

Title:

Habitus, practice and agency of young East Timorese asylum seekers in Australia

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Abstract:

This article explores the process of agency and empowerment through a case study of a group of young East Timorese asylum seekers who arrived in Australia during the 1990s. Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus and his theory of practice, the article considers how the asylum seekers dealt with the challenges of exile and adjusted to Australian society. In addition to the difficulties asylum seekers normally face in exile, such as limited financial and social support and coping with trauma and loss, the East Timorese who arrived during the 1990s faced particular challenges due to the Australian Government's treatment of their cases. The article argues that, despite their vulnerable and liminal position, the asylum seekers were not just passive victims. On the contrary, they were active agents who through practice, consciously or unconsciously, dealt with their liminal situation. Their power to act was positively affected by their young age upon arrival.

Keywords:

East Timor; asylum seekers; youth; habitus; practice; agency

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The anthropological study of refugees is a relatively recent focus of the discipline. The study of refugees has traditionally been embedded within a functionalist model of society in which, as Malkki (1995, p. 508) suggests, displacement represents 'an anomaly in the life of an otherwise "whole," stable, sedentary society'. Exile has been perceived as a discontinuous state of being (Said 2000), a liminal zone or an anti-structure characterised by uncertainty and lack of coherence. Refugees and other displaced people have often been perceived as 'pathological victims' (Sørensen 1997, p. 147), living in a state of alienation and isolation in which they may experience loss of identity and face challenges to their behaviour and social practice (Marrus 1985; Shawcross 1989; Stein 1981). Indeed, the devastating effects of exile should not be underestimated. However, intensification of global networks of human relations and the lack of one-to-one relationships between place and cultural expression pose a challenge to traditional refugee studies (Hastrup & Olwig 1997). A heightened perception of culture and society as differentiated and dynamic, and personal identity as a complex sense of being and belonging, developed, negotiated and transformed in relation to multiple spaces (Sørensen 1997, p. 146) urges us to reconsider the conventional perception of exile as a state of sadness and uprootedness and to acknowledge that exile may also entail individual agency and empowerment.

This article explores the process of agency and empowerment through a case study of a group of young East Timorese asylum seekers who arrived in Australia during the 1990s. Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus and his theory of practice developed in his classic work *An Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), I question whether exile is such a discontinuous state of being as the traditional refugee literature suggests. I draw on Bourdieu's concepts as a tool to consider the young East Timorese asylum seekers' response to cultural change. I focus on the importance of practice in the asylum seekers' engagement with their situation in exile. The article is divided into two main parts. I first outline the difficulties facing the young East Timorese asylum seekers in exile and then analyse the significance of agency and practice in the participants' response to their experiences in exile.

Methods:

Between August 2003 and April 2004, I conducted field research with young East Timorese in Sydney and Melbourne.[1] It was difficult to conduct long-term community-based fieldwork. The participants in the study all live in different areas of Sydney and Melbourne, and they do not have a common association with a particular community organisation. Accordingly, the research utilised a methodological approach more suited to the social context of their daily lives. Over a period of months, I met with people from various church, social, welfare and other organisations intimately involved with the East Timorese diaspora who could help me identify young interviewees and I regularly participated in various community events such as fundraisers, parties and forums in suburban Sydney and Melbourne. In addition to such social interactions with East Timorese people living in New South Wales and Victoria, I conducted interviews (45 minutes-2 hours) with twelve young East Timorese asylum seekers. These interviews, exploring their experiences and stories of socialisation, identity and belonging, constitute the core research material. I used an open-ended interview schedule based on three topics: life in Australia, life in East Timor and the future. Due to ethical considerations, the interviewees were not asked directly about specific traumatic experiences, although these matters did arise in the discussions. The interviews took place at the participants' homes or another location convenient to the interviewees.

The participant group was selected because of their first-hand experience of conflict, flight and socialisation into a new culture at a young age. The participants were between 18 and 32 years of age, and were proficient in English. Seven of the twelve participants were indigenous Timorese or had a mixed Timorese

and Portuguese heritage, while five were Timorese Chinese. All arrived in Australia during the 1990s, and were children or young adolescents at the time of arrival.

