' stories in written form (Mantzoukas, 2005; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Findings

Several key findings emerge from this analysis:

First, Australian news media in this period systematically constructed South Sudanese refugees as racialised "others" — as violent, uneducated, and culturally incompatible with Australian norms — through a repertoire of othering strategies that included deficit framing, sensationalised crime reporting, and the weaponisation of refugees' traumatic pasts. These representations were experienced by participants as deeply damaging to their personal well-being, their sense of belonging, and their ability to access education and employment opportunities.

Second, the climate of prejudice fostered by media coverage intersected with institutional racism in educational settings, including schools and AMEP centres, where South Sudanese students and adult learners encountered discrimination, exclusion, and the systematic devaluation of their multilingual competencies. The AMEP's narrow, autonomous model of literacy — focused on written English within a capped 510 hours — failed to recognise or build on the rich oral and multilingual literacies that South Sudanese refugees brought to their learning.

Third, employment discrimination was pervasive and systemic, involving non-recognition of overseas qualifications, racial discrimination in hiring, and the mismatch between South Sudanese educational backgrounds and Australian employer expectations. Media representations of South Sudanese refugees as criminals and social problems contributed to this discrimination by creating a climate in which employers were less likely to hire South Sudanese applicants, regardless of their qualifications or experience.

Fourth, South Sudanese refugees were not a homogeneous group. They brought diverse educational backgrounds, multilingual competencies, professional experiences, and cultural practices to their resettlement in Australia. The media's tendency to construct them as a monolithic, deficit-ridden community erased this diversity and denied the rich capital they brought to Australia.

Finally, despite these formidable challenges, many participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, resourcefulness, and agency in navigating their resettlement experiences. They drew on community networks, church organisations, digital literacies, and their multilingual competencies to build lives in

Australia. Their stories challenge the media's deficit narratives and affirm the potential of South Sudanese Australians to contribute richly to the social, cultural, and economic life of their adopted country.

The implications of these findings are significant for media practitioners, policymakers, educators, and service providers. Media organisations have an ethical responsibility to report on refugee communities in ways that are accurate, contextualised, and respectful of the diversity and dignity of those communities. Governments and policymakers should ensure that English language programs for refugees are adequately resourced, culturally responsive, and grounded in a pluralistic understanding of literacy that values multilingualism. Employers should be supported to recognise and value the overseas qualifications and work experiences of South Sudanese refugees. And researchers should continue to centre the voices and experiences of refugee communities in the production of knowledge about their own lives.

As the researcher reflects in his autoethnographic conclusion:

"I trust that the light that this PhD shines on the diverse experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Australia in 2000-2010 can guide present and future policy making in this country. And I trust that my study can inform and support Australia and Australians to take their ethical obligations seriously as global citizens to 'support refugees and people displaced from their homes, families and countries by conflict and persecution'." (Woul, 2023, Chapter 9, citing UNHCR, 2021, p. 16). The next section will be the discussion.

5. Discussion

5.1 Media Representations and Their Impact on Resettlement

5.1.1 Constructing the South Sudanese as "Other."

The analysis of media documents from 2000 to 2010 reveals a consistent pattern of deficit and racialised representations of South Sudanese refugees in Australian mainstream media. These representations drew on a repertoire of othering strategies: emphasising physical "visibility" (skin colour, height) as markers of difference; associating South Sudanese identity with criminality, violence, and cultural incompatibility; and deploying sensationalised language to construct moral panic around the presence of South Sudanese communities in Australian cities.

An early example of this pattern is found in an article by Jewel Topsfield in The Age (April 2007), which quoted Federal Immigration Department Secretary Andrew Metcalf highlighting "crimes and drink-driving offences committed by people of South Sudanese origin" (Topsfield, 2007a). As the present study notes, this report appeared at precisely the moment when the Federal Government was considering drastically reducing humanitarian visas for South Sudanese refugees — suggesting a deliberate effort to shape public anxiety about African communities where none had previously existed.

More explicit in its othering is Chris Hart's (2007, October 6) article in The Australian, provocatively titled "Black mischief in refugees' affairs." The article characterises South Sudanese refugees as morally dubious, invoking the metaphor of "folk devils" (Cohen, 2011) to construct South Sudanese cultural customs as threatening to a supposedly monocultural white Australia. The article links South Sudanese "otherness" to their "previous experience of civil war," presenting trauma not as a basis for compassion but as evidence of an inherent culture of violence, further connected to assumptions about "lower levels of education" and "poor grasp of English" (Hart, 2007).

