THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF LONELINESS AMONGST WOMEN OF REFUGEE BACKGROUND LIVING IN ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA.

Jane Rodeghiero

A thesis submitted for the award of Master of Philosophy
Discipline of Anthropology
University of Adelaide
February 2015
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declarations ......................................................................................................................... i
Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ iv
Preface ........................................................................................................................................ v

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................. 1
Anthropology and Refugees ........................................................................................................ 1
The Project ............................................................................................................................. 5

Policy Background .................................................................................................................. 9
Assimilation ........................................................................................................................... 9
Integration ............................................................................................................................. 10
Multiculturalism ................................................................................................................... 10
The Demise of Multiculturalism and Re-emergence of Integration ......................................... 12
Social Cohesion .................................................................................................................... 17
Social Inclusion .................................................................................................................... 19

Integration and Social Capital ............................................................................................... 22
Integration ............................................................................................................................ 22
Social Capital ....................................................................................................................... 26
‘Bonding’ and ‘Bridging’ Relations ....................................................................................... 29

Thesis Structure .................................................................................................................... 34

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS ................................................................. 37

CHAPTER 3: FAMILY FRAGMENTATION ............................................................................ 43
Family Reunification ............................................................................................................. 45
‘Family is 100% we stay together in one place’ ..................................................................... 49
Reconfigured Family ............................................................................................................ 54

CHAPTER 4: ETHNO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ...................................... 58
Community Organisations .................................................................................................... 60
‘Where is my community?’ .................................................................................................. 62
Keeping a Distance .............................................................................................................. 64
Mistrust ................................................................................................................................. 66

CHAPTER 5: NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS .......................................................................... 73
Local Community Cohesion Programs .................................................................................... 74
‘In Australia it is not so easy to make friends with your neighbours’ .................................... 76

CHAPTER 6: SOCIAL DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS ........................................... 85
Loneliness, ‘Depression’ and Social Engagement ..................................................................... 87
‘It’s not good at all feeling lonely’ ................................................................. 90
Home Alone ................................................................................................. 93
‘I never lived lonely before’ ........................................................................ 97

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION............................................................................. 100

REFERENCES................................................................................................. 106
Declaration

I certify that this work does not contain material that has been accepted for award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give my consent for this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University of Adelaide library, being available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give my permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University’s digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Signed........................................

Date........................................
Abstract

This thesis problematises the Australian government’s current settlement model which aims to develop social networking and social capital for new arrivals in order for them to become ‘fully integrated’ into society and achieve a sense of Australian national identity. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into why so many women of refugee background are experiencing social disconnection and loneliness for protracted periods. Six months of ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken to explore how existing policies and practices relate to the everyday experiences and priorities of a small group of women as they endeavored to rebuild their fractured social world in Adelaide.

I centrally argue that the government’s current settlement model is flawed for five key reasons. Firstly, its assimilationist-integration agenda can produce or exacerbate feelings of social alienation. Secondly, it undermines relations with family and people of similar ethnic-cultural background through highly restrictive family reunification policies and the withdrawal of government support and resources to ethno-specific organisations. Thirdly, the assumption that this will inevitably lead to the increased development of relations with the wider population is erroneous. The current political and social conditions have produced an environment where these relations do not easily evolve through informal social interactions or active participation in work and study and there is a lack of effective and properly resourced facilitated opportunities. Perversely then, the very process of social networking and building social capital, considered to be vital to the current settlement model, is likely to be disrupted.

Fourthly, current settlement policies are unsound because they are based on unrealistic assumptions about the capacity of women from a refugee background to develop trusting, reciprocal and durable relations. In doing so, they fail to acknowledge the structures that produce disadvantage and exclusion and the complexity of issues such as changed family dynamics, mistrust, and prejudice. Policy makers need to take more account of the experiential dimension of network building.