There is a small group of people whom I did not reach through my interaction with the community. This is the group of young people who continuously struggle with settlement issues, trauma, trust, language, school and daily survival. These young people rarely associate with the groups and organisations that assisted me in the recruitment process and, given also time constraints, limited researcher mobility and restrictions of ethics, I was unable to make contact with them. Moreover, I was told by youth and social workers who work with the East Timorese community that, due to their difficult circumstances, many would be reluctant to take part in the study. It should therefore be noted that the participant group is drawn from a group of East Timorese who articulate a relatively homogeneous narrative of successful resettlement. This does not imply that the participants did not grapple with challenges of displacement, trauma and loss. As the following section illustrates, trauma, loss and hardship were certainly part of their reality in exile.

Victims of War and Forced Displacement:

Before discussing the young East Timorese asylum seekers' agency in exile, I will briefly outline some of the difficulties they faced as victims of war and forced displacement. Born after the 1975 Indonesian invasion of East Timor, the participants in the study grew up in a society characterised by fear and tension. Despite their young age, the majority of the participants experienced the authoritarian powers of the militarised regime in one way or another. Of those that I interviewed, ten conveyed memories of political instability, combat situations, interrogation, loss of family members or friends and other forms of personal involvement in the resistance, torture or persecution.

The young East Timorese asylum seekers' trauma continued in exile. Australian anthropologist Amanda Wise argues in her discussion of trauma and collective identities among the East Timorese refugees in Australia that '[e]xacerbating the primary trauma, the effects of trauma and loss are often experienced more intensively under the kinds of conditions of isolation, loss, and displacement that forced migration entails' (2004, p. 31). Exile is in itself an ambiguous state of disruption and loss, and may impose further distress as a result of the separation from homeland, family and friends. Such anguish may be coupled with initial experiences of culture shock, collapse of meaning, loneliness and alienation. Facing a new reality and removed from many of the conditions that previously underpinned identity and sense of belonging, the participants in this study felt increasingly alone and experienced a sense of lost identity and diminished meaning of their existence. The following quotes from interviews encapsulate the common experience of first arrival:

First, when I was came over to Australia it's a bit hard for me to settle down in here 'cause obviously, the change, like the culture, the food, the lifestyle, everything is so different to where I come from and I can't even speak the language and that's the biggest problems that I'm facing, 'cause I can't go anywhere, I stay at home and do nothing and it make me*like over there I've got a lot of friends, here I'm just like a bird inside the cage.

It was really bad [when arriving in Australia]. Really bad. I don't know it was really difficult for me especially. I never been apart of my family, like my parents and that. All I do was, like, when we came 'cause my mum stayed with us for a few weeks, and was happy, happy, happy, 'cause we thought we just came here for holiday, you know, so everything will be good. But in then, after she left, everything seemed so bad, like different. And we had a wardrobe at home. What I do, I just stay there. I lock myself inside. I don't wanna see nobody, nothing. I don't wanna face nobody.

The difficulties in exile were further exacerbated by the Australian government's treatment of their applications for protection. The East Timorese asylum seekers who arrived in the 1990s encountered a different set of immigration policies than the refugees arriving in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s, all of whom acquired permanent residency.[2] After the Timor Gap Treaty with Indonesia was signed in 1989 and the national boundaries of the oil-rich fields of the Timor Sea thereby delineated (Clark 1995, pp. 74-5), a harder line replaced the Australian Government's previously sympathetic stance towards the allocation of permanent residency to East Timorese refugees. In order to facilitate negotiation it was paramount for the Australian Government to maintain a good relationship with Indonesia, and, when 1,200 East Timorese refugees arrived in Australia in 1994, a new strategy was employed. From the official perspective, accepting these refugees could be perceived as a public critique of, and offensive to, Indonesia. Accordingly, the Australian Government claimed that the asylum seekers should be entitled to Portuguese nationality, disqualifying them from seeking refugee status regardless of the validity of their claims of persecution. Their applications were put on hold, leaving them in a state of uncertainty for up to twelve years (Wise 2006, pp. 45-7).[3]

