PREDICTING MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT FOR REFUGEES:
THE INFLUENCE OF PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND
DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS ON EMPLOYMENT
STATUS AND HOURLY WAGES

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine refugee personal characteristics and developmental factors as predictors of meaningful work for refugees 6 months after their arrival in the United States. This study defines meaningful work as work that provides an adequate living wage and is in a nonremedial (i.e., competitive placement and opportunity for employment upgrade) position. Previous research in this area has focused on demographic factors as predictors of refugee employment outcomes but very few studies have examined the influence of the developmental factors of years spent in refugee flight or refugee career aspirations.

Archival data on a sample of 85 refugee adults (18 to 54 years old) who were resettled in a medium sized urban setting in the western United States were accessed for this study. This data set only included refugee adults who had secured employment during the first 6 months in the United States and excluded refugee adults who had not gained employment during this period. Personal characteristic data included sex, age, education level, and English level. Developmental factors included refugee career aspirations and years spent as a refugee. These variables were predictors for two employment outcome variables, refugee employment status (remedial versus adequate employment) and hourly wage rate.

The results of this study were analyzed using Pearson correlations, logistical regression and linear regression procedures. With each increase in years spent as a refugee the odds of gaining adequate employment significantly decrease. High education level and male gender predict hourly wage.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................ iv

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................ vi

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ...................................................................................... vii

Chapters

I. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................. 1
   An Overview of Refugee Resettlement in the United States ..................... 3
   Problem Statement ......................................................................................... 10
   Defining Economic Self-Sufficiency ............................................................... 11
   Personal Characteristics and Refugee Employment .................................... 13
   Developmental Variables and Refugee Employment .................................... 19
   Hypotheses ..................................................................................................... 23

II. METHODS ....................................................................................................... 25
   Participants ..................................................................................................... 25
   Procedures ..................................................................................................... 25

III. RESULTS ....................................................................................................... 28

IV. DISCUSSION ................................................................................................ 35
   Hypothesis 1 ................................................................................................. 35
   Hypothesis 2 ................................................................................................. 36
   Hypothesis 3 ................................................................................................. 36
   Hypothesis 4 ................................................................................................. 37
   Limitations of the Study ................................................................................ 37
   Recommendations for Future Research ....................................................... 38

REFERENCES ................................................................................................... 41
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Descriptive Statistics by Country of Origin</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Descriptive Statistics</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Frequencies for Sex and Employment Status</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Correlation Coefficients for Selected Study Variables</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Logistical Regression Model Predictors of Employment Status</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Multiple Regression Analysis</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The end of a process of flight from dislocation and persecution is realized in the minds of many refugees the moment that they enter the United States. As a substantial life transition, however, the positives of successfully escaping a conflict-torn region is tempered by new struggles that emerge as refugees negotiate the process of establishing roots to build a stable future in a country in which they have very little familiarity. This process, including the adjustment and effort of both the refugee and the receiving community, is known as refugee resettlement. The modern and formalized U.S. refugee resettlement system in existence today began as a limited program to provide refuge to intellectual and political elites fleeing Nazi forces prior to and during World War II. US refugee resettlement has since evolved into a complex network of government and nonprofit social services assisting an ever-changing array of diverse groups who have been forced to flee their country of origin to escape conflict or persecution.

Though there are a number of factors that contribute to successful resettlement, few if any are as important as securing meaningful work. Stable employment promotes a sense of dignity and economic security in the lives of refugees, many of who have spent
years on the run or warehoused in unforgiving and dangerous transitory refugee camps. Adequate earnings, derived from stable employment, represent a foundational definition of meaningful work. In this regard, meaningful work empowers refugees to integrate into the local economic and social environment of the community in which they are attempting to resettle. In addition, if an employment setting also provides a market-rate (or even adequate) wage, this economic resource enables refugees to emerge from the marginalized realm of transitory poverty to become active members of the community in which they are living. On the other hand those refugees who work for minimum wage (or substandard wages) and are unable to hold a steady job have great difficulty becoming economically independent and may be compelled to turn to long-term government assistance which further entrenches their marginalization. The importance of securing meaningful work for incoming refugees as soon as possible following entry into the United States demands that resettlement policy is based upon a sound understanding of the factors that predict stable employment and adequate wages for this special population.

The federal government appropriates over $450 million for refugee resettlement annually (Fix, Zimmerman, & Passel, 2001). This figure does not include state, local and private funding also contributing to the effort. Though a portion of this funding is spent on coordinating the initial arrival of refugees to the United States, the majority of funds are spent on the resettlement process and the facilitation of economic self-sufficiency by helping refugees identify, and efficiently secure stable, wage-generating employment. Ensuring that recently arrived refugee populations do not slip into economic dependence and societal marginalization is of great importance to the communities that will host
them. Therefore, identifying the factors that predict refugee economic adaptation has important public health and social welfare implications.

This master’s thesis project examined refugee personal characteristics and developmental factors as predictors of meaningful work among refugees 6 months after their arrival in the United States. The review that follows provides a context for this study and a rationale for examining predictors of meaningful work as a primary outcome of a refugee resettlement program in a medium sized urban setting in the western United States.

An Overview of Refugee Resettlement in the United States

A refugee is defined as an individual who is outside of his or her home country and is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of origin due to a well founded fear of persecution, violence or death based on the individual’s race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group and/or, political opinion (UN Charter, 1954). Although the issue of displaced persons fleeing conflict and in search of refuge in a less hostile, but foreign country has deep historical precedence, formalized policies regarding the legal admission and the provision of assistance to refugees is a contemporary phenomenon.