Finally, the current settlement model is defective because it overlooks the subjective goals of the women in this study. Essentially, they wanted to feel part of a nourishing and inclusive social world with family and friends. However, and despite their best efforts, many found themselves to be deprived of immediate close supportive ties, often for many years after arrival.
and the attainment of citizenship. This generated or exacerbated feelings of profound loneliness, social disconnection and emotional distress, which complicated further network building. This has important implications for policymakers. A lonely, socially disconnected and alienated woman can be seen as being the obverse to one who is socially ‘well integrated’, and productively building social capital and a sense of Australian national identity. Moreover, these women are unlikely to feel ‘well settled’ or a sense of social inclusion if they cannot identify with people through intimate relations. Consequently, the government is failing to fulfill its settlement agenda as well as the critical social needs of many women of refugee background. More attention to this issue is necessary to improve settlement outcomes.
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the assistance and support of many people. First and foremost, I am enormously grateful to all the informants who participated in this research. I am especially indebted to all the women who warmly welcomed me into their homes, opened their lives and shared their stories and experiences. Thank you for your kindness and trust. The time I spent with you was inspirational, a truly enjoyable and unforgettable experience, and the highlight of my candidature.

I greatly appreciate the time, intellectual guidance and support provided by my supervisors Dr Richard Vokes and Dr Anna Szorenyi. I particularly benefitted from the discussions we had during the writing up phase of this thesis. Your insight, knowledge and suggestions were invaluable to me and your ongoing reassurances gave me the motivation and confidence to accomplish this.

Thank you to all my work colleagues at the Australian Refugee Association for their generous assistance and support, particularly the client services team.

I wish to give a special thanks to my family and all my dear friends who have provided me with emotional support and good cheer throughout the research period. I really appreciate you putting up with my thesis obsession and helping me get the balance in my life right during this endeavour.

Most of all my deepest gratitude goes to my greatest supporter John Spoehr, whose love has been the greatest gift of my life. Thank you for your unwavering faith, encouragement, understanding and patience, which made it possible for me to keep focus and complete this.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my beloved mother Lex and sister Mary who were instrumental in inspiring and encouraging me to pursue further studies. I miss them everyday and I know they would have been proud to see me achieving this milestone.
Preface

Over the past few decades or so, the Australian government’s overarching settlement-related objectives have been for new arrivals to be self-reliant, well ‘integrated’ into the economic, cultural, social and political structures of society, and achieve a sense of belonging to Australian national identity. The prescription for the process this goes something like this: learn the English language; participate in work, study and/or volunteering; access mainstream services as quickly as possible; adopt so-called Australian cultural norms and values; and eventually, gain citizenship and vote. This simplistic, linear version of the process of settlement however, fails to capture the complex experiences of many people of refugee background who are likely to face significant hurdles in achieving these steps along the way. Furthermore, many may fulfill these goals but experience intense loneliness and a sense of social disconnection and hence remain feeling fundamentally ‘unsettled’. How is this possible?

My personal involvement with people of refugee background began about eight years ago when I became a volunteer with the Australian Refugee Association (ARA) and a year later, was employed as a social support worker. During this time my colleagues and I have been concerned about an increasing number of clients, primarily women, recounting their experiences of feeling lonely and socially disconnected. This is often despite their length of time living here, English language competency and participation in employment or study, for example. A key issue raised by these clients was the lack of opportunities they had in meeting people from diverse backgrounds, within a context of informal interactions, in order to develop friendships. This persistent pattern warranted further investigation.

One of the female clients who particularly inspired me to explore the themes of this thesis I met soon after I began working at ARA. The woman, who I shall call Rose, was from South Sudan, in her late 20’s and had been living in Australia for about two and a half years. A social worker had previously identified social ‘isolation’ as being a key issue impeding Rose’s settlement progress. It was suggested that she might benefit from the engagement of a volunteer ‘friend’ who could visit regularly. I arranged an introductory visit. We arrived at her city flat one warm afternoon and knocked on the door. We waited but there was no response. I knocked again more loudly and still there was no response. Minutes passed and I was about to ring Rose when the door opened tentatively. We were quietly welcomed and ushered into the darkened lounge room. The volunteer and I sat down on a couch while Rose sat on the other side of the...
room in a single armchair with a shawl wrapped securely around her. Her English was very good and we chatted generally about how her life in Australia was going. Rose came to Australia alone and had no relatives here. She had been living alone in the same gloomy block of flats for about two years and did not know any of her neighbours. Rose said that she only had one friend in Adelaide whom she met when she was attending English classes but because she was now living a long distance away, she only saw her very occasionally.

