

# “We will start building from that”: Social capital, social networks and African migrants’ job-seeking experiences in Australia

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## Abstract

This article explores the job-seeking experiences of Black African migrants in South Australia, focussing on the role played by social networks in labour market integration. While it has been long held that “who you know” matters when finding work, the quality and nature of interpersonal connections that can be put to use for job-seeking purposes suggests that not all networks effectively leverage social capital when it comes to employment. This article argues that Africa-born migrants in South Australia are a small, diverse population whose experiences of labour market integration are mediated by both reception (how they are received and perceived) and strategy and choice (decisions made by migrants themselves). There is evidence of these migrants’ evolving and expanding social networks; however, the strategy of building the “right” social networks only goes part-way to addressing employment gaps, while racialised social hierarchies are embedded in the Australian labour market.

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African migrants, Australia, employment, social networks

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Australia has seen increasing numbers of settlers arrive over recent decades through the skilled, family reunion and humanitarian migration streams. Visas granted peaked at 190,000 in 2012–2013 and 2013–2014 (Simon-Davies, 2018). Research suggests that migrants to Australia face challenges in finding employment commensurate with their skills and experience. Some groups experience heightened labour market disadvantage because of pre-migration experiences (Australian Survey Research, 2011; Cheng et al., 2021), their gender (Haque & Haque, 2008), age (Nunn et al., 2014), their temporary visa status (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2020), ethnicity (Colic-Peisker, 2011) and industry (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006). Australian migrant employment experiences are consistent with those from similar migrant-receiving countries (cf. Fuller & Martin, 2012), with the migrant “employment gap” largely attributed to a confluence of factors relating to human capital (individual traits, skills and capacities), social context, and institutional or structural impediments (policies and labour market structure) (cf. Almeida et al., 2015; Banerjee et al., 2019; Delaporte & Piracha, 2018; Fleming et al., 2016; Hawthorn, 1997; Mahuteau & Junankar, 2008; Ressia et al., 2017; Shinnaoui & Narchal, 2010; Webb, 2015). Understanding the particularities of migrant labour market integration experiences in different contexts is important as “new scenarios emerge at local, national and global levels” and “new insights and perspectives become necessary” (D’Angelo et al., 2020: 745).

The Africa-born population in Australia is diverse in terms of countries of origin, ethnicity, recency of arrival, age profile and migration trajectories, so it is possible to explore intersectionality and variation in accounting for differences in employment experiences. Black African-born migrants are a small and “visible” (Black) minority in a country where “whiteness is still a key category in the construction of the Australian nation” (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2008: 52; see also Hage, 2012).

In exploring these themes, this article focuses on the social context of migrant labour market integration and the role, dynamics and significance of social networks in the job-seeking experiences of Black African migrants. It draws on findings from a study of 141 African migrants residing in South Australia (SA), one of the least populous and ethnically diverse states in Australia. Qualitative (focus group) and quantitative (survey) methods were combined to explore how Africa-born job seekers understand and draw on social connections in their job searches. The paper starts with some background on the labour market integration experiences of the Africa-born Australians and then describes the conceptualisation of social networks in the context of labour market entry and mobility. The paper then explores the methodologies employed. The findings of this research relate to social networks and job-seeking experiences, and a key objective of this article is to present new data about the role played by social networks in employment outcomes. We conclude with an analysis of the formation and evolution of how social networks form and evolve amongst African migrant populations, and the implications of ethnic networks and groupness (or “outgroupness”) to job-seeking success when whiteness is privileged.

### 1.1 | Africa-born migrants in South Australia

African migrants represent a small but growing population in Australia, with 388,179 Africa-born Australians recorded in the 2016 Census (around 1.7% of the total population; ABS, 2016). This population is extremely diverse in terms of countries of birth, ethnicity,

recency of arrival, age profile and migration trajectories. African migration to Australia peaked between 1996 and 2005 with the arrival of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa on refugee and humanitarian visas. Since the 1990s, a small but steady stream has arrived on student or skilled visas.

Correspondingly, African migrants residing in SA are a small, diverse and relatively recent population. By 2016, 20,238 Africa-born migrants were residing in SA (1.2% of the population). More than half (54%) arrived after 2006 (ABS, 2016). The largest group (32.7%) was born in South Africa, with the remainder coming from 45 different countries, of which only 12 countries of birth had populations over 500 people<sup>1</sup>.

## 1.2 | Labour market integration of Africa-born migrants

Scholarship on the employment experiences of African migrants affirms the significance of work for social inclusion, participation and integration. A range of challenges face African migrants finding employment in their chosen field, with major barriers including: English proficiency and communication gaps (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012; Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012; Hebbani & Preece, 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2010; Lejukole et al., 2012); racism and discrimination (Abur & Spaaij, 2016; Hebbani, 2014; Udah et al., 2019); lack of desired social networks, work experience, qualifications and/or access to transport (Correa-Velez et al., 2015; Delaporte & Piracha, 2018); ineffective employment transition support services (Hebbani & Khawaja, 2018); and settlement location (i.e. settlement in regional or rural areas compared with cities) (Boese, 2013; Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009). These findings closely align with research on other migrant groups (Peters, 2008), suggesting systemic rather than community-specific challenges for migrant integration into the Australian labour market.