By way of history, in 1948 the first refugee legislation was enacted by the U.S. Congress that allowed for admission of Europeans displaced by the Second World War to legally enter the United States under the designation of refugee (The Displaced Persons Act, 1948). Later laws provided for the admission of persons fleeing from Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Asia and the Caribbean. With the fall of the South
Vietnamese regime in 1975 and the increased repression of other South East Asian
governments the U.S. faced a challenge of resettling hundreds of thousands of
Indochinese refugees. In order to create a coherent system for dealing with the needs of
the on-going refugee resettlement process, the U.S. Congress passed the Refugee Act of
1980. This act standardized the provision of resettlement services available to refugees
who were admitted into the U.S. The 1980 Act also made a provision for a consistent
annual admission of refugees whose overall census at any given time was determined by
the Executive branch of government. Furthermore, the Refugee Act of 1980 set the
successful economic and social integration of refugees into American society as the
primary objective of the U.S. resettlement program (Majka, 1991). Since 1975, the U.S.
has resettled over 2.6 million refugees. During this period, annual admissions figures
have ranged from a high of 207,116 in 1980 to a low of 27,100 in 2002 following the

For the estimated 16 million refugees around the world there exist three durable
solutions to resolve their status. First, they may be able to repatriate to their country of
origin. This option is preferred by most refugees as it represents a return to home and
family. However the ability for many refugee populations to return to their country of
origin even decades after the initial conflict has ended is not guaranteed. This uncertainty
is witnessed by the fact there continue to exist large refugee populations living in
Tanzanian refugee camps today following their flight from the 1972 ethnic cleansing in
their native Burundi. A similar situation exists for the many ethnic Karen refugees
stranded in refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia following their flight from Burmese military oppression in the early 1980s.

A second durable solution is for refugees to integrate into the country of first asylum. This option, though often less preferred than returning to their country of origin, at least permits the refugee to remain in a geographic and cultural region similar to their country of origin. However, many countries bordering conflict zones pose the same risk factors for instability and conflict that produced the previous refugee flight. Economic difficulties and ethnic tension can lead countries of first asylum to dramatically restrict the freedoms and movement of refugees thereby effectively preventing refugee integration.

For those refugees unable to return home and unable to integrate into their country of first asylum third country resettlement is the durable third solution: This solution is activated only after a refugee has (1) fled his or her country of origin and (2) can demonstrate that this departure was due to a well-founded fear of persecution or death, can the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) grant the individual with the legal designation of refugee. Thereafter, as noted above, the refugee may engage this third solution which initiates the process of third country resettlement. In the case of the United States, all referred cases for third country resettlement must pass through a rigorous legal and security screening process to determine eligibility for resettlement. Once a refugee’s application has been approved, the refugee is assigned to one of a variety of regional resettlement programs contracted to volunteer agencies and coordinated by the U.S. Department of State. Transportation to the U.S. is arranged by
the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and refugees are expected to repay
the IOM in monthly installments for all transportation costs loaned to them through the
US government beginning 18 months after the refugee arrives in the United States. Core
services provided by resettlement agencies include locating initial housing, provision of
basic household needs, clothing, food, community orientation, referrals to schools,
healthcare, social services and of importance to the current study, employment
counseling. These services are paid for by Federal, State and local governments as well
as through private and nonprofit sources.

Refugees enter the United States with full employment authorization, that is, they
are allowed to work for full or part-time wages. Once they receive a social security card
(which occurs typically within 4 to 6 weeks after arrival in the United States) refugees are
able to begin the search for employment. Resettlement agencies are expected to initiate
employment assistance programming as early as possible in the resettlement process. A
primary goal of the U.S. refugee resettlement program is to secure employment for all
newly entering and eligible refugees within a 6-month time frame.

Successful resettlement of refugees in the U.S. has been primarily defined by the
Office of Refugee Resettlement, as “the establishment of economic self-sufficiency.”
(Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2005). The specific objectives of the U.S. refugee
resettlement program have been further operationalized to include early employment and
a reduction in State welfare dependency. Though these measures may not reflect the
qualitative success of any one particular refugee resettlement program, economic self-
sufficiency is nonetheless the standard upon which the resettlement process (and a
resettlement program) is evaluated (Majka et al., 1992). More measures of successful resettlement such as acculturation are also viewed as relevant to successful resettlement to the degree such outcomes have a demonstrated effect on a given refugee's establishment of economic self-sufficiency.

Though the economic self-sufficiency definition may represent a narrow interpretation of successful resettlement, there is some logic in this approach given that it permits the Federal Government to quantify the success or failure of the refugee resettlement process through employment statistics and verifiable State assistance utilization rates, that is, success is measured by gainful employment and minimized need for State welfare support. Furthermore, long-term success and integration into American society is facilitated by stable economic integration and whether refugees are able to stay out of poverty. This is often achieved when a refugee secures work that provides an adequate wage. Herein, however, is the challenge of establishing a successful refugee resettlement program. Refugees, as a result of the circumstances of their forced migration (e.g., victims of torture or trauma, flight from war, systematic violence and oppression, lack of access to quality education or employment) often face greater barriers to acculturation and economic self-sufficiency than other incoming immigrant groups. The data suggest that resettled refugees therefore have higher rates of unemployment, lower annual incomes, less access to healthcare benefits, and fewer opportunities through education or employment for upward mobility (Fix et al., 2001). One explanation for this difference is that refugees come to the United States based upon well founded fears of persecution or even death and not for economic advantage. Supporting this explanation,
underemployment and downward mobility have been associated with the upheaval and instability of refugee displacement (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Beiser, Johnson & Turner, 1993; Westermeyer, Callies & Neider, 1990; Young & Evans, 1997). Refugees therefore may face greater difficulties adapting to a host country, compared to immigrants who have voluntarily left their country of origin. The Refugee Act of 1980 was designed to address these specific refugee needs by providing intensive case management and employment assistance to resettling refugees with the goal of increasing refugee self-sufficiency and economic independence.