Rose conveyed feelings of extreme loneliness and social disconnection and talked freely of the depression she said she was experiencing at the time. I remember her asserting that ‘we don’t have depression in my country’, and ‘I’ve never felt lonely before’. She said that her main desire was to meet new people, to ‘find a friend’ and have somebody to talk to. Apparently she spent most of her days at home alone. The volunteer immediately enquired if she had been in touch with ‘her community’, the assumption being her ‘ethnic’ group. Rose looked at us blankly. It transpired that she was from a minority ethnic group and not only did no such formal ‘community’ exist here but she had no interest in mixing socially with others from her ethnic and cultural background. This was due to tensions resulting from the war and issues of mistrust as well as a wariness of inviting gossip about her single status. Rose was not religious and therefore did not have the opportunity to meet people via religious membership. One of the main problems she identified was that she did not know how and where to meet new people in Adelaide.

As the atmosphere slowly became more relaxed, Rose spontaneously opened up about her past traumatic experiences. Her parents and brother had been killed during the war and she did not know the whereabouts of her other siblings who she missed terribly. She talked about how she felt ‘lost’ and did not know where she ‘fitted’ in her new social environment and I remember clearly her words: ‘I feel so alone in the world now’. As she told her story she became overwhelmed and started to cry uncontrollably. The volunteer and I immediately rushed to her and gave her a long hug. This outburst was unexpected and I felt out of my depth in being able to provide any real solution to her situation. Rose’s case drew my attention to the importance of social relations to easing the settlement process. Not just for practical support, but for emotional support and friendship and a sense of social connection. It also raised a common perception that people of refugee background have ready access to a strong co-ethnic/cultural community network upon arrival for settlement support and social connections.
Another particular case has stayed with me for many years. This woman, who I will refer to as Razieh, was from Afghanistan, in her 30's and had been living in Australia more than five years with her children when I met her. Her husband had been ‘missing’ for 10 years. Again, she knew nobody when she arrived. Razieh was desperate to be reunited with her mother and sisters who were living in Pakistan. After waiting for several years for a decision, her application to sponsor her younger sister and mother was rejected. She was heartbroken and continued to worry constantly about their safety and welfare but was determined to rebuild her life here. She had worked very hard to learn the English language, drive a car, complete tertiary studies, gain her citizenship and had also secured a decent job. Although her work colleagues were friendly, she said that they had not invited her to socialise with them outside work. Razieh was socially distant from others from her country of origin due to issues of mistrust and the desire to avoid judgment about her choice to be non-religious. The need to move house numerous times had made it difficult for her to get to know her neighbours.

Like Rose, Razieh was feeling socially disconnected and extremely lonely. She told me that sometimes she was so distressed about her situation that she would go to the local park and sit by herself and cry. Her main desire at the time was to find friends but she said that she didn’t know how to go about doing it here. Razieh claimed that she could not feel ‘at home’ in Australia until she was able to do so. In this case, although the key outward markers of apparent ‘successful’ settlement had been addressed, Razieh was still struggling to achieve her settlement goals.

Whilst I stress here that people of refugee background are individuals who have diverse pre-migration and post-migration experiences, they are also very likely to face many common settlement issues and challenges. For most, war and conflict, displacement, and for a small minority, eventual third country settlement, results in the separation from family members and friends. Many are able to re-establish previous relations and/or create new ones with little problem. For others however, particularly those who are forced to entirely rebuild their social networks here, the process can be much more difficult. During early settlement people commonly experience periods of feeling lonely and socially alienated or, a subjective state of social disconnection and detachment. For some however, it can get worse over time and continue to be a critical issue for many, many years. This is often coupled with limited opportunities to meet new people within an informal context. For all the women in this study, settlement in Adelaide resulted in separation from significant loved ones. Re-establishing and
building new social relations and networks meant that often complex and diverse situations needed to be negotiated in the new socio-cultural and political context, raising significant challenges as well as opportunities.