The majority of the East Timorese asylum seekers were offered bridging visas while waiting for their applications for protection to be processed. There are different types of bridging visas, giving asylum seekers varying access to services and disparate entitlements, depending on the timing of the application and its circumstances (Mohamed et al . 2002, p. 30). The participants in this study were offered 'bridging visa A', which entitled them to the right to work, access to healthcare and, for minors, primary and secondary schooling. In other words, they had the right to live temporarily in Australia but had no certain prospect of resettlement, with the entitlements this implies. The temporary nature of their visa situation left them in a liminal position in which they were separated from their home, family and friends while simultaneously being denied the right to re-establish their lives in exile. Fear of repatriation and ongoing uncertainty permeated the young people's everyday lives, and concern regarding the outcome of the application process led to enhanced anxiety and stress. As the quote below suggests, the participants articulated a sense of being in limbo, of their lives being put on hold, affecting their capacity to plan and relate to their future. Some of the participants also conveyed feelings of loneliness, depression and anxiety, and many articulated ongoing feelings of helplessness and lack of control over their lives.

[L]ike asylum seeker, you didn't see clear about your future, you stay here or you go back to your country, and when. ...e didn't know this, you know. The government doesn't give you answers. This is being in limbo. And then it's really hard to as well to organise, to make prepare for yourself, like you wanna buy a house, you wanna study, you wanna working for living. ...And you can't go back to your country, 'cause it's hard for you as well to make a decision when you feel in limbo, 'cause you can go see everything is dark for your soul, you can't see the light. If you wanna go this, a little bit of worry, you know, I can get in trouble. You can't go back, can get in trouble. You can't go forwards. You stuck in the middle.

However, as I will illustrate in the following section, the young asylum seekers were not merely passive victims. Rather, by means of personal agency and practice, they succeeded in improving the liminal situation in which they found themselves.

Habitus, Practice and Agency:

Edward Said (2000, p. 180) contends that, when starting their lives in exile, large parts of the refugees' lives will be occupied by the challenge of creating a new world of which they themselves can get in command. He argues somewhat pessimistically that exile is:

the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. ...The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Said 2000, p. 173)

Because they are cut off from their roots and their past, exiles feel 'an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives' (Said 2000, p. 177); they need to 'reassemble an identity' out of the discontinuities and refractions of exile (Said 2000, p. 170). In order to do so, exiles need to re-create meaning within new cultural discourses. These cultural discourses guide practice, produce relations of power and configure, classify and normalise the social world, embracing particular combinations of narratives, concepts, ideologies and signifying practices. Exiles must develop an understanding of this cultural logic upon which perception within the new society is founded. Only when they possess such an understanding do they have the choice of participation and subsequent opportunities of improving their lives in exile. The question is: how do refugees and asylum seekers develop such an understanding? To answer this question I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) notion of habitus and his theory of practice.

Habitus refers to the principles of generating and structuring practices and representations, subsequently producing identity through particular dispositions and structures of perception which are associated with a sensory environment. Acquired through primary socialisation in childhood and adolescence, habitus is continuously reproduced and transformed throughout the life of each individual, its reproduction being determined by its past conditions (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus is an embodiment of personal history, including social location (class, ethnicity, gender, etc.). It is constructed through the individual's practice within particular social, cultural and historical contexts, and reflects not only the individual's biography but also the collective history of the group (or variety of groups) to which the individual belongs. That is, the individual's habitus and the logic of her or his practice will reflect the social field within which she or he acts. A social 'field' is a relatively autonomous network, or configuration, of objective relations, a particular social space characterised by its determinate agents, accumulation of history, forms of capital and a particular logic of action (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989, p. 39). Within each field there is a game of power that follows particular rules by which the individuals act and negotiate their relations. Thus, it provides fundamental resources, values and relations by which the person creates her or his internal perception of self, and, moreover, negotiates and transforms the underlying dispositions creating meaning and practice (habitus) (Bourdieu 1977).

Bourdieu argues that '[t]hrough the systematic "choices" it makes among the places, events and people that might be frequented, the habitus tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible' (1990, p. 61). But what happens when the individual or the individual's habitus has no such 'choice', as in the case of refugees and asylum seekers who are forced to relate to new fields and an unknown milieu? Bourdieu makes references to such 'crises' in which discordance between subjective dispositions and objective structures appear. He claims that:

[t]he critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation, has as the condition of its possibility objective crisis, which, in breaking the immediate fit between the subjective structures and the objective structures, destroys self-evidence practically. It is when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon that the question of the natural or conventional character (phusei or nomoi) of social facts can be raised. (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 168-9)

Arriving in exile, refugees and asylum seekers enter such a crisis in which their embodied assumptions are brought into the sphere of consciousness. They are forced to relate to an unknown milieu and unfamiliar structures, and to face the challenges this poses for their habitus. The dissonance between their habitus and the objective conditions lead to experiences such as those outlined above: culture shock, collapse of meaning, loneliness, isolation and alienation.