Though Federal funding for refugee resettlement is allocated for a duration of 5 years of services per refugee, individual State legislatures determine how to spend funding at the local level. Therefore, there is great variation in State resettlement policies and resources. Designated resettlement agencies tasked with the most intensive and arguably most important initial resettlement responsibilities can in some States work continuously with refugee clients for the entire 5 years. In other States, initial resettlement services are terminated much earlier and cases are transferred to secondary service providers.

In the State of Utah (where this study was conducted) initial refugee resettlement services conclude after a 6-month time period at which point refugee cases are transferred to a secondary agency. This restricted time frame between refugee entry into the State resettlement program and the transfer of services to secondary providers creates additional pressure on refugees to access the more specialized refugee employment services. It is often the case that secondary providers will only provide intermittent
employment assistance help. The employment that a refugee is able to secure by month 6 is the baseline upon which a given refugee will begin the day-to-day routine of living within the State of Utah. To secure meaningful work, or work that is stable and that pays a livable wage early on in the resettlement process, may be the difference for a given refugee between economic integration and economic marginalization.

Job placement statistics in the intermountain west indicate that between 2005 and 2008 over 70% of eligible adult refugees who resettled in Utah were employed within the 6-month transition period (Utah Department of Workforce Services, 2008). Though these statistics appear to indicate successful job placement outcomes, a closer examination of the specifics of employment show a more mixed pattern with respect to the definition of meaningful work. For example of the 70% of refugees employed by month 6, many had jobs in remedial settings with little or no opportunity for long-term stability and/or advancement. The wages paid at these jobs were for the most part at minimum wage levels and many of these jobs did not include health benefits. It is therefore important to (1) distinguish between remedial employment and adequate employment with respect to stability and advancement and (2) recognize differences in hourly wages that would range between market rate and minimum wage.

The State of Utah accepts over 1000 refugees for resettlement annually. Initial 6-month resettlement services in Utah are provided by one of two resettlement agencies; The International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Catholic Community Services (CCS). Each agency provides similar core services as outlined above. For the purpose of this study, IRC, which has historically handled the majority of Utah refugee resettlement
cases, was surveyed. Of the total number of refugees resettled in Utah by IRC between 2005 and 2009 roughly 700 secured employment by their 6th month. Within this refugee population there was significant variability across individual refugee characteristics and larger social/regional/country of origin factors. Demographic and educational factors such as age, gender, country of origin, education level and English proficiency level are potential predictors of 6-month employment status. In addition other variables that are less commonly measured in this population could predict employment status including the number of years spent as a refugee or the career aspirations expressed by refugees upon arrival in the United States. The present study examined the most salient of these variables for predicting employment status that, in turn, may impact policy and decision-making strategies for the refugee resettlement effort.

Problem Statement

Issues of employment and particularly meaningful work of refugees are of great concern to those who work to resettle them. The communities that accept refugees and the refugees themselves are served when meaningful work is achieved. Economic adaptation patterns are an important factor used to assess refugee integration into a new country and community (Schwartzer, Jerusalem & Hahn, 1994). For federally funded refugee resettlement agencies, timely (within a 6-month period) and successful job placement of refugees is at the basis of policies enacted to promote refugee self-sufficiency (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2001). For the host community, meaningful
work of incoming refugees alleviates the concern that refugee groups will burden available public assistance resources (Vinokuro, Birman & Trickett, 2000).

Defining Economic Self-Sufficiency

From a public policy standpoint defining what is meant by successful employment would seem straight forward. Simply put, successful employment would be whether a refugee is working or is not working at a paid job (i.e., employed versus unemployed) at 6 months. However, as a metric sensitive to individual differences, the variable employed verses unemployed does not adequately discriminate the actual ability of a refugee to establish self-sufficiency at a basic economic level. Although unemployment would describe a refugee that has not become self-sufficient, among those refugee adults who manage to find employment during the resettlement process, “underemployment” is also a risk factor for economic insufficiency. For example, although working at a job that pays at or below minimum wage would be classified in a strict sense as evidence of employment, if the job pays a low wage a refugee may still need public assistance to maintain a basic standard of living. In this example a low wage job does not represent self-sufficiency.

The overall earning rate of employed refugees typically rises with the length time that a refugee has been in the U.S., but securing a job with higher versus lower pay early in the resettlement process reduces the need for State welfare assistance and places recently arrived refugees on a trajectory towards self-sufficiency. Establishment of a livable working wage during the resettlement process is of great importance in the State
of Utah given that the resources for resettlement assistance dramatically decrease after 6 months.