The Government’s version of ‘successful’ settlement overlooks the key priorities of people of refugee background. I argue that central to this is their social well-being; the capacity to be reunited with family, build friendships and feel a sense of social connectedness. Social relations can play a critical role in supporting and fuelling the process of settlement. Indeed, smooth settlement can often depend on a person’s ability to build supportive social ties. However, and as I will show, the process for the women in this study could be problematic and complicated by a number of factors. Despite their best endeavors many found their immediate social world bereft of intimate social relations. Accordingly, many experienced extended periods of feeling socially alienated and lonely. This is a problem for both people of refugee background and the government. A person who is feeling lonely and socially alienated is unlikely to feel subjectively ‘well’ settled. Furthermore, they are unlikely to feel a sense of belonging to Australian national identity if they cannot identify with people through their immediate personal relationships. Various factors related to pre-migration experiences and the political and social conditions of settlement interplay to shape their capacity to re-establish and build new social ties. Significantly though, Australian Government policies and practices (or their absence) do not reflect the everyday life world of the women I have come to know and can produce or exacerbate social alienation.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Anthropology and Refugees

Anthropology has played a crucial role in the development of ‘refugee studies’ as a major interdisciplinary academic field since its inception in the early 1980s. Anthropologists have established various forums in order to reach the public, policy-makers and practitioners, as well as provide a means for giving a voice to refugees (Colson 2003:13). A notable example of this was the creation of The Refugee Studies Programme (RSP) at Oxford University in 1982, whose founder and first director was the anthropologist Barbara Harrell-Bond. This paved the way to the establishment of the Journal of Refugee Studies in 1988. Perhaps anthropology’s most significant contribution to refugee studies is the ethnographic fieldwork method and participant observation which has allowed for the perceptions, agency and lived experiences of the refugees themselves to be prioritised (Chatty 2014:74).

Anthropologists have documented the experiences of refugees during displacement, migration, repatriation and settlement. Others have focused their attention on the humanitarian system and the institutions that deal with displacement or on the impact of forced migration on governments and the populations of settlement. Most of the theories and concepts used in these studies have been imported from other scholarly fields such as migration studies. The following provides a very brief outline of some of the key ideas underlying the development of anthropological studies of refugees and the broader field of forced migration (for a more comprehensive overview see: Malkki 1995; Eastmond 2001; Colson 2003; Chatty 2014).

Anthropologists have traditionally associated geographic spaces with communities and distinctive cultures. Thus, until the 1990s there was a tendency to assume an inherent link between territory and people, and culture as being ‘rooted’ in the homeland (Eastmond 2001:12904). Indeed, during this period much of the work of anthropologists dealing with questions of identity, culture and ethnicity was characterised by an implicit functionalist view of society. The assumption here was that displacement across nation-state borders involved a loss or ‘uprooting’ of identity and culture and ‘tradition’ rather than a transformation (Malkki 1995:508). This view was not challenged until the 1990s when scholars (e.g. Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1992 & 1995; Appadurai 1995) began to rethink the notion of tying people and communities to bounded nation states and territories with distinctive cultures, arguing that both culture and places are constructed socially, politically, and historically (Chatty
Malkki (1992) for example, writes that: “people are chronically mobile and routinely displaced, and invent homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases – not in situ, but through memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit” (Malkki 1992:24). Malkki’s work (1992 & 1995) in particular was important in spawning discussions about ‘deterritorialization, liminality and belonging’ (Chatty 2014:74).

A reconsideration of the notions of community and territory as ‘bounded’ led to a move away from an emphasis on structure and stability to that of process and fluidity (Lewellen 2002:171). Since the 1990s there has been an increasing academic interest in transnationalism and globalisation across many disciplines. Within anthropology, discussions of transnationalism have been active (see Keam 1995; Hannerz 1996) and the link between locality, culture and social relations has been questioned (e.g. Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Much of this research has focused on the practices and transnational links of distinct ethnic groups (Vertovec 2007:966).