The crisis in which they find themselves is compounded by loss of capital, that being financial, symbolic (i.e. status), social (i.e. contacts and networks) and cultural capital (i.e. educational qualification, language, artefacts and goods, etc.). As social position is largely defined by capital assets, access to capital will determine conditions that form life experiences and practice, and thus habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1984; Crossley 2001, p. 87). Capital, alongside dispositions and positions, shapes opportunities for action within an ongoing field. Experiences of declining social status and restricted possibilities due to limited access to relevant capital will therefore further affect life in exile. Faced with an unknown social field and without access to the various forms of capital, refugees and asylum seekers may experience loss of movement and possibilities for action. How do they overcome these critical challenges? How do they accumulate capital central for their movement and practice within the new field?

The development of habitus and the accumulation of capital is a significant part of Bourdieu's theory of practice; however, little is said about how this process takes place. He concentrates on the inert and conservative nature of habitus, and his framework says more about its reproduction than its transformation (Crossley 2001; Noble & Watkins 2003). According to Noble & Watkins (2003, p. 527), Bourdieu's theory reduces the process of change in which refugees and asylum seekers engage to a process of 'alchemy' through which the individual's habitus gradually adjusts to the new environment, creating a 'sense of one's place' as well as 'a sense of the places of others' (Bourdieu 1989, p. 19). This inherent determinism of Bourdieu's argument is problematic when discussing the situation of refugees and asylum seekers. It reduces agency to an effect of structure, undermines the generative capacity of habitus and suggests that action is contained and constructed through an embodied pre-understanding of the world. If this is so, how can we explain the practice of refugees and asylum seekers within unfamiliar fields? Bourdieu contends that 'the scheme of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will' (1984, p. 466). Although Bourdieu recognises the opportunity for critical reflection at times of crisis, according to Crossley (2001, p. 97) he underestimates the level of reflection and conscious calculation, which is part of people's everyday life. Prior to arrival in exile, refugees and asylum seekers have an already habituated mastery of reflexivity and will accordingly possess the opportunity of conscious involvement with, and creative agency within, the structures of the host country.

The young East Timorese asylum seekers' agency in exile exhibits two levels of consciousness. First, faced with unfamiliar structures and foreign fields, they were made aware of their embodied assumptions. They attained what Noble and Watkins (2003), p. 530) call 'agentic reflection'. Agentic reflection refers to the kinds of ordinary reflection that social agents continuously engage in. It is:

that discursive practice in which we consider our behaviour and its principles. ...It is not critical, in that it does not necessarily entail some engagement with relations of power or the sense of social location; rather it is an awareness of what we have done and what we can do. (Noble & Watkins 2003, p. 531)

Agentic reflection is particularly evident in the young asylum seekers' response to the restricted position they found themselves in due to the Australian immigration policies. Through conscious strategies directed towards changing their visa situation, they attempted to improve their situation. This included participating in protests and media campaigns, writing letters to the Department of Immigration and Multi-cultural Affairs (DIMA) and the Minister of Immigration and engaging with various support organisations and legal groups, such as the Sanctuary Network and the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre.[4] Agentic reflection was also evident in the young asylum seekers' re-accumulation of (cultural) capital and engagement with their embodied experiences (habitus). They consciously engaged with issues such as language and bodily expressions, negotiating their former practice and habitus in relation to previous and imagined actions and capacities.

Second, through everyday practice and interaction with their local communities, the young asylum seekers dealt with primary trauma, loss and difficulties experienced when resettling in the new country. They adopted a level of awareness that took form as intuitive responses to external physical stimuli. This 'automaticity' is similar to what Bourdieu terms 'practical sense' (1977; Noble & Watkins 2003, p. 532). It is guided by the structural circumstances and objective conditions of the host country, and leads to the gradual transformation of habitus and the development of a practical mastery of the tacit rules of the social world.