*Adequate Versus Remedial Employment*

For the purpose of this study it is important to distinguish between adequate employment which is work that is stable and that includes advancement potential. In addition, adequate employment would require a market-rate wage. Adequate employment would be distinguished from remedial employment that would include jobs granted to refugees noncompetitively for temporary training and humanitarian purposes, these jobs are almost always is at a minimum wage. Remedial employment constitutes a separate category from adequate employment because refugees are referred to such employment options through humanitarian organizations designated to provide for this type of work to refugees who have not had success finding work through the competitive process within the 6-month service window. While these remedial jobs provide a meager income to the refugee such jobs are only granted for 1 temporary year during which time the refugee is not eligible for wage increases or health benefits. Instead these remedial jobs are designed to provide work experience and training to refugees unfamiliar with basic U.S. employment practices. In contrast, adequate employment is defined as employment secured following competitive application processes with market-rate wages and stability including the expectation that there is position upgrade potential.
Hourly Wage Rate

This study assessed the specific outcome gradation of actual wages earned per employed refugee at 6 months. By assessing refugee hourly wage rates this study aimed to explore the factors that contribute to higher versus lower wages for refugees 6 months after arrival in the United States. As noted in this definition, wage is a primary dependent variable, that is, wage is a factor used to establish the definition of meaningful work and it varies within this group of refugees.

Personal Characteristics and Refugee Employment

Though there is a significant base of research on United States immigrant economic adaptation, there are very few studies that either focus on employment and wage rates (i.e., wages at 6 months following entry into the U.S.) or on the specific economic adaptation demands faced by recently resettled refugees. Research pertaining to the demographic factors proposed in this study must therefore be placed within the context of a relatively under examined issue within refugee groups nationally.

Of the studies that have examined demographic predictors of refugee employment a variety and at times contradictory list of demographic factors have been found to be predictive of meaningful work, these studies have targeted country of origin (Mamgain, 2003), age (Borjas, 1995; Friedberg, 1993; Shaafsma & Sweetman, 2001), sex (Mamgain, 2003; Potocky, 1995; 1997; 2000; 2003), English proficiency level (Adkins & Dunn, 2000; Hagstrom, 2000; Haines, 1988; Shaafsma et al., 2001; Waxman, 2001) and education level (Potocky, 1995; 1997; 2003).
To date the most compelling research on demographic factors in refugee economic adaptation was conducted in a series of studies by Potocky (1995; 1997; 2001; 2003). The results of these studies demonstrated that the demographic characteristics exerting the most influence on adult refugee employment status were: (1) sex and (2) education level. Particularly interesting for this master’s thesis project are the results from Potocky’s most recent research (2003) which went beyond employment status as a sole outcome measure and further extrapolated the estimated hourly wages of refugees based upon the employment categories they reported during the study interview. Results of this 2003 study indicated that men had higher estimated wages and refugees with more education, who were typically male, earned higher wages than refugees with less education.

Country of Origin

In the previously cited study by Potocky-Tripodi (2003) analyzing predictors of the dichotomous dependent variable of employment/unemployment, initial analysis showed substantial employment status variation across refugees from different countries of origin. However, after logistic regression analyses were conducted for all groups combined to determine the net effect of country of origin on employment/unemployment proportions after entering all other significant variables, country of origin was not a significant predictor of employment status. More specific to wage, Mamgain (2003) examined hourly wages of refugees resettled in the state of Maine. The findings from this study demonstrated that the influence of country of origin on wage rates for resettled
refugees was more a result of the degree to which a given individual from a specific ethnic group was established in the host community versus the specific strengths or weaknesses of refugees who originated from a particular country. Mamgain's findings point toward a network/acculturation effect where the establishment of an ethnic enclave helped to facilitate economic integration for future immigrants of a particular ethnicity. This supports the facilitative/adaptive concept of the "ghetto" with respect to persons of a single ethnicity living in proximity of one another and supporting each other through the strength or grassroots group resources.

Age

Though not specific to refugees but investigated in immigrant groups, Friedberg (1993) and later Borjas (1995) each found that age at immigration was a negative predictor of earnings particularly among male immigrant. In other words, age at immigration was inversely related to average wage for male immigrants. Shaafsma et al. (2001) also found evidence that age at immigration was correlated with wage. Their findings however pointed more towards the relationship between age and education level and age and language acquisition as mediating factors on wages earned by immigrants. In other words, age acts as an indirect marker for other variables influencing refugee wages.
Sex

While some research has shown that refugee women are less likely to be employed than refugee men (Potocky-Tripodi, 2001) little research has focused on the differences in wages earned between male and female refugees. One exception to this was a study conducted by Mamgain (2003) where sex was found to predict wage rates for refugees when paired with other demographic factors. For refugee men, Mamgain (2003) found that the best predictor for higher wages was English proficiency level. For women on the other hand, the same study showed that education level attained prior to resettlement was the strongest predictor of higher wages.

English Proficiency Level

Some of the more prominent research studies have focused on the relative influence of English proficiency level at time of immigration and the impact that English proficiency exerts on the ability of the individual to secure employment. It makes intuitive sense that English facility is correlated with economic success. Haines (1988) found that those refugees with higher levels of English proficiency were more likely to not only search for work, but were more successful in their searches and obtained higher paying jobs in the process. In studies by Chiswick (1993) and Majka and Mullan (1992), English language proficiency was found to predict workforce entry and accomplishment amongst refugees. Waxman (2001) found a significant relationship between English competency and gainful employment in recently resettled refugees. English proficiency level at the time of immigration was found to be positively associated with wages earned.
(Adkins et al., 2000; Schaafsma et al., 2001). More specifically, Schaafsma et al. (2001), determined that older-aged immigrants who possessed higher English proficiency level were advantaged over younger less English proficient immigrants with regard to economic self-sufficiency. Similarly, Hagstrom (2000) found that limited English proficiency levels predicted refugees moving into lower paying jobs during the resettlement process, that is, poorer skills were associated with lower paying employment placement.