Ethnicity has been an important concept in forced migration studies. Barth’s (1969) conceptualisation has been particularly influential. From his perspective, ethnicity is socially constructed and arises from the recognition of difference from other groups (Barth 1969). Many anthropologists define ethnicity as “a sense of belonging to a group, based on shared ideas of group history, language, experience, and culture” (Chatty 2014:82). Thus, ethnicity was commonly viewed as malleable in different contexts. Whilst the maintenance and construction of ethnic identity remains an important area of interest in the study of forced migration, generally speaking it is no longer the principal focus. Since the 1990s the concepts hybridity, creolisation and cosmopolitanism have been used to move beyond fixed understandings of ethnicity and culture (Vertovec 2007:965).

Social and political change due to involuntary migration has offered an important context for examining refugee communities and identity formation. Anthropologists have portrayed the perspectives and strategies used by different groups to deal with their situation and renegotiate their social relations and identities through their interactions with the settlement population (Eastmond 2001:12903). Here the dynamic character of identity has been emphasised. For example, Binder and Tosic (2005) write that:

By transcending borders and embarking on a life in a new cultural environment, refugees normally question old and self-evident collective identities and change
them. Either new identities emerge, or sometimes old ones even get strengthened. Each conception of collective identity is a priori abandoned. The living conditions in the host country also shape the new emerging identities. (Binder & Tosic 2005:610)

Studies (Van Hear 2000; Monsutti 2005) of international diasporas, through which people maintain strong links with each other, the homeland and members living elsewhere overseas, have been critical in extricating geographic territory, place and home. Numerous studies (e.g. Bousquet 1991; Fuglerud 1999; Loizos 1999; Tambiah 2000; Wahlbeck 1999) have highlighted the transnational character of refugee communities in describing how members continue to relate in one form or another to their country of origin. Many maintain stronger relations with people living in their homeland and elsewhere overseas more so than people living in the place of their settlement. This can present them with many dilemmas and ‘full’ integration into the society of settlement may not be seen as a priority (Fuglerud 1999).

Anthropological studies of refugees living in Western countries typically address issues of settlement and integration. Many have tended to focus on sociocultural adaptation drawing on the concepts of ethnicity and identity whilst highlighting agency and processes of cultural construction (Eastmond 2001:12903). In recent times, processes of cultural adaptation have been viewed as “a practicing of a permanent in-betweenness of transnationalism”, rather than an acculturation to new identities (Rapport & Overing 2003:156). Most of the anthropological studies of refugees in the settlement context have focused on the experiences of one or two particular ethnically defined groups.

Since the early 1980s anthropologists have had a research interest in engaging with the policies that affect the lives of refugees. Much of this work has been undertaken in the area of ‘refugees and development’ (mostly in Africa). Over the past few decades, anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to the institutions of the settlement context and how they engage with refugees. Some ethnographic studies (e.g. Korac 2003 & 2005) have highlighted how different policies and practices of social exclusion have impacted on social network building and processes of integration.

Overall, few anthropological studies have had a central focus on the settlement and social policies that impact on the everyday lives of refugees. Shore and Wright (2005) have argued that: “policy has become an increasingly central concept and instrument in the organization of
contemporary societies…. policy now impinges on all areas of life so that it is virtually impossible to ignore” (Shore & Wright 2005:3). Yet as Vertovec (2007:974) has noted, anthropologists are often hesitant to engage with policy within the broader field of migration studies. He calls for the need to take more account of policy since it’s “conditioning structures directly affect migrants’ lives, practices and processes” (Vertovec 2007:974). I maintain that Government policies have always intervened in the lives of settling refugees in Australia and so this thesis highlights their central organising role.
The Project