Both agentic reflection and practical sense emerge in a dialogue between the conditions of the host country and the particular personal characteristics of the individual, in the dialectic of conditions and habitus. Hence, it is important to understand how particular social fields, as well as personal characteristics, guide refugees' and asylum seekers' interaction within the new environment. In the case of the young East Timorese asylum seekers, their age upon arrival particularly affected their interaction with the host society and the process of settlement and acculturation. This will be explored in the following section.

Youth, Habitus and Practice:

One of the participants of the study told me that:

that's what made it easier, that's why, like I said, if I'd come ...[to Australia] in '99 that would have been a lot harder, after, because I would have been 14 and that would have been a lot harder. That would've been during my teenage years, and after, I would've been making friends there [in East Timor] as well, so that would've been harder, so yeah. Just being a young and starting it young made it really, really easy for me, especially the language, to pick it up.

As this quote suggests, youth can act as a significant force in an individual's response to cultural change. This can be explained in relation to, first, the development of habitus, and, second, young people's access to institutional structures that encourage practice and reflection, introduce the individual to the cultural logic of the host community and provide fields for the accumulation of new capital.

Arriving as children or young adolescents, the participants in the study had the potential to energise and excite their habitus in accordance with the new environment to which they were introduced. Children and young adolescents have, as noted by Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder, 'fewer vested interests in, and motivations to, preserve the existing social order than do adults, and thus are less anxious about change' (2002, p. 245). Their agency is coupled with high levels of mobility and openness to modification to life conditions and social reality, and their response to cultural change will therefore differ from that of adults, whose 'habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information' (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 60-1). Through their engagement with their local communities the young asylum seekers entered a spiral through which practice and meaning positively reinforced each other: practice, in the form of repeated action, led to an embodied understanding of the new society, encouraging further practice. Everyday tasks that had initially been foreign and a source of frustration, such as catching public transport, shopping and paying bills, gradually became familiar and naturalised. Similarly, through everyday practice, the study participants engaged with cultural and societal traits which had initially caused feelings of alienation and lack of meaning, such as the multicultural character of Australian society. Indeed, the majority of the participants cited multiculturalism and differences in values as significant stumbling blocks to resettlement in Australia. This is illustrated by the following two quotes:

[T]he first time I came here I feel very, very alienated. Not really belong to Australian society, because, you know, whatever it is that you see, it's very new and you don't know any thing, and you were really, really young and you don't know what to do. And, especially Australia is a

multicultural society and it has a lot of very different values that mix together and sometimes you just don't know exactly what to do, which one to follow.

The most difficult [aspect of life in Australia], I have to say, the culture. Because it's a mixed culture and it's so hard for you to adapt to the culture because I'm from the kind of culture that I've never been outside before in my life and suddenly you go 'bang!' you're here and you see so much different culture and you don't know which one is to adapt, to follow.

By engaging with their local communities and new social fields through everyday practice, the participants became familiar with the multicultural character of Australian society. Their cognitive structures were developed within the context of both East Timorese and Australian discourses, and they acquired a cultural logic that enabled them, and indeed continues to enable them, to create meaning and act within and across both the East Timorese and the Australian context.

The participants' access to various social fields acted as a catalyst for their interaction with the new environment. On this point there appears to be a difference between the younger and the older participants in the study. Those who arrived at school age were in a favourable position. School is a powerful field for the development of habitus and the distribution of cultural capital. For the young asylum seekers, it provided access to a particular social field, which offered, although in varying degrees, socialisation and education in accordance with a standardised, institutionalised and gradual process (Bourdieu 1995, pp. 142-3). As a result, their education followed a similar process to that of their peers, and they attained opportunities for accumulation of cultural, social and symbolic capital corresponding to that of local youth.