Research also indicates that refugees themselves perceive their English proficiency as critical for identifying and securing a good job. Dunning and Greenbaum (1982) found in their surveys of refugees that included questions about needs, problems or barriers to employment, consistently pointed to English as the most important skill for obtaining employment. It may be that the perception that one can speak and relate to others in English (regardless of one's objective English skill level) could be an indirect employment self-efficacy factor.

**Education Level**

The US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001) has consistently shown that achieving higher levels of education reduces the likelihood that a person will be unemployed or underemployed. Individuals with more years of education have greater access to higher paying jobs than those persons with fewer years of education. It is unclear, however, if these results generalize to incoming refugee populations.
The nature and level of education received by incoming refugee groups prior to third country resettlement is as diverse as the populations themselves. That is, the level and quality of education received by refugees prior to resettlement is difficult to quantify given that it is challenging to fully separate metrics used to measure educational attainment from the countries and culturally-idiosyncratic educational philosophies of the countries from which refugees originate. Furthermore, access to educational systems may be restricted in the country of origin based on demographic and geographic factors. Finally the educational systems available to refugees in flight or in refugee camps are likely to vary with respect to the context in which the education is received. For example, if one has been located in a refugee camp for 7 years and has received informal schooling under difficult conditions, such an education may be qualitatively different than receiving an education in one’s country of origin where conditions for living (and ostensibly learning) are more stable.

Research linking education level to wage rates in resettled refugees has thus far produced contradictory results. Chiswick and Miller (1985) found that schooling obtained abroad exerted less influence on wages earned than schooling received after immigration to the host country. Friedberg (2000) found that education obtained abroad was generally a nonsignificant factor on refugee wages earned. On the other hand Potocky-Tripodi (2003) found that with each unit increase in education level at the time of immigration there was a corresponding increase of estimated annual earnings among some but not all of the refugee groups surveyed. In a thorough study of refugees resettled in Portland Maine, Allen (2006) found that well educated refugees tended to earn higher
wages than less educated refugees. Interestingly the results of this study showed that there was no difference between refugees who went on to higher education and those who finished their education at the secondary level. Specifically, refugees with a primary education or lower earned on average 75% less than those with a secondary education or higher. Allen's (2006) results suggest that access to education prior to resettlement was an important determinant of the economic success of refugees.

**Developmental Variables and Refugee Employment**

*Years as a Refugee*

There does not appear to be systematic literature that has specifically focused on the effects of time spent in flight as a refugee (prior to third country resettlement) as a factor associated with employment following resettlement. A conceptual argument can be made for the importance of the nature of the transition process in predicting refugee adaptation to the host country. For example, Burundian and Burmese refugees currently resettling in the United States have faced protracted refugee camp experiences. For many of these long-term refugees, life in the camp is all that they have known and for some, their formative learning years were spent in these transition camps. It could be hypothesized that such a protracted refugee camp experience could result in psychological and social skills deficits that could disadvantage these long-term refugees for acquiring the skills needed to obtain meaningful work experience that would later enable them to establish economic self-sufficiency in their resettlement country. In contrast, other refugee groups such as the Iraqis or Cubans have not, in general,
experienced protracted periods in refugee camps. Instead, based on the context within which they have entered refugee status, they are rapidly transitioned from a conflict zone and through the resettlement process.

Though there is a shortage of research studies linking refugee transition experience with employment trends following third country resettlement, it is informative to review several conceptual models that could elucidate how protracted life in a refugee camp may influence later employment outcomes. Borrowing from Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (1986) Lent, Brown and Hackett (2000) introduced Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) as a theoretical system for organizing and describing the interplay between internal and external influences on career development. Given that the refugee flight experience represents a sudden and dramatic disruption of career development for the refugee, the SCCT concept of career barriers is fitting to this formulation. Self-efficacy beliefs specific to career barriers are referred to as coping-efficacy within SCCT. Coping-efficacy, like the more general concept of self-efficacy, is arrived at by an individual through performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion and physiological arousal (Albert et al., 1999). Within SCCT, factors influencing career development are further broken down into proximal and distal factors through their theoretical distance from actual career choice and implementation. Distal factors influence learning experiences that later translate into coping-efficacy and outcome expectations for specific barriers, whereas proximal factors have an influence on the active phase of career decision making (Lent et al., 2000).
Distal factors may represent the degree of past exposure to positive role models for a diverse set of career choices. For example, a person entering the United States for resettlement following a protracted stay in a refugee camp may lack exposure to certain career options, either directly or through vicariously learning, and may not fully explore and or develop interests in that area for the future. This lack of interest or exploratory behavior upon resettlement may present as a barrier for a refugee to find higher paying employment by month 6, whereas a refugee entering the US following a shorter (ostensibly less disruptive) transition from conflict to resettlement may experience less dissonance when barriers are present such as having to make choices among a diverse set of career options. Proximal factors on the other hand may interfere with the ability of a recently resettled refugee to navigate the job search process. For example, the lack of financial resources for childcare may prevent a young parent from attending a free training workshop where they can learn how to search online for higher paying employment. Or the degree of access to public or reliable transportation may represent a proximal barrier for a recently resettled refugee to search for higher paying employment beyond their immediate geographic location.

Career Aspirations

Career aspirations are an individual's expressed career related goals or choices (Johnson, 1995). Research has demonstrated that career aspirations predict future occupation and career development (Gottfredson, 2002). Furthermore, studies have
shown a consistent link between career aspirations and achievement (Haller & Virkler, 1993).