This thesis seeks to gain insight into why so many women of refugee background are experiencing significant levels of loneliness and social disconnection in the context of settlement. To address this concern I explore how settlement related policies and practices relate to the lives of a small group of women as they endeavored to rebuild their ruptured social world. The principal aim of the thesis is to examine the inadequacies in the Australian Government's current settlement model which is implicitly based on Putnam’s (1993, 2000 & 2007) ideas about social capital. In order to do so I pursue three key research questions: what are the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying the government’s approach to ‘successful’ settlement; how do government policies and practices shape the lives of the women in this study; and what are the associated implications for policy makers and the women? I essentially argue that the government’s current settlement model is essentially flawed due to the following reasons. Its assimilationist-integration agenda can produce or exacerbate feelings of social alienation. It undermines relations with family and people of similar ethnic-cultural background. It fails to account for structures of inequality and other forces that can complicate network building. It also overlooks the subjective goals of the women. I argue that feeling part of a nourishing and inclusive social world with family and friends is fundamental to the women in terms of everyday subjective well-being and future goals.

The overall purpose of this thesis is to make an anthropological contribution towards better-informed settlement policies and practices in Australia. Whilst my goal was for this study to have policy relevance, I also wanted to privilege the women’s voices and priorities. As Chatty (2014) has pointed out, a tension exists within the field of refugee and forced migration studies between an approach of anthropology that prioritises the voices and lived experiences of those being studied, and the ‘refugee policy’ approach which prioritises government based agendas and concerns (Chatty 2014:79-80). This thesis is an attempt to balance this concern by having a dual focus - it interrogates the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying government settlement related policies and practices and also illustrates how they intervene in the lives of the women in this study by providing personal narratives of their lived experiences, concerns and priorities.
This study warranted a focus on women primarily because the majority of the clients at the Australian Refugee Association (ARA) whom report feelings of social disconnection and loneliness are overwhelming female. Studies (e.g. Deacon & Sullivan 2009) reveal that women of refugee background can experience impediments to social network building differently to men due to issues such as economic hardship, lack of transportation and childcare, cultural and social restrictions, and limited English language competency. Anthropologists Binder and Tosic have urged the need for more female focused research due to their double marginalisation as women and as refugees (Binder & Tosic 2005:613-621). Moreover, Goodkind and Deacon (2004) suggest that these women can be triply marginalised by forces related to their economic, racial and ethnic, as well as gender status (Goodkind & Deacon 2004). Thus, women of refugee background are more likely to be socially withdrawn than men. On a more practical level though, my focus on women was also due to the likelihood that they would be more open with me about their lives.

Malkki (1996) has warned against representing refugees as merely passive victims and knowable only through their need and so as much as possible I have tried to draw attention to the women’s agency in shaping their social world (Malkki 1996:378). Jackson (1995 & 1998) refers to inter-subjective agency as a person’s own evaluation of their capacity to establish some degree of control over their lives. Agency, or a lack of, is therefore critical to the process of settlement. My concern was to emphasise the various ways in which the women in this study were actively engaged in the process of their settlement and used their agency to cope with and improve their situation.

Refugee-centred studies, both in anthropology as well as in the social sciences more generally, predominantly focus their attention on one or two ‘distinct’ ethnic groups. This thesis distinguishes itself as a non-ethnic specific study (see Gilad 1990 and Baumann 1996). Malkii (1995) has emphasised that the category ‘refugees’ represents an extremely heterogeneous group of people who happen to share a particular legal status, and are subject to ‘management’ by the international regime and nation states (Malkki 1995). In Australia, refugees are managed by a certain set of settlement and social policies and processes that reach across all nationalities and produce subject positions. In other words, policies have constructed the diverse group of women in this study as a distinct group according to their social status as settling refugees in Australia rather than their ethnicity. In my view, this justified looking at an ethnically diverse group of women who were ‘loosely connected’ by policy
processes. Whilst I acknowledge that this is not a ‘neat’ cohort choice, given that one of my goals was to evaluate policies, the strength of my approach is that it enabled me to highlight through individual cases, the different ways that they can impinge on the lives of these women. Hence, the personal cases of these women were used as a lens onto the settlement system rather than the other way around. I was also concerned that the issues I raise in this thesis may be seen as being community specific and so my focus on a diverse group of women diminished this possibility because it allowed for more research variables to be generated.