Research on the employment experiences of Africa-born migrants in Australia predominantly focusses on the experiences of those from select countries (Abur & Spaaij, 2016; Boese, 2013; Lejukole et al., 2012) and/or refugee and humanitarian visa holders (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009; Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012), except Udah (2018). Most research also tends to focus on states other than South Australia (Abur & Spaaij, 2016; Boese, 2013 for Victoria; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006 for Western Australia; Correa-Velez & Onsando, 2009; Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012; Udah, 2018, for Queensland). Lejukole et al. (2012) examined Sudanese experiences of *employment* in SA, while the *employment-seeking* experiences of SA African-born migrants remain unexplored. SA has a smaller and less diverse population compared to other Australian states with just 23% of South Australians being overseas-born (cf. 33% in Australia overall; ABS, 2016). Earlier studies focussed on recency of arrival and the intersections of employment and settlement. There is little research on migrants' experiences if they have been in Australia for over ten years, arrived under different migration streams, and whose job-seeking experiences are less hindered by the immediate challenges of resettlement in terms of language acquisition, credentialisation, establishing social networks and navigating Australian socio-cultural work contexts. Further, the role of social networks in the labour market experiences of African migrants has been neglected.

Africa-born migrants face heightened and distinct challenges. As illustrated in Table 1, there were more Africa-born migrants in work in 2016 compared to the national average (62.7% compared to 59.8%), but more were job seekers (6.7% unemployed compared to the national average of 4.4%).<sup>2</sup> Further, these statistics do not capture the quality and suitability of the jobs and/or potential problems of underemployment for those with jobs, likely to be a key problem given that deskilling in the Australian labour market is more pronounced for "visibly different" migrants (cf. Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Khawaja et al., 2019).

TABLE 1 Labour force status by birthplace region, 2016 (%)

	MENA	Africa-born	Asia	Americas	Oceania	Europe	Australia
Employed	41.2	62.7	59.1	65.8	62.0	48.2	59.8
Unemployed	6.8	6.7	6.0	5.2	4.3	2.6	4.4
Not in the labour force	50.8	29.7	34.1	28.4	32.7	47.7	34.8
Other	1.2	0.9	0.7	0.6	1.0	1.4	1.0

Source: Census TableBuilder, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016.

### 1.3 | Social networks and migrant labour market integration

Social networks, social capital, ties and connections are significant for labour market outcomes (Lancee, 2012). *Who we know* is important for *how* and *what kind* of employment we find (Granovetter, 1983). Interpersonal connections are important because they provide job seekers with information about opportunities, application processes, industry or employer insights, and signalling to a prospective employer an applicant's cultural fit within a workplace (Webb, 2015).

While it is generally accepted that social networks are important to employment, how these networks function across different industry and occupational contexts is less clear. What kinds of social ties are important for facilitating entry into employment? How much agency do individuals in shaping the networks to which they have access in their job search? Lancee's (2012: 155) analysis of immigrant social networks in Germany and the Netherlands found that social connections are not inherently beneficial (see Correa-Velez et al., 2015; Delaporte & Piracha, 2018; Mahuteau & Junankar, 2008; Webb, 2015, for similar findings in Australia). Concepts like social capital have "powerful, intuitive appeal" but its components "are many and varied and, in many instances, intangible" (Dasgupta, 2005: 1). Social capital may operate in different and complex ways (Patulny, 2015), with different positive and negative consequences (Nannestad et al., 2008; Portes & Landolt, 1996). Furthermore, social networks operate within the broader context of the job seeker's economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In analysing social networks and labour market integration, it is important to note that a person's social ties should not be pre-determined as an asset. The nature and implications of social networks are far messier than that. To use Dasgupta's (2005: 3) turn of phrase, there is a need to "remove some of the warm glow" that can surround the concept of social capital, for example those developed by Putnam (2000; see also Leonard, 2004, for critique). Granovetter distinguished between "weak ties" (acquaintances in low-density networks) and "strong ties" (close friends within densely knit networks), showing that the nature, strength and extent of a person's ties have implications for employment outcomes; there is a "strength of weak ties" because these are more important for occupational mobility and for securing particular types of work (e.g. managerial and professional) (Granovetter, 1983). On the other hand, strong ties are advantageous for those at the more precarious *and* the high end of the labour market (Bourdieu, 1986). More recently, Putnam (2000) made the distinction between bonding and bridging ties (cf. Lancee, 2012; Mahuteau & Junankar, 2008; Nannestad et al., 2008). Like strong ties, bonding ties constitute relationships with those who have a substantial commonality (such as family, ethnic, religious and linguistic similarity) and are typically "inward looking [and] tend to reinforce exclusive identities." A key feature of bonding ties is the expressive nature of the relationship, characterised by a high degree of intimacy, friendship and trust existing between the parties bonded within that network (Putnam, 2000; Ramsden & Taket, 2013). Also, bonding ties are typically shaped by cultural norms (Feng & Patulny, 2020).