As with length of refugee flight and third country employment there is a paucity of research regarding refugee career aspirations and economic self-sufficiency upon resettlement. Returning to SCCT, however, several subordinate concepts important to constructing a framework for understanding articulated employment goals are relevant to refugee resettlement. For example, SCCT postulates that the extent to which a refugee is able to articulate his or her career aspirations upon arrival may be understood as a manifestation of the refugee’s perceptions of the career barriers that exist before him or her. Career barriers have been conceptualized as external conditions or internal states that make career progress difficult (Swanson, Daniels, & Tokar, 1996). Embedded in this definition is the recognition that internal affective states and the cognitive interpretation of external barriers can themselves represent obstacles to career development. Though not specific to refugees, many of the empirical studies published on this subject have assessed the perception of barriers in the development of interests and career choices.

A second concept embedded in SCCT is the ability to articulate employment goals. As conceptualized by SCCT, articulated employment goals represent an external manifestation of coping efficacy. That is, as a refugee articulates specific employment goals he or she is demonstrating a degree of confidence in the ability to overcome the proximal barriers associated with resettlement. The theoretical (Lent et al., 2000) and research literature (Kantas, 1997; Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999) supporting SCCT career barrier and employment goal articulation demonstrates that coping efficacy feeds directly
into career interests, choice goals and eventually performance outcomes. This specific pathway however has not been applied to a refugee population thus far.

There are several accepted methods for measuring career aspirations. This study used the socioeconomic index (SEI) codes as a summary measure of expressed career aspirations. The SEI was most recently updated by Nakao and Treas (1994) and represents a two-digit calculated occupational prestige score based upon income and educational characteristics of occupational U.S. Census categories. SEI codes have been widely used as a measure of career aspirations in empirical research (Rojewski, 2005).

This study uses SEI scores for career aspirations based upon previous studies conducted in the social sciences that have found SEI scores to be a useful method of classifying occupations. In particular, SEI scores are useful as they provide a continuous variable for aspirations that encourages statistical analysis. SEI scores have also been shown to reflect estimations of ability that may indicate individual and social barriers to future career development (Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996).

**Hypotheses**

This study examined selected personal characteristics and developmental factors that predict the ability of refugees to establish economic self-sufficiency early on in the resettlement process. The focus of this study was to elucidate personal characteristics and developmental factors and their relative contribution to the explanatory variance of meaningful work. To review, meaningful work is defined as (1) employment that is stable, provides opportunity for position and/or wage upgrade and is secured following a
competitive process; (2) employment that results in a refugee earning higher as opposed to lower wages. The following hypotheses guide the presentation of the methods, results and discussion sections of this master’s thesis project.

**H1:** Refugees who report higher career aspirations will be more likely to secure adequate employment than refugees who report lower career aspirations.

**H2:** As the number of years spent as a refugee increases the likelihood of a refugee securing adequate employment will decrease.

**H3:** Refugees who report higher career aspiration levels will earn higher wages than refugees who report lower career aspirations.

**H4:** As the number of years spent as a refugee increases the hourly wages earned by a refugee will decrease.
CHAPTER II

METHODS

Participants

Adult refugees resettled in Utah by the IRC resettlement office from June 2008 to June 2009 who secured employment by the 6\textsuperscript{th} month resettlement deadline were included in this study. The roughly 30\% of adult refugees in Utah unemployed by month 6 were excluded from the study primarily due to an insufficient number account of the factors leading to their unemployment (including health or family related factors). For example, women were not included who indicated that they were not seeking employment because they were engaged in fulltime childcare at home. Furthermore, given that this study was designed to examine predictors of refugee wages earned, the refugees with no income were excluded from the analysis. This sample included 85 refugees between the ages of 18 and 54 years who were in some form of employment and were earning a wage from their employment setting.

Procedures

The data were collected and archived by the IRC both through initial intake interviews as well as follow-up employment verification processes. No direct contact
was required between the investigator and the subjects. Variables collected were as follows: age (measured in years from birth), sex (male or female) and country of origin were recorded by the resettlement agency based upon official immigration documentation.

Education level attained prior to resettlement was based upon subject self-report during structured intake interviews conducted by IRC employment counselors within 10 days of the arrival of each refugee client. Education was measured based on the level of formal education that each refugee attained prior to resettlement. Specifically, education consisted of a five point scale with 1 = none, 2 = primary/secondary, 3 = high school, 4 = college, 5 = advanced degree. English proficiency level was recorded during the same structured interviews based upon assessments of reading, writing, speech and listening comprehension.

Career aspirations were recorded during employment intake interviews at the IRC 2 weeks after each refugee entered the United States. When asked about their future employment goals refugee interviewees were free to respond with as little or as much detail as they chose. Their responses were not limited to a set list of occupations. For the purpose of this study employment aspiration statements were organized according to SEI codes. These codes formed a continuous variable score from 0 to 100. A high score indicated a high rank based on (1) perceived prestige, (2) education requirements required to perform the work and (3) estimated earning potential from the employment type.
Years spent as a refugee were assessed based upon the documented status of the refugee camps or transit points in the countries in which each refugee found temporary residence. Migration history was also gathered from the employment intake forms used by the resettlement agency. The dependent continuous variable of hourly wage rate was recorded by IRC staff based upon follow-up employment verification interviews conducted by phone with employers at month 6.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Table 1 highlights selected demographics by country of origin groupings. The majority of the 85 participants in this study originated from Burma (49.4%) and the remainder of the sample were divided roughly evenly between Iraq (24.7%) and Bhutan (25.9%). The Iraqi participant group was 62% male and 38% female, had a mean age of 30 years, a mean education level of 3.71 and a mean English level of 2.81. The Bhutanese participant group was 64% male and 36% female, had a mean age of 30 years, and had a mean education level of 3.27 and a mean English level of 3.18. The Burmese participant group was 79% male and 21% female, had a mean age of 31 years, a mean education level of 2.45 and a mean English level of 1.57.