Through schooling, the young East Timorese asylum seekers were not only introduced to the logic of the host society as a whole, they also became part of its hierarchical structures. As Bourdieu argues, 'the school institution contributes ...to the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital and, consequently, of the structure of social space ...[it] ensures that capital finds its way to capital and that the social structure tends to perpetuate itself' (1998, p. 19, emphasis in original). Participation within this field gradually endowed the young asylum seekers with embodied experiences of the structures, conditions and power relations of the new society. As their practice was refined through their agency within this particular field, an understanding of the complex structures of the host society developed and they could participate in the various choices and decisions facing other young people in their social environment. Moreover, attending school provided them with a context in which they could meet people and deal with experiences of isolation and loneliness. It was a place for fun, where friendships could be made and interests fostered. New friendships and participation in various after-school activities increased their confidence and were a source of empowerment. Furthermore, the support and encouragement from teachers and significant others provided the young asylum seekers with role models and further increased a sense of belonging. The positive experience of school is summarised in the following statements:

[I]t was really difficult before I start school. So, when I start school everything changes, like, like when I just came everything seemed so weird, like I don't wanna talk to nobody, I don't wanna know anybody, all I do is just lock myself in the room, like I don't wanna see nobody. But, and, yeah, everything changes when I start involving with school, making friends, you know, so it's pretty awesome.

[O]ur homeroom teacher ...she was the only person that I can look up to. I think she's really, she understands me. She helped me through, like, you know how the asylum seeker and that, she helped me to write letters [to the Minister of Immigration], she helps me to talk to other teachers about my situation and that.

I just went to school. Because, you know, you've got friends there, and school is fun! Yeah, well that's all it was to me. Like all your friends. Like what are you gonna do if you don't go to school?

Attending school provided the young asylum seekers with a facility for language acquisition, one of the most important cultural assets. Language promotes social interaction with collectives and represents, as Crossley contends, 'embodiments of our schemas of typification. Language and language games ...are embodiments of the shared practical sense of a society or social group. They give durable forms to habits of perception, conception and reflection that have formed within the group' (2001, p. 110). Language is paramount for inclusion in and participation within the new society. Enhanced language proficiency inaugurates social fields for interaction and contributes to increased self-confidence and security, positively affecting general interaction with the community and feelings of belonging (Hyman et al. 2000).

Language acquisition is one of the major challenges facing newly arrived refugees, and lack of language skills can be a source of ongoing frustration, isolation and exclusion. As Wise contends, '[l]anguage difficulties can have profound effects on a person's life' (2006, p. 57), and, with little knowledge of the new language, 'it is very difficult to handle the complexities of immigration, filling in forms, understanding letters, dealing with social security and so on. This can create an enormous feeling of frustration and powerlessness' (Wise 2006, p. 56). As asylum seekers, the study participants remained ineligible for federally funded language services accessible to other refugees and migrants, and, consequently, school became an important source of opportunities to learn and practice the new language. Access to schooling reduced frustration related to language difficulties. In turn, for the majority of the participants, improved language skills alleviated academic difficulties and contributed to increased self-confidence and security, positively affecting new friendships. This encouraged further engagement with the community, and, ultimately, developed and transformed habitus in relation to the new cultural milieu in which they now belong.

The participants who arrived in Australia in their mid-teens or older and were ineligible for schooling faced greater challenges. Their legal status as asylum seekers limited their access to fields in which they could create an understanding of the new society and accumulate capital that would encourage future practice. Ineligibility for language support and employment programmes, coupled with high levels of trauma and restricted access to mental health and psychosocial services, limited their engagement with formal spheres through which the process of resettlement and integration could be eased (cf. Graydon 1998; Rees 2003a,b; Silove et al. 2002). They relied heavily on their extended family and friends who helped with interpretation and provided basic information about government and non-government assistance.

Whereas the younger participants had automatic access to an important social field of the host society, the older participants were essentially left to themselves and the process of resettlement depended largely on their own initiative. As one of the older participants told me in relation to how he learnt the new language:

I didn't go to English class to learn proper English. I just speak English with the people in the street that I meet, and the work, and from television and the radio, and meet the people, make friends with the people, talk with the people. Yeah, that's how I learnt my English.

However, some participants found it difficult to take such initiatives. As a woman explained when describing the initial period after she arrived, feelings of isolation and loneliness were common and many felt they had been left to fend for themselves: 'you need somebody ...I missed home, I was homesick as well and I [struggled] with my English and everything, so it was hard.'