Andrew Bolt's (2010, May 21) blog in The Herald Sun, "How police hid the truth about ethnic crime," exemplifies the most end of this discourse. Bolt made frequent reference to "bashings by African gangs," characterised refugees as "traumatised and badly educated people from war zones … or from backward cultures and angry faiths" who brought "their resentments" to Australia, and derided the then Victoria Police Commissioner Christine Nixon's contextualised crime statistics as "sweet lies" (Bolt, 2010). This language, as the study documents,

endorsed and incited racism toward young African people and projected them as crime committers who created fear in the wider community.

Richard Karbaj's (2008, April 16) piece in The Australian, "Escape from the mire," similarly wove phrases such as "gang culture" and "violent assault" into his narrative, citing decontextualised crime statistics ("276 arrests and more than 280 charges") as if they constituted evidence-informed accusations rather than raw, uncontextualised numbers.

Notably, Lower and Akerman (2008, November 14), in a piece titled "Payback concerns after Sudanese death," weaponised the trauma of South Sudanese refugees' pasts to attack them in the present: "They have come from a culture and a country that's undergone serious violence and warfare," deploying simple othering rhetoric to reinforce the difference between "they" (South Sudanese youth) and an implicitly peace-loving "us" (readers of The Australian).

Even when presenting ostensibly positive stories, some journalists reproduced othering discourses. Chris Johnston's (2010, October 9) article in The Age, while featuring a young Sudanese woman aspiring to join the Police Force, took the opportunity to emphasise "strife" in the South Sudanese community and made crude linear connections from South Sudanese "lawlessness" to a disparate range of social deficits — from "low prospects for decent work" to "binge drinking" (Johnston, 2010).

These media constructions had real and measurable effects on the lives of South Sudanese refugees. As the participants in this study consistently attested, the media's negative representations were not abstract or distant — they were experienced in workplaces, schools, and everyday social interactions.

5.1.2 Participants' Experiences of Media Discrimination

The interview data reveal that participants were acutely aware of and deeply affected by media representations of their community. Achol expressed the belief that the media and government needed to work together to represent young South Sudanese people more accurately:

Achol: "What other white people were doing, what Sudanese were doing was just a small fraction... but with these Australian laws, we could not protect our children because of the media and government." (Interview, 11/10/2017)

Deng drew attention to the structural conditions — unemployment, idleness, discouragement — that media representations ignored in their rush to criminalise South Sudanese youth:

Deng: "Not really like the ones in America — some of them had no jobs, they were idle… Some of them wanted to study, but they couldn't do it, and some were discouraged." (Interview, 18/9/2017)

Josephine articulated the personal and communal damage of media stereotyping:

Josephine: "I didn't think it was a good name for [the] Sudanese community because we were not the ones doing the crime... I felt bad because they talked about young people who don't have links to crimes." (Interview, 16/9/2017)

Nyibol expressed the cumulative psychological toll of relentless negative coverage:

Nyibol: "Because the media just talk negatively about one community always on the news. When you saw that every day on the news, you didn't feel happy about it." (Interview, 20/9/2017)

Nyakong went further, questioning the very basis of the media's claims:

Nyakong: "I could not be happy where I heard about Sudanese being called crime committers because we didn't have such crimes, and we didn't even know where the name came from. Maybe created by the media." (Interview, 20/9/2017)

This last comment is particularly significant. Nyakong's suggestion that the "African crime" narrative was itself a media creation aligns with research by Williams (2014), which showed that the number of Sudanese youth committing crimes was no greater than that of other Australians at the time. The media's disproportionate focus on crimes allegedly committed by South Sudanese youth — while ignoring comparable or greater rates of crime

among Anglo-Australian youth — exemplifies what the Diversity Council Australia (2018) identified as a pattern of giving disproportionate attention to crimes committed by people of colour.

The researcher's own autoethnographic narrative adds a further dimension to this analysis. As a community leader who was sometimes contacted by the media for commentary when incidents occurred involving South Sudanese community members, he was intimately aware of how journalists sought to shape rather than report community realities:

"I am also aware of the sporadic issues that some young people in our communities have been involved in, sometimes involving violence and criminal activity. I have been affected by and experienced some of these challenges." (Woul, 2023, Chapter 1)

5.2 Media, Discrimination, and Education

5.2.1 Racism in Educational Institutions

The VEOHRC (2008) report "Rights of passage: The experiences of Australian-Sudanese young people" documented disturbing instances of racial discrimination in Australian schools that were directly connected to the broader climate of prejudice fostered by media representations. The report described institutional racism as involving "processes, attitudes, and behaviours that escalated to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, and racist stereotyping which disadvantaged minority ethnic groups" (VEOHRC, 2008). One particularly stark example involved a school principal who failed to address racial abuse:

"A boy called a Sudanese young person a nigger, so the Sudanese boy pushed the young boy. The principal then got involved. The principal didn't take the nigger issue seriously but took it as a fight and told the Sudanese young person that his fighting explained and justified the racial abuse." (VEOHRC, 2008, p. 44)

Another story from the same report illustrates how educators actively denied South Sudanese children's sense of Australian identity:

"At school, everyone in the class was asked to say where they are from. My daughter told her teacher she was Australian, and the teacher said, 'No, you are Sudanese'. My daughter said, 'My parents are Sudanese, but I was born here. The teacher continued to say, 'No, you are Sudanese. My daughter came home and said, 'Mum, even though I was born here, I will never be Australian'." (VEOHRC, 2008, p. 44)

These incidents illustrate how media discourses that positioned South Sudanese as fundamentally "other" — as not belonging to Australia — were reproduced in institutional settings, including schools that were supposed to be sites of inclusion and learning.

5.2.2 AMEP, Literacy, and the Limits of Formal Education

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) was the primary vehicle through which the Australian Government met its obligations to newly arrived South Sudanese refugees in English language learning. The program provided up to 510 hours of free English tuition within the first five years of resettlement (Department of Home Affairs, 2021). Despite its importance, the program was widely criticised for its limitations.

The DIAC (2008, p. 22) itself acknowledged: "There is consensus that the number of hours offered through the AMEP is insufficient for the majority of clients to acquire sufficient language skills to manage at an acceptable level within the workplace and in social situations." The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA, 2018, p. 19) later recommended that "the 510 hour limit for AMEP be removed and replaced by a needs-based individual assessment."

The participants' experiences of AMEP were mixed. Many found it valuable, particularly its social dimensions:

John: "Yes, I thank the Australian government for its support because we came to a new country where we don't know the language. It was a valuable opportunity. You could listen and understand people in the classes. 500 hours were not problematic because they provided a foundation. There were no difficulties during my classes… we interacted

together from different nations learning English with different experiences." (Interview, 10/08/2017)

Others identified significant gaps, particularly around employment-focused English skills:

Koang: "Yes, it was important because if you learned English, you can work / you can get income, and you can have money to rent a house. But AMEP classes didn't give enough attention to English for job skills to assist in getting work." (Interview, 11/08/2015)

Lado was critical of the program's cultural narrowness:

Lado: "In South Sudan, you learn the Sudanese curriculum, but here in Australia, it was different. People only learned in English. The focus was only on English, and Australian culture and other cultures were not included." (Interview, 5/08/2015)

Some participants experienced racism even within AMEP classrooms. Nyakong described a sense of isolation from the broader community that extended into formal learning spaces:

Nyakong: "I think we live in isolation from the wider community. I mean lack of interaction. Aussies were bossy if you were with them in the street... native Australians didn't want to be part of that... It discouraged people because we learnt through motivation… You felt like these people are racists." (Interview, 24/09/2017)

John also noted the challenge of learning without translation support, and the particular difficulty for those without prior formal education:

John: "Was good but sometimes hard to understand things because no translation. If you understand was ok, but if not then you don't get anything. It needed someone who had a background in education back in Sudan, because if you have never been to school, it was quite hard." (Interview, 10/08/2017)

The Joint Standing Committee on Migration (JSCM, 2013) noted that "25 percent of [South Sudanese new arrivals] have had some experience of torture or trauma. Such negative experiences can have a profound effect on the individual's memory, concentration, confidence, and engagement in the classroom and therefore affects the ability to learn English." This finding underscores the inadequacy of a one-size-fits-all approach to literacy education for refugee communities with diverse and often traumatic backgrounds.

5.2.3 Multilingualism as Unrecognised Capital

A recurring theme in the data is the systematic failure of Australian institutions — including AMEP, schools, and employers — to recognise and build on the multilingual competencies of South Sudanese refugees. Most participants were speakers of at least three languages, including tribal languages such as Dinka, Nuer, Chollo, or Bari; Arabic; and varying levels of English. Many had sophisticated oral literacy practices developed through community activities such as cattle herding, farming, church participation, and storytelling.