Bonding ties can provide both positive and negative benefits to job search (Nannestad et al., 2008). In their positive form, bonding ties can provide powerful resources to job seekers. People

bonded through these ties can provide social support, assistance and guidance during the job search process, motivated by a personal desire to assist. In some cases, people within a bonded tie can act as agents, brokers and facilitators for their tie mates, assisting through the various stages of the recruitment process such as passing on information about the job, advising on the nuances of the application process, preparing for the selection process and providing recommendations and endorsements. A bonding tie can assist in the challenging process of dealing with the gatekeepers in the recruitment process. Ethnic bonded networks are especially important during initial labour market entry, by guiding people into easily obtained employment and can help create niche markets for “ethnic entrepreneurship” (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012: 111).

Bonding ties also have the dark potential signalled by Portes and Landolt (1996). Krieger (2000) points out that family ties may constrain a job seeker in their choices. Others point to new migrants experiencing “ethnic path integration” into more insecure work in secondary labour markets such as cleaning services, aged care, disability support services, meat processing, taxi driving, security and building (cf. Boese, 2013; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Udah et al., 2019). Further, ethnic path integration into insecure work is more pronounced for racialised groups (Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2006). While working in secondary labour markets can be understood as a rational course of action for newcomers seeking to find work quickly, in some cases, such communities have also been seen as “dysfunctional” by “holding back individuals” as “having a low-status job becomes an accepted community standard” (Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012: 532; see also Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Portes & Landolt, 1996).

Bridging ties represent “outward looking” connections with people “across diverse social cleavages” via inclusive rather exclusive networks (Putnam, 2000: 22). These ties are with people outside the job seeker's immediate community network and provide new and different information and opportunities – non-redundant information, in contrast to the often-redundant information within the bonding ties, which is freely available to everyone else within the bonding tie network. It is this diversity that enables the job seeker to find and actualise advantageous job search information and opportunities (Putnam, 2000: 22). Whereas bonding ties enable a job seeker to “get by,” bridging ties enable the job seeker to “get ahead” (Ramsden & Taket, 2013; de Souza Briggs, 1998). Further, bridging ties are primarily instrumental, focussed on achieving employment- and work-related outcomes, in contrast to the expressive character of bonding ties (Feng & Patulny, 2020; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993).

The effectiveness of bridging ties to lift a job seeker beyond their strong community-based bonding ties depends on how *vertical* the tie is (Ryan, 2011). The more vertical a tie is, the better able a job seeker is to access a broader and better array of opportunities, drawing on assistance from those in a better, more privileged position. Less vertical ties – that is horizontal ties – give weaker access to privileged information and leave the job seeker more reliant on information similar to that already available through their existing strong tie networks (Ryan, 2011). Those job seekers with greater vertical ties will be better able to get assistance and information in obtaining employment from beyond the domain of one's existing bonded network. An implication is that those job seekers who do not have the qualifications, experience, cultural capital, personal charm or luck to acquire, develop or use vertical bridging ties will be obliged to rely on bonding ties.

Patulny and Svendsen (2007) demonstrated that bridging and bonding ties are not dichotomous; a job seeker may have low or high levels of each type of tie. Nannestad et al. (2008) distinguished between positive and negative bonding ties. Ryan (2011) has pointed to the varying power of a bridging tie according to its verticality. Accordingly, Patulny (2015) proposed a job seeker may possess a combination of bridging and bonding ties, and these combinations may be placed along a spectrum, with different consequences for that job seeker's integration into the labour market, as well as the broader community. Patulny's (2015) framework highlights four combinations, each representing different levels of integration:



1. *Full integration*: The migrant job seeker obtains meaningful employment through their high levels of positive bonding and bridging capital. Here, the job seeker has access to vertical bridging ties that provide useful job information, along with supportive bonding capital that assists the job seeker in finding suitable employment. In these cases, the strong bond tie provides help as the person moves through the selection process.
2. *Transitional integration*: The job seeker has weak positive bonding ties but strong bridging ties. Job seekers have to make great efforts in developing new connections beyond their existing network, but without the strong bonding connections that could convert the potential of the vertical bridging tie into a more successful application. Here, the job seeker may have useful information about opportunities, but insufficient support to break through the steps of the recruitment process.
3. *Supportive segregation*: A supportively segregated job seeker has high levels of bonding capital and low levels of bridging capital. They may have many friends, in the right places as well as their own community, but their information about job opportunities is limited. Consequently, they struggle to find opportunities beyond those offered by their bonding tie networks and they are unlikely to find employment opportunities beyond those generated by their co-ethnic community.
4. *Coercive integration*: In Patulny's final combination, job seekers struggle against low levels of both bridging capital *and* bonding capital. They are most likely to be obliged to remain within the confines of their ethnic community networks, as they have neither the skills or the connections to find opportunities beyond those available to other members of the ethnic community.