Their difficulties were compounded by limited access to employment. Many of the older asylum seekers had been forced to sacrifice their education in East Timor due to the enduring conflict (Crockford 2000, p. 230). Lacking qualifications and with little, if any, knowledge of the new language, they experienced difficulties finding work. As one of the participants explained, this hardship was further enhanced due to

their status as asylum seekers: 'all the job I apply for they always ask are you permanent resident, are you, are you, for your identity, like your Australian citizen or permanent resident. And if you're none of those they don't accept you.'

The asylum seekers were also excluded from government-funded university education. As they were neither permanent residents nor overseas students there were no clear criteria for university admittance. Nonetheless, if they managed to gain admission, they were considered international students, and would, subsequently, pay full international fees (Rees 2003b, p. 99). The fees are high, and, with meagre incomes, only those with extensive family support could afford higher education. Exclusion from university education, however, did not eliminate all opportunities for higher education. As Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses are part of the state governments' educational portfolio and are more affordable than university courses, many of the asylum seekers were able to gain a diploma or certificate within vocational areas. Their access to TAFE courses had a positive affect on their pattern of resettlement. It provided them with an arena through which they were introduced to the new culture and the new language, and with the vocational and linguistic qualifications they attained, opportunities for work increased, establishing further fields in which they could participate.

Conclusion:

Through this paper, I have argued that the ability to cope with experiences of loss and overcome the challenges of exile can be tied to the power of agency and practice. Bourdieu's theory of practice and the notion of habitus provide a conceptual foundation for understanding refugees' gradual integration into their new environment. However, it should be noted that the adjustment to the new socio-cultural reality does not necessarily cause a rejection of the original culture. Rather, as recent studies on refugees and diasporic communities have shown (Hall 1993; Noble & Tabar 2002; Wise 2006), many refugees manifest a pattern of biculturalism, reflecting continued attachment to their original culture, combined with loyalties and affiliations cultivated within the host country. This is suggested by the accumulative nature of habitus, which 'is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 56). But, the development and negotiation of habitus necessitates practice, which again requires that the habitus is able to command practice within the new environment. Refugees' ability to act may be affected by severe trauma and stress, both before their flight and in exile. However, in relation to the young East Timorese asylum seekers, I have argued that, despite primary trauma, loss and ongoing uncertainty and distress in exile due to the Australian Government's treatment of their cases, they were able to deal with the challenges of exile and gradually become immersed in the Australian society. Their power to act was positively affected by their young age upon arrival, which ensured greater openness to change and access to formal institutions. Arriving in exile as children or young adolescents, the participants had the potential to energise and excite their habitus in accordance with the new environment. Their habitus was subsequently developed in the context of both East Timorese and Australian discourses, and they engaged in cultural practices which enabled them to create meaning within both contexts. Their agency within the Australian setting and the subsequent development of their habitus and adjustment to their new surroundings allowed them to overcome the initial experiences of loneliness and alienation, and to recreate meaning and establish social relationships in exile. They were not just passive victims, but active agents who through their practice dealt with their liminal position.

Notes:

- [1] The article is based on empirical research conducted for the research project *Young East Timorese in Australia: Becoming Part of a New Culture and the Impact of Refugee Experiences on Identity and Belonging* (Askland 2005).
- [2] East Timorese refugees have arrived in Australia since the Second World War, although the vast majority arrived after the Indonesian invasion of the country in 1975 (Thatcher 1992, pp. 2-4). The exodus was most prolific during the 1970s and 1980s (Thatcher 1992, pp. 2-4; Goodman 2000, p. 31) when East Timorese refugees arrived on various family reunion schemes and under Special Humanitarian Programs (SHPs), which acknowledged and accepted East Timorese people's broad classification of 'close kin', allowing the reunion of extended family members and informally adopted children. Following the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991 there was a further large-scale flight, including about 1,650 people who sought safety in Australia.
- [3] The East Timorese asylum seekers' fight for recognition ended in 2005 when the vast majority were granted permanent residency on humanitarian grounds.
- [4] The Sanctuary Network was founded by a group of Catholic Sisters in 1995. It aspired to protect the rights of the East Timorese who sought asylum in Australia and promised to provide housing, food and clothing to any of the East Timorese asylum seekers who were refused refugee status and could be forcibly deported (Wise 2006, pp. 46-7).

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