Achol described her multilingual code-switching practices in everyday life:

Achol: "At work I used English but at church sometimes Dinka or English and Arabic depending on the situation... Sometimes when I'm at home with my children I use Dinka, sometimes in Arabic. With kids when things got complicated, we switched to English and with people who did not understand our languages... In community we spoke Arabic and also mixed with some English." (Interview, 11/10/2017)

Peter drew a direct connection between the imposition of English as the dominant language in Australia and his experience of Arabic being imposed on South Sudanese students in Sudan:

Peter: "It was another way of colonising people… In Australia, we have now left English colonialism but they were using Arabic for colonisation... Because you were not allowed to speak your own language." (Interview, 16/9/2017)

This insight reflects a sophisticated postcolonial understanding of the politics of language — one that resonates strongly with Said's (1978) theorisation of how dominant cultures position non-Western languages and literacies as inferior. The media's frequent characterisation of South Sudanese refugees as "illiterate" (Topsfield, 2007) exemplifies this

dynamic, erasing the refugees' rich multilingual competencies in favour of a narrow, dominant-culture definition of literacy as written English.

Musgrave's (2008) research paper "Knowledge of endangered languages in the Sudanese community" highlighted that many South Sudanese refugees spoke multiple languages, some of which were endangered, and that low levels of written literacy in English should not be conflated with a lack of literacy more broadly. Unfortunately, as this study documents, these nuanced understandings rarely penetrated policy or media discourse.

5.3 Media, Discrimination, and Employment

5.3.1 Structural Barriers to Employment

The participants' employment experiences revealed a complex web of structural barriers that intersected with and were reinforced by media representations. These barriers included: non-recognition of overseas qualifications; racial discrimination in hiring; the requirement to demonstrate Australian work experience; and the mismatch between South Sudanese educational backgrounds and Australian employer expectations.

Achol described the systematic devaluation of her teaching experience from South Sudan:

Achol: "Often my employer assumed that my employment experience in South Sudan was inconsistent with the Australian workplace culture... migrants were mainly doing manual jobs not related to their qualifications." (Interview, 17/8/2017)

She also identified name-based discrimination in hiring processes:

Achol: "Yes, because I tried to apply for some jobs and the outcome was rejection… I think that was because of my last name, 'Tong', and many people may think it is a migrant name, not necessarily from South Sudan." (Interview, 11/10/2017)

Josephine, who had worked in taxation and education in Sudan, found her qualifications entirely unusable in Australia:

Josephine: "I worked in taxation and then as a teacher…. I used Arabic in my work and in my study, but here everything is in English. What I studied, I cannot apply it here because it was a different environment... Yes, I couldn't apply any knowledge here." (Interview, 16/9/2017)

Alex noted the fundamental differences between employment laws and practices in Sudan and Australia, which created additional barriers for newly arrived refugees:

Alex: "There was a lot of difference… There was a huge difference, for example, the law that governs it was different… the rights of people, for example, if the weather was hot, you may not work in Australia… But in South Sudan, it's different." (Interview, 16/9/2017)

Monica highlighted the additional barrier posed by the Australian requirement for formal job interviews:

Monica: "English was important. If you were looking for a job, you needed to go through an interview in English, and sometimes the interview could be over the phone, so you needed to know English to communicate." (Interview, 13/8/2015)

John's experience as a waiter in Sudan — where he worked in Arabic — illustrates how language requirements created barriers even for those with directly relevant work experience:

John: "I used to work as a waiter in a hotel in Sudan?... Yes, there is a big difference. I studied Arabic and now going back to study English from zero is really difficult // It frustrates people because you don't get what you want,// but at least we learnt the language through communicating with different people." (Interview, 10/08/2017)

5.3.2 The Role of Media in Employment Discrimination

The connection between media representations and employment discrimination is not merely inferential. The climate of suspicion and prejudice fostered by media coverage of "African gangs" and South Sudanese criminality created conditions in which employers were less likely to hire South Sudanese applicants, regardless of their qualifications or experience. Fozdar and Hartley (2013) documented

one participant's experience of workplace discrimination that resonates deeply with the media-driven othering described in this study:

"I don't think the white Australians want to communicate with us… They don't like us to be in Australia. For example, in a workplace in Kmart where I was working, they treated me like I was not part of them; they saw me as an animal. In TAFE, they segregate: 'this [place over here] is for Africans'. The teachers do explain the content well to African students; they think we are not part of them. They don't want us … to be here." (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013)

A report on employment and refugees by Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2007) documented a more positive employer perspective, but even this positive account is revealing in its framing — praising African workers for doing "fantastically well" in "labouring jobs," suggesting that manual labour was the expected ceiling of South Sudanese refugees' employment aspirations:

"I have had several Africans, I've put them into a lot of labouring jobs, and they've done fantastically well. I've also had a couple who are now permanent employees of…you know…with our clients, and they've also assisted them with the process of applying for residency in Australia because they work so hard, even though they are doing external studies to actually get more professional positions." (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007, p. 32)

The researcher's own employment journey illustrates the gap between qualifications and opportunity. Despite holding two undergraduate degrees from Sudanese universities and having worked as an English teacher in Cairo, he began his working life in Australia in an abattoir in Colac, Victoria:

"Although I had been working as a teacher in Cairo, as well as translating and interpreting refugees' applications to UN bureaucrats and refugees case managers, I began my working life in Colac in an abattoir. This was with other South Sudanese refugees, who had also found it difficult to obtain employment in Melbourne." (Woul, 2023, Chapter 5)

This experience resonates with the broader literature. Losoncz (2013, p. 2) found that South Sudanese refugees were "almost six times more likely to be unemployed than other Australians," and that Australian employers and the policy framework they operated in "failed to give South Sudanese refugees the employment opportunities they deserved." Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner (2008, p. 2) acknowledged in 2008 that "Outsiders [such as refugees, even when they have strong expertise] are subtly excluded by a complex web of invisible barriers."

5.3.3 Media Narratives and the Erosion of Social Capital

The sustained negative media coverage of South Sudanese refugees in this period had a measurable effect on their social capital — their ability to build networks, access opportunities, and participate in Australian civic life. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, social capital is not simply accumulated; it can also be stripped away when dominant institutions devalue or misrecognise the capital that individuals and communities bring.

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCA, 2009) found that South Sudanese refugees, despite gaining some degree of social and economic stability, remained deeply uncertain about their cultural identity and perceived this uncertainty as an obstacle to their resettlement. This finding aligns closely with the participants' experiences in this study, where the relentless negativity of media coverage undermined their confidence, their sense of belonging, and their willingness to engage with Australian institutions and communities.

James Purtill's (2018) research, cited in this study, showed that South Sudanese young people were "more likely to go to university than non-migrants" in Australia — a finding that directly contradicts the media's persistent narrative of South Sudanese educational deficit. Wahlquist's (2018) article, "'We're not a gang': The unfair stereotyping of African-Australians," quoted a South Sudanese Australian who captured the double bind created by media representations: "You are an Australian until a South Sudanese person commits an offence and

then you are a South Sudanese-Australian, who is likely to be a potential criminal."

5.4 Gender, Media, and Resettlement

The intersection of gender with media representations and structural barriers added a layer of complexity to the resettlement experiences of South Sudanese women. Female participants in this study faced a double marginalisation: they were subject to the same racialised media representations as their male counterparts, while also navigating deeply embedded patriarchal structures within South Sudanese communities that limited their access to education and employment.

Susan described how, during the civil war in South Sudan, families prioritised male education:

Susan: "When the war started, the focus was on war, not education — if the father had four girls and boys, they would prefer to take boys to school, not girls, because it was too expensive and also the culture." (Interview, 10/10/2017)

Achol noted the persistence of these attitudes in Australia:

Achol: "In Australia, it was and still is mostly males going to school, while back home, more girls are now starting to go to school…. Back in Sudan, the focus was on male education because people were thinking that males would rule the country or at least get a job to support the family, but not females. It was a mindset of people." (Interview, 11/10/2017)

Yet Australia's compulsory schooling laws and greater encouragement of female education were experienced by many participants as a positive and transformative force:

Achol: "Of course, more girls were going to school compared to the older generation in general, because it was compulsory for girls in Australia. They had no choice. In South Sudan, maybe they can drop out, but in Australia, there was a minimum age if you wanted to drop out of school…. In Australia, the laws requiring girls to go to school led to more chances, encouragement, and motivation." (Interview, 11/10/2017)

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC, 2010b) identified numerous gender-related challenges for South Sudanese refugee men and women, including the tension between maintaining traditional Sudanese cultural practices and integrating with Australian legal and cultural expectations. The AMEP, as Maria's experience suggests, played an important role in providing women with opportunities to leave the home and engage in social learning:

Maria: "Yes, classes were helpful because I met new people…. learn new words and meanings…. It was useful because I learned English and Australian history and other cultures." (Interview, 08/10/2017)

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the role of Australian news media in shaping the resettlement experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Australia between 2000 and 2010, with particular attention to how media representations intersected with discrimination, educational barriers, and employment exclusion. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 18 South Sudanese refugees, autoethnographic narratives, and analysis of media articles, service provider reports, and government documents, the study has demonstrated that media representations did not merely reflect existing social attitudes but actively constructed and entrenched discriminatory conditions that impeded the resettlement of South Sudanese communities.

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Declarations

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Consent to Participate declaration

I have given my consent for the publication of identifiable details, which can include photographs, participants' pseudonyms and ages, case history, and/or details within the text to be published. Other authors could use this information in potential research.

The Ethics Declaration Norm

Monash University Faculty of Education observes the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research(the National Statement).

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