In addition to this, some migrant job seekers may be the beneficiary of organisational diversity and inclusion policies, and recruitment processes that overcome the disadvantages faced by migrant job seekers. Over time, job seekers can acquire new and more positive bonding ties, and new and more vertical bridging networks, enabling job seekers to access better quality jobs outside their local networks. The difficulties in obtaining vertical bridging ties with suitable positive bonding ties can explain the role of ethnic networks in employment, and to the different trajectories of individual migrants and migrant communities in finding full integration in the broader labour market. This is illustrated in Fuller and Martin (2012), who compared the labour market integration experiences of migrant groups in Canada over time by migrants' social networks. These networks combine with other factors to create opportunities and constraints in job seeking and that this needs to be understood partly in terms of strategy and choice (decisions made by migrants themselves) and partly in terms of reception (how migrants are received and perceived). Fuller and Martin identify different employment trajectories among different ethnic groups. For first- and second-generation migrants, trajectories are uneven and multipath. Differences between migrant groups underscore how social connections combine with other factors (cultural, ethnicity, race and gender) to result in different trajectories for different migrant groups over time. More nuanced analyses of migrant labour market integration are needed "to account for differences in strategy as well as reception" (Fuller & Martin, 2012: 178).

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

Building on the theoretical insights from social capital and social network theory as expounded above, the following presents findings from a mixed-methods study conducted by researchers at the University of South Australia in partnership with the African Communities Council of South Australia, Australian Migrant Resource Centre and African Students Council of South Australia. The article presents data specifically from South Australia as a case study of a state

of Australia with a smaller population (approximately 1.7 million people, ABS, 2016) than the eastern states of Victoria (approx. 6.6 million), New South Wales (approx. 8.1 million) and Queensland (approx. 5.1 million), which have been the focus of much previous research with Africa-born migrants and refugees (Abur & Spaaij, 2016; Hebbani, 2014; Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012). Data were collected from five focus groups involving 32 participants and an online survey (109 responses). The focus groups and survey gathered data on participant demographics and employment status, and asked participants to identify job-seeking challenges and enablers.

Focus group questions were developed by the research team in collaboration with the three community partners as well as being informed by existing research. The focus groups were semi-structured conversations that asked participants to reflect on questions such as:

- Are you currently working in the type of employment that you would like to hold and that you feel fits with your qualifications?
- What helped you to find your current job?
- Please tell us about your experiences seeking employment in Australia (i.e. some of the challenges you experienced and some of the things you found helpful).

Following an initial analysis of the transcripts from focus group discussion undertaken by all research team members, key areas of interest were identified for further exploration in the online survey. Subsequently, a coding framework was developed by the research team and the focus group data were coded against this framework using NVivo. The survey questions covered a range of demographic data including visa status, birth country, languages spoken, country of qualification, education level and employment status. It then asked participants to respond to a range of questions relating specifically to employment seeking which were based on the focus group responses and existing research. The questions that are analysed in this article asked participants “To what extent have each of the following influenced your employment-seeking experiences” with response options ranging from “Very strongly” to “Not at all.”

- Job opportunities in South Australia.
- The strength of your personal social networks.
- Your knowledge about Australian culture.
- Employers’ knowledge about African culture/s.
- Your former employment experience/s.
- Your level of qualification being too high.
- Your level of qualification being too low.
- The country you received your qualification in.
- Your “race”.
- Your language or accent.
- Employers’ perceptions about Africans in Australia.
- Your limited prior employment interview experience.
- Limitations of your social networks.
- The profile of the role you are applying for (i.e. is it a customer facing role).

The survey responses were analysed through basic statistical analysis.

Recruitment of participants for focus groups and surveys was through social media, word-of-mouth, and through the community partners detailed above. Circulation of recruitment materials through Twitter and Facebook groups, including broad African–Australian groups meant that while there was a degree of snowball sampling from within the communities with which the researchers and community partners were engaged, there was a broader engagement with the research through these social media platforms, particularly

for the online survey. Participants were provided with information about the project and focus groups prior to commencing the focus group discussion, and consent forms were signed by each participant. The online survey commenced with information about the project and survey and consent was given through completion and submission of the survey. Three members of the research team are Africa-born migrants, with two being born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and one in South Sudan – the two largest Black African communities currently in South Australia. Their knowledge and experiences as well as their connections to various African communities in South Australia informed the development of the focus group and survey questions, the recruitment of participants, the analysis of the data and the writing of this article.