Descriptive statistics for the entire participant sample, including minimum, maximum, means and standard deviations for the variables age, education level, English level, career aspirations, years as a refugee, and hourly wages earned are displayed in Table 2. Hourly wages earned ranged from $5.50 to $11.40 per hour, with a mean of $8.06 and a standard deviation of 1.64. It should be noted that the minimum hourly wage at the time that these data were collected was $6.55 per hour (Utah Minimum Wage Act, 2008).
Table 1

Descriptive Statistics by Country of Origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Iraq ((n = 21))</th>
<th>Bhutan ((n = 22))</th>
<th>Burma ((n = 42))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Means</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level(^1)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>2.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Level(^2)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) 1 = None, 2 = Primary/Secondary, 3 = High School, 4 = College, 5 = Advanced Degree

\(^2\) 1 = None, 2 = Low, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Upper, 5 = Advanced

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>30.56</td>
<td>9.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level(^1)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Level(^2)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Aspirations</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as Refugee</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16.76</td>
<td>6.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hourly Wage Rate(^3)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>11.40</td>
<td>8.06</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) 1 = None, 2 = Primary/Secondary, 3 = High School, 4 = College, 5 = Advanced Degree

\(^2\) 1 = None, 2 = Low, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Upper, 5 = Advanced

\(^3\) Measured in dollars and cents
Table 3 summarizes the dichotomous variables and lists the relative proportions (expressed in terms of percentages) for each category. As summarized in Table 3, the participants were primarily men who comprised 70.6% of the total sample. The sample was also divided between refugee participants who were granted remedial employment (22.4%) and those who secured adequate employment (77.6%).

Table 4 displays a correlation matrix for the overall sample with significant relationships highlighted below. A positive correlation was found between English level and education level ($r = .65, p < .01$). Career aspirations were found to be negatively correlated with age ($r = -.22, p < .05$) but positively correlated with education level ($r = .29, p < .01$) and English level ($r = .23, p < .05$). There was a negative correlation between years spent as a refugee and both education level ($r = -.44, p < .01$) and English level ($r = -.33, p < .01$).

Table 3

Frequencies for Sex and Employment Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>70.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Status*</td>
<td>Remedial</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>77.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This variable did not include unemployed refugees but instead was a dichotomous variable 1 = time limited employment granted to refugees for training purposes with no opportunity for wage or position increases (remedial) 2 = employment secured by refugees that provided opportunity for wage and position advancement with time and demonstrated competence (adequate).
Table 4

Correlation Coefficients for Selected Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sex(^1)</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Education(^2)</th>
<th>English Level</th>
<th>Career Aspirations</th>
<th>Years as Refugee</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Hourly Wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Level</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Aspirations</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as Refugee</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.44**</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Status</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hourly Wages</td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>- -</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\) \(p < .05\); \(^**\) \(p < .01\)

\(^1\) 1 = male, 2 = female

\(^2\) 1 = None, 2 = Primary/Secondary, 3 = High School, 4 = College, 5 = Advanced Degree

\(^3\) 1 = None, 2 = Low, 3 = Moderate, 4 = Upper, 5 = Advanced

\(^4\) Ascending scale of Socioeconomic Index scores (SEI) 0 – 100 with higher scores indicating greater prestige and earning power

\(^5\) 1 = remedial employment; 2 = adequate employment
With respect to the first employment dependent variable in this study three significant correlations were observed in the overall correlation matrix. There was a positive correlation between employment status (remedial vs. adequate employment) and both education level ($r = .24, p < .05$) and English level ($r = .22, p < .05$). There was a negative correlation between the years spent as a refugee and employment status ($r = -.34, p < .01$).

With respect to the second employment dependent variable three significant correlations were observed in the overall correlation matrix. A positive correlation was found between employment status and hourly wages ($r = .60, p < .01$), a negative correlation was found between sex and hourly wages ($r = -.34, p < .01$), and a positive correlation between age and hourly wages ($r = .22, p < .05$).

Confirmatory analyses were conducted to address the four study hypotheses. To address $H_1$ and $H_2$ a logistic regression analysis was conducted. Interaction effects among the predictor variables were not included in this analysis because the total sample size was too small to interpret any interactions. Predictor variables that were statistically significant were entered into the logistic regression model. The resulting model, as shown in Table 5, included education level, English level and years as a refugee. The model was significant:

In order to address the second dependent variable (refugee hourly wages) associated with hypothesis H3 and H4, a multiple linear regression was performed. In this regression, the predictor variables were entered in the following order: sex, education level, career aspirations and years as refugee. Career aspirations and years as a refugee were also entered in reverse order which resulted in no significant difference in the statistical output.

As summarized in Table 6, the first two predictor variables in the multiple regression analysis, sex and education level were significant. Specifically, sex accounted for 11% of the overall variance in hourly wages and education level accounted for an additional 7% of the variance in refugee hourly wage. Neither career aspirations nor years as a refugee were significant predictors of hourly wages.
### Table 6

*Multiple Regression Analysis Variables Influencing Refugee Hourly Wage Rates*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>$\Delta R^2$</th>
<th>Cum $R^2$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.37</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Aspirations</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as Refugee</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of selected individual
characteristics and developmental variables to employment status and hourly wage in
adult refugees resettled in Utah between June 2008 and June 2009. Previous research in
this area, summarized in the literature review, has identified predictors of refugee
employment outcomes. To date however this literature has not considered the predictive
contributions of career aspirations or years spent as a refugee on employment status or
hourly wage. This study examined data from 85 adult refugees resettled in Utah who had
secured employment within 6 months of their initial arrival in the United States.