Participants in this study encompassed broad demographic diversity of Africa-born migrants in South Australia. All participants were residing in South Australia, were of working age (79.5% were aged between 20 and 49) and were born in Africa, with the majority of participants born in three countries: South Sudan (23.4%), the Democratic Republic of Congo (22.7%) and Kenya (22.7%). The remainder were born in 14 other countries (Burundi, Nigeria, Sudan, Liberia, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Libya, Uganda and Zambia). Most participants had been in Australia for over 10 years (average: 11.4 years). The majority (62.4%) had arrived on refugee and humanitarian visas, with 19.1% arriving on student visas and 9.2% as skilled migrants. There was even representation in terms of gender, with 71 (50.4%) participants identifying as female. With regard to education and employment levels, 87% held a vocational or university-level qualification, with 63% holding a Bachelor degree or higher. The majority (76%) had attained their qualifications from an Australian education and training institution. 78.7% of participants were in employment, while 18.4% were unemployed job seekers. Of those who had jobs, the majority were employed on a casual basis (42% of jobs), with 28% holding part-time and 27% holding full-time jobs. It is unsurprising, then, that 35 participants (25%) were working two or more jobs. Participants with jobs were working predominantly in hospitality and retail, transport, health and community services (particularly aged care, disability services and nursing).

### 3 | FINDINGS

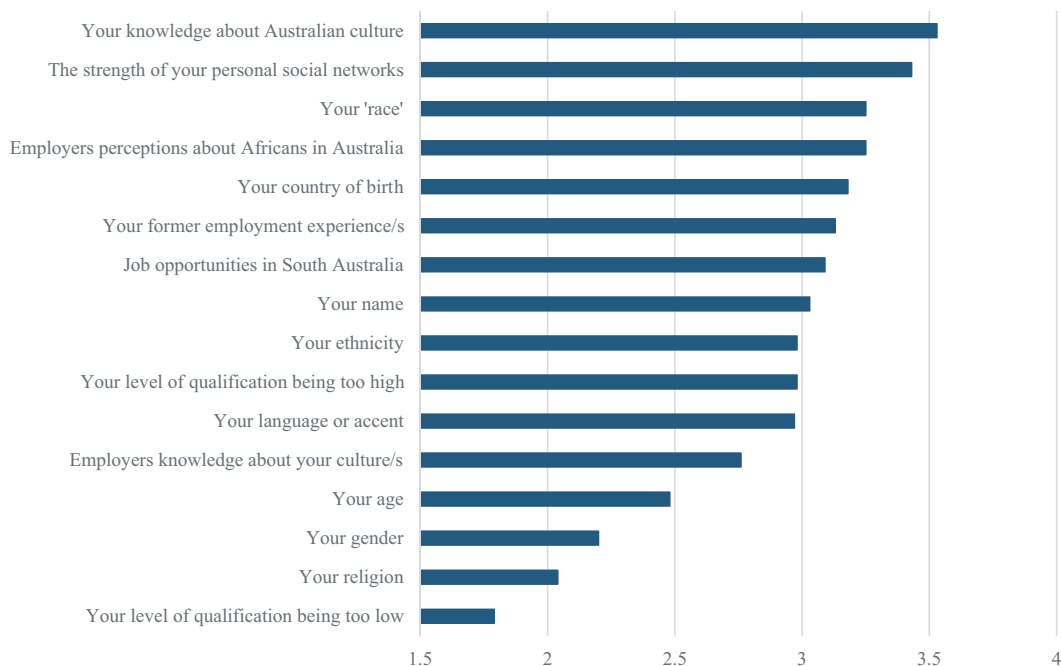
The following subsections consider the role of interpersonal connections in job seeking, what kinds of ties participants saw as valuable, and how ethnic (African) networks in the South Australian context were perceived to work for (or against) labour market entry and integration.

#### 3.1 | It's who you know not what you know

When survey participants were asked to identify influences on their employment-seeking experiences, strength of personal social networks was perceived as one of the strongest influences, second only to knowledge about Australian culture (see Figure 1). This finding correlates with themes identified in the focus group discussions, where a number of participants referred explicitly to the adage “It's not what you know but who you know that matters.”

In focus groups, the role and nature of social networks was broken down further, with many participants speaking about how friends and family (strong and bonding ties) and acquaintances (weak and bridging ties) helped them to find out about opportunities, encouraged them to apply for particular jobs and made recommendations to employers. Thus, the notion that job-seeking processes and outcomes are enabled by the different types of ties was confirmed by participants, as the following excerpts illustrate:





Note: Responses measured on a scale of 1 (Not important at all) to 5 (Very important)

FIGURE 1 Participants' perceptions about the importance of influences on job seeking

We know all of those organisations where these women are invited for a morning cup of tea, for breakfast, so that they can meet and mingle and then get to know who is the boss [at] one of these aged care centres. And that's how they get their jobs. This effect [is not just] on paper, not that I'm just speculating, but what I've seen in my nearly 25 or so years in this country. [...] So they're just small connections... that at least someone can open up a door.

I guess connection because my... one of my friends connected me: 'Oh, go to this service. Just apply, you get a job.' To tell you the truth, my first job I don't even know whether I applied [for] it; whether I left a resume. I just got a call. All I remember is being excited...about being called for an interview.

Indeed, it was not only "real" social connections that created opportunities. One woman told of how she ended up in a job because of a mistaken connection:

To get my other job I brought a referee as 'Caroline someone' and then the manager gave me the job because they thought the 'Caroline' I [put] there is someone they know. Later they realised it's not the same Caroline but, in four months, I got their best carer award because of that [mistake].

### 3.2 | Knowing the "right" (white) people

When describing what enables job-seeking success, many participants were cognisant not only of the importance of social connections, but also of having the right connections. One woman

described it as having a connection to people with social capital who could “*push you in.*” Furthermore, knowing the right people was described by a number of participants in racialised terms, as knowing or having “white friends.” For example, one young woman compared the social networks she could draw on to find work with those of her Caucasian friends, saying:

Looking at my Caucasian friends, their parents probably know other people like, ‘Oh, you want to be a lawyer? No problem my child!’ Just one phone call, then you have a job.

These experiences correspond with how Webb (2015) conceptualises “employment gatekeepers” as operating with a broader understanding of skill than is codified through things such as formal qualifications, and that speaks to how social capital is valued in the labour market. As Webb argues, it is often through trustworthy connections who can act as referees and verify or signal that a job seeker possesses the range of social-cultural skills employers look for to minimise the risk of miscommunication in the workplace and that a job seeker passes to the next stage of a recruitment process. In an employment market and social context largely dominated by whiteness, acquaintance with a white person was acknowledged by many participants in similar terms to what de Souza Briggs (1998: 206) calls “*leverage-type social capital,*” which combines vertical bridging and positive bonding ties. In Webb’s (2015) study, it is the migrant who joins a local netball club that more readily finds work. This idea, the need for vertical bridging ties that assist the job seeker through the various stages of the recruitment process, was supported by an anecdote told by one participant who attributed the employment success of two women she knew to their white husbands. The participant told how these husbands were visible in their wives’ job-seeking processes:

Their [white] husbands were actually the one that make the first contact to the office...then they applied and when they went there they give background information about themselves; they’re married to so-and-so, their husband work here..., things like that... And even when they came to do the interview their husband dropped them there and the husband sits there to wait for them to do the interview.

What is perceived here is a signalling of proximity to whiteness (Hage, 2012) and, arguably, the social capital of having a white husband to a prospective employer – the equivalent of joining the local netball club. While it is impossible to verify this anecdote, the idea of Africa-born job seekers needing to bend to the social-cultural (racialised) expectations of employers, and the effect of “passing for white,” or needing “more white friends” was a sentiment shared by others.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.3 | Community ties and the search for “solid employment”

White friends were not the only connections that factored into narratives about job-seeking among African migrants in South Australia. The role of social ties within ethnic communities (ethnic networks) also came up in focus groups, particularly with regard to acting as sources of information and advice for newcomers. The following participant responses illustrate the ways in which newer arrivals are socialised into particular types of work through community links:

[The] newly arrived they usually just go through the same like everyone else. They’re basically taxi driving... and now it’s Uber. [...] So when he came here everyone was telling him just to get your license and you do this.

When I came in, because in order to survive, you have to get something... So the fact is that every other Kenyan who steps in is advised to go for is aged care because [in] that industry there's a job... You just finish aged care [and] there's already [a] job.

These experiences resonate with other research showing ethnic networks as key to facilitating entry into secondary labour markets, but not necessarily into other kinds of work (cf. Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Creese & Wiebe, 2012; Farrugia, 2020; Mahuteau & Junankar, 2008). One participant observed:

A lot of people in our community work in aged care or disability services, so I can call my auntie or my friend and ask them for advice on how to get a job in this industry, but not if I want to be an accountant. There's no one that you know – who looks like you – that you can get advice and insights from to help you get a job at, say, [a bank].

Another participant made the distinction between ethnic community networks and those needed to find solid employment, implying that the former is less fruitful for finding secure work within professional fields:

...the job that [my sister is] in now – she works [as] a counsellor – it took years. It took five years, and that's through volunteering and all these things, and also building her network, her own connections, and that's what got her to where she is. And I feel like one of the biggest stumbling blocks within the African community in finding employment – and not just employment, a solid employment within a professional field – is connection.

### 3.4 | African ethnic networks in South Australia

Accounts such as those above suggest recognition that employment success comes from expanding who you know and, also, that building social networks takes time. This intuitively makes sense and is particularly relevant for migrants from smaller, less-established ethnic groups whose social networks may be more limited. This was articulated in a focus group of young people, one of whom said:

I feel like it boils down to connections because, when you look at the history of Australia, Africans [are] still new in the land... Where you look at other cultures – you look at the Italians [or] Asians, they've been here a long time – and they have had that opportunity to set a foundation down where generations after generations have connection. When you look at Africans, first of all... Africa is a continent and within that continent you have different types of Africans, and we barely know each other.