**Hypothesis 1**

H$_1$: Refugees who report higher career aspirations will be more likely to
secure adequate employment than refugees who report lower career
aspirations.

Career aspirations did not predict refugee employment status at 6 months.
Hypothesis 2

$H_2$: As the number of years spent as a refugee increases the likelihood of a refugee securing adequate employment will decrease.

Years spent as a refugee was a significant predictor of adequate employment. The Exp($B$), also referred to as the odds ratio, for the logistic regression model was less than 1, therefore increasing values of the variable corresponds to decreasing odds of the dependent variable’s occurrence. Specifically, for every year increase in life spent as a refugee the odds of a refugee securing adequate employment (versus remedial employment) within 6 months of initial resettlement decreases by a factor of .79. As an example, the odds of a person securing adequate employment within 6 months of resettlement after spending 5 years as a refugee decreases from 1 to .31 ($0.79^5$) and further to .09 ($0.79^{10}$) after 10 years as a refugee. This finding suggests that people who have spent longer portions of their lives as refugees are at a significant disadvantage for securing adequate (versus remedial) employment during resettlement. It is important to recognize that this disadvantage is present even after controlling for sex and education level, suggesting that factors inherent in the refugee experience itself represents an additional barrier to meaningful work.

Hypothesis 3

$H_3$: Refugees who report higher career aspiration levels will earn higher wages than refugees who report lower career aspirations.

After controlling for sex and overall education level career aspirations did not predict refugee wages.
Hypothesis 4

H₄: As the number of years spent as a refugee increases the hourly wages earned by a refugee will decrease.

Years spent as a refugee did not predict wages for refugees following initial refugee resettlement.

Limitations of the Study

A number of study limitations were noteworthy. First, the representativeness of the participant sample and therefore the generalizability of the study findings were limited. The study sample itself was restricted to Iraqi, Bhutanese and Burmese refugee clients resettled in Salt Lake City, Utah by the IRC during a relatively narrow time frame. Increasing the size of the sample to include additional refugee populations resettled in a variety of regions across the U.S. would result in a more representative sample. Second, because this study excluded refugees who did not secure even remedial employment by 6 months the results reported here do not explain the overall variability of employment success. Third, due to the relatively small sample size, interaction effects were not assessed. Fourth, this study did not account for potential social influences such as racism, discrimination or overall negative opinions toward refugees and immigrant populations by citizens in the host community on the employment status and earning potential of the sample. Fifth, as discussed above, outcome data for this study were restricted to a relatively short 6-month period following initial refugee resettlement and
socio-economic factors occurring during this time frame that were not measured may have influenced outcomes.

With regard to this fifth limitation, career aspirations and years spent as a refugee may exert some predictive power for wage outcomes but these factors do not appear to manifest themselves during the first 6 months of a refugee’s resettlement. That is, 6 months may be too brief a period of job search time for the underlying influences of career aspirations and years as a refugee to produce wage rate differentiation. In support of this conclusion shortly after arrival in the United States, refugees are tasked with securing employment as quickly as possible and this rush to find work may come at the expense of waiting to secure a higher paying job. Furthermore, within this 6-month period employed refugees may have been unable to increase their wage beyond the initial hiring rate. After 6 months, refugees with higher career aspirations and with fewer years spent as refugees may in fact be more likely to earn higher wages than refugees in the inverse position.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study findings suggest that protracted refugee experiences could translate into significant barriers to economic and social integration for refugees transitioning through the resettlement process. The importance of limiting the length of time that people are forced to live in refugee camps or as stateless residents in countries of first asylum makes intuitive sense for a whole spectrum of reasons. The findings from this study provide data that protracted stays in refugee camps may affect patterns of job seeking during
resettlement as well. Though these camps and the countries of first asylum represent important temporary solutions for people fleeing conflict and persecution, prolonging this transition and postponing durable solutions for the global refugee population will ultimately reduce the chances that refugees will be capable of successful integration when and if they are provided the opportunity for third country resettlement. Further investigation should seek to determine the critical threshold in the life of a refugee where residing in a camp might have its greatest impact on the resettlement process.

Research on refugee employment and resettlement outcomes should also consider the broader social and economic climate as predictors of successful integration into the community. These could include gauging the relative influence of the overall economic climate on refugee employment success and wage outcomes. Because both wage and employment status are particularly sensitive to broader economic and labor force influences, future research may also focus on refugee psychological or behavior outcome variables as measures of successful adaptive responses to the resettlement process. Such variables could include changes in job search self-efficacy or in the frequency and intensity of refugee engagement in the job search process.

In addition to expanding on the predictor variables already evaluated in the present study, future research should aim to develop a comprehensive assessment measure that can be administered to refugees prior to departure for third country resettlement or shortly after arrival in the host community. A measure that can predict meaningful work and/or the degree of psychological and behavioral engagement in the pursuit of economic and social integration would be a valuable tool for agencies assisting
in the refugee resettlement process. Such a measure could include the relevant demographic, educational and developmental variables already discussed above but would further encompass the predictive potential of refugee personality types, locus of control, degree of acculturation, perceptions of workplace and job search self-efficacy, perceived barriers to employment, and the consequences of the unique mental health concerns facing many refugees (e.g., PTSD and acculturative stress). Understanding how these variables interact with economic and social conditions would enable service providers to better address the unique needs of refugee resettlement within a given host community.
REFERENCES