The idea that African migrants “*barely know each other*” makes sense when one considers the statistics cited earlier – that, among Africa-born migrants in South Australia in 2016, only 12 countries of birth had populations over 500 people, with the largest (from South Africa) numbering just over 6600 and the majority (54%) arriving after 2006. Furthermore, the trajectories and pre-arrival experiences of different Africa-born migrant groups speak of significant variation beyond ethnicity, language, country of birth or recency of arrival. For example, in one focus group there was a medical doctor who had arrived on a skilled migrant visa and spoke fluent English, in another there were women who had fled violent conflict and had spent many years in refugee

camp with limited access to either formal education or employment. These experiences, taken at their extremes, suggest that the nature and strength of ties within and across African ethnic communities – that which are presumed to constitute social capital – may vary considerably.

Pre-arrival experiences of forced displacement were one area where variation across ethnic communities was discussed as having implications for both evolving network formation and job-seeking experiences. One member of the research team identified differences observed within their own community, explaining how elders who had struggled to survive in refugee camps often valued and nurtured their strong ties (more narrowly bound by ethnic or tribal affiliations) to a greater extent, with some more hesitant to establish a wider network. In addition, it was observed that knowledge within refugee communities about the labour market may be more limited, with one female participant saying: “*I think there are only four jobs that are acceptable to our parents: doctors, nurses, lawyers and engineers.*” Younger generations struggled to meet both the aspirational expectations of their parents’ generation, but also to find support within their (strong ties) networks to pursue diverse opportunities available in the Australian labour market – opportunities where there was no frame of reference for those who had spent significant periods of time in conflict or displacement contexts.

What was clear from focus groups was how job-seeking experiences are shaped by inter-generational and temporal differences in how migrants understood and built their social networks. Young people who had grown up in South Australia spoke more confidently of needing to expand their networks, even where this triggered an “*identity crisis.*” As one participant said, “*even to build that connection I feel like you have to change yourself in a sense; you have to change how you are and how you behave, how you speak to conform to that group of people, to build that connection, to get that job. It's all a whole process.*” Younger participants spoke of the value of their own networks extending beyond the need for “*more white friends,*” but to being able to develop connections with other people from different backgrounds through sport, school or casual work that would lay the foundation for future success. As one participant concluded:

In Australia, it's one [step] at a time and I feel like our parents, our older generation, have set that foundation by bringing us here and giving us a better opportunity. Now we are that generation that lays the foundation down. I guess, you know, when you go build a house you buy the equipment but then you need an architect to lay the foundation and we are the architects, and then generations after us will start building from that.

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Africa-born migrants in South Australia are a small, diverse and growing population whose experiences of labour market integration are mediated by both reception (how they are received and perceived) as well as strategy and choice (decisions made by migrants themselves). While there were common frustrations and evident challenges in job-seeking among this population, borne out in comparatively higher unemployment figures and supported in findings from our study, there was also significant variation in experiences by age, pre-migration experiences, industry type, gender and recency of arrival. With regard to reception, racism and discrimination were common experiences, leading some job seekers to lower expectations, pursuing work in secondary labour markets that were perceived as more accessible than those befitting their qualifications, experience or aspirations. For successful job-seeking strategies, participants recognised the importance of social networks but again with variations across generations, over time, and influenced by pre-migration experiences and family expectations.

Many participants recognised that knowing the right people was an enabler of success. In Bourdieusian terms, without the right set of bonding and bridging ties, an applicant's cultural

and economic capital would not be engaged. The benefit of establishing connections to those outside one's close, trusted circle, as Granovetter (1983) argues, comes from developing cognitive flexibility and an ability to communicate in ways that people who may be quite different from us can understand, such as in workplaces. Many of our participants were cognisant of this, and this was reflected in the survey with job seekers rating knowledge of Australian culture as the most significant influence on finding employment (see Figure 1).

The focus group interviews demonstrated the importance of a job seeker's connections to other people, especially with people already established in the local workforce and who had knowledge and networks across the labour market. Often the outcome of the job search depended on the job seeker's combination of bonding and bridging ties. If a job seeker had developed vertical bridging ties, they would know about better job opportunities that would better use their skills than those with only bonding ties. But bridging ties were not always sufficient. Sometimes the job seeker needed additional help. For many, it was not merely enough to have expertise, qualifications, capability or enthusiasm – a job seeker often needed someone to provide information about the availability of a job, to make introductions and to generally assist in the process of connecting the applicant with potential employer.

Here, positive bridging ties were important, when someone with prestige and knowledge and a personal connection to the job seeker was able to provide help during the recruitment and selection process – illustrated by the fact that many of the participants mentioned the need for a white friend or connection. A job seeker with a full integration combination of positive bonding ties and vertical bridging ties is better able to find employment complementing capabilities. But, as the focus groups highlighted, many did not have a full integration set of ties. Nor did every ethnic group have the resources or expertise to assist people in developing these ties. For those without vertical bridging ties, they were obliged to fall back on the information and assistance provided by their bonding ties. These ties had positive effects – helping people not only to find a job but also assisting them in learning about the idiosyncrasies of the local market. But these ties could also have a negative effect, drawing people into jobs in the secondary labour market without providing assistance to move into employment that better suits them.

It is for this reason that there have been numerous calls for initiatives that help migrants build wider social networks (Delaporte & Piracha, 2018; Fuller & Martin, 2012; Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012). Yet, the avenues and extent to which Africa-born migrants can build or nurture social networks are as yet unknown. In terms of African community networks in South Australia, our research suggests that ethnic networks are currently not a path that leads to work outside of secondary labour markets because participants are in small and recently arrived communities, without deep and broad connections to “*solid employment*.” As some participants in this study recognised, building social connections takes time and requires members of a network to first gain entry into different types of work and who can then build bridges for others.

There is some evidence that African migrant networks are evolving in South Australia and coming together in some contexts as Africans with the potential for widening social networks – something the partner organisations in this study can attest to<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, it should not be assumed that there are or will be strong ties across African communities. Whether Africa-born migrants in South Australia decide to nurture connections to become a dense, trusted network is far from clear. Indeed, there are those who have experienced violent conflict based on ethnicity or tribal affiliation, so to assume that connections will be made across these divisions in Australia is naïve at best. The context reflects classic socialisation into groupness. SA Africa-born job seekers in South Australia are a small and visible Black minority. As Tajfel (1970: 102) suggests, “Socialization into ‘groupness’ is powerful and unavoidable; it has innumerable valuable functions. It also has some odd side effects that may – and do – reinforce acute intergroup tensions whose roots lie elsewhere.” Drawing on this idea and



the common experience of racism and discrimination described by our participants, Black African migrants may be considered an outgroup and the challenges of trying to find work in a social context where whiteness is privileged helps us understand the job-seeking experiences, difficulties and strategies of this population.

Insights from Tilbury and Colic-Peisker's (2006: 671) research into employers' attitudes to workplace diversity in Western Australia suggests that cultural racism is "embedded in the market." The "visibly different" need to become "invisible" in order to succeed in the job market (see also Uda, 2018), underscoring the role of reception and migrant labour market integration. Whether or not African migrants nurture stronger ethnic networks or cast their net more widely, how they are received and perceived as individuals or as members of a group is essential to their employment outcomes. Being identified as a Black African in Australia is not something a person can choose to exit from (see Wintrobe, 1995 on the impossibility of exit from ethnic networks), and nor should they have to. A bigger question is how African migrants, in all their diversity, are or will be perceived and received by prospective employers in their search for meaningful employment. If integration is understood as a two-way process, bending to whiteness or becoming invisible in order to succeed should not be the strategy to which African migrants have to bend. Instead, employers should bend to African migrants' richness, diversity, knowledge and unique experiences. If migrant-receiving countries like Australia really want to address the migrant employment gap, much more needs to be done not only to help new migrants build social networks, but also to develop substantial policies to mitigate against embedded racism (Soutphommasane, 2013) as an integral strategy for migrant labour market integration.


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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> These were: South Africa (6609), Kenya (1699), Zimbabwe (1486), Egypt (1466), Sudan (992), South Sudan (903), Ethiopia (799), Democratic Republic of Congo (677), Burundi (577), Liberia (567), Nigeria (522) and Tanzania (513) (Census TableBuilder, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).
- <sup>2</sup> This chart was built from the "Labour force status and hours worked" (LFHRP) and "Birth place region" (BPLP) data from the 2016 Census (Census TableBuilder, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). In order to correspond with the participant profile in this study, which includes migrants from all of continental Africa, the 'Africa-born' category combines the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 'sub-Saharan Africa' region with countries in North Africa (included in the ABS "North Africa and Middle East" region). There is, therefore, some overlap between the "North Africa and the Middle East" and "Africa-born" regions in this chart. Other ABS regions have also been combined. In this chart, "Asia" includes the ABS regions of "Southern and Central Asia," "North-East Asia" and "South-East Asia." "Europe" includes the ABS "Southern and Eastern Europe" and "North-West Europe" regions. Detail on ABS regions can be found here: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2901.0Chapter1102016>.
- <sup>3</sup> The racialised aspects of employment seeking and particularly this form of "racial" bridging were particularly complex and prevalent in the discussions of the participants. As such, they are considered in more details in a forthcoming publication from the research team.
- <sup>4</sup> The African Communities Council of South Australia (ACCSA) and African Students Council of South Australia (ASCSA) are both pan-African networks and were partners in this research.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of the article at the publisher's website.

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