Blakewell (2008) writes that there is a tendency by academics in the field of forced migration to seek to capture data that is relevant to dominant policy categories and in doing so, they may overlook other aspects of a person’s social world that may be much more significant to their daily lives (Blakewell 2008:433). This thesis is an attempt to develop a framework for describing social relations and connectedness that are an alternative to the dominant categories used by academics and policy makers of ‘bonding’ (within family and those from similar ethnic, cultural and religious background) and ‘bridging’ (between people from dissimilar ethnic, cultural and religious background) (Ager & Strang 2008:178). ‘Bridging’ and ‘bonding’ relations are predominantly viewed in instrument terms or, as resources for building social capital and integration. I propose a different way of discussing social relations, friendships, belonging and social connection that are based on what the women in this study wanted. The following domains were revealed as being most significant: family living in close proximity; ethnic/cultural ‘community’ relations based on trust; friendly neighbours whom they could rely on if they needed help; and close diverse social relations with other people whom they shared an affinity with.

This study addresses several gaps in the literature on forced migration in the context of Western settlement. Most policy-oriented anthropological studies are centered on policies of exclusion (e.g. housing dispersal) that specifically affect the lives of asylum seekers. Overall, only a handful of qualitative studies in the Social Sciences have had a key focus on family reunification policies and only a couple in Australia (e.g. McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009; Wilmsen 2011). Few studies have given central attention to issues of mistrust in the context of Western settlement and in Australia it has been rare (a notable exception being Lenette 2013). As far as I can ascertain, loneliness has yet to be explored as a significant settlement issue for people of refugee background. The social relations/networks of refugees have predominantly been represented and analysed by scholars in instrumental terms namely, the extent to which
they provide access social capital resources (e.g. Lamba & Krahn 2003; Wells 2011; Yi Cheung & Phillimore 2013) and enable ‘successful’ integration via ‘bridging’ social relations (e.g. Daley 2007; Nannestad et al. 2008; Strang & Ager 2010; Larsen 2011). This thesis however, builds on previous ethnographic studies (McMichael & Manderson 2004; Williams 2006; Smith 2013) that have explored the social relations of settling refugees beyond their functional aspects.

Finally, there is a need to clarify the terms used in this thesis. Australian governments have commonly used the term settlement to refer to the complex phase of adjustment new arrivals experience as they become established and independent in Australian society. For the purposes of this thesis, my use of the term settlement refers to a continuum from the initial arrival period to the development of a sense of having control over one’s life and feeling subjectively and positively re-established (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2003:62). This may mean different things to different people but I suggest that feeling a sense of connection to society through the establishment of significant social ties may be critical. I also use the term ‘refugee background’ whenever possible rather than the political and academic label ‘refugee’, which reduces a person to a category devoid of agency and history (Daniel 2002; Zetter 2007).
Policy Background

Since the end of World War Two more than 780,000 refugees have settled in Australia from increasingly diverse backgrounds (Refugee Council of Australia 2014). This trend has generated public and political anxiety about the achievement of ‘successful’ settlement outcomes. In response, multiple policies and practices have been employed aimed at ‘integrating’ refugees into society. Explicit policies have evolved from Assimilation and Integration to those of Multiculturalism and more recently included Social Cohesion and Social Inclusion. This section provides an overview of these policies and examines how they have shaped refugee settlement experiences in Australia. It seeks to address the question, what does ‘successful’ settlement look like from the government’s perspective? I argue that while Multicultural policies have applauded diversity and tolerance of cultural differences in the abstract, the assimilationist-integrationist agenda underpinning these policies seeks a one-way process of conformity to a common language and supposed shared ‘values’ and Australian identity, and thus lacks tolerance of cultural practices deemed outside of ‘mainstream’ society. In problematising refugees as ‘outsiders’ and in need of ‘fixing’, an environment has been created that socially alienates and marginalises refugees from the ‘majority’ population.

Assimilation

In 1901 the ‘Immigration Restriction Act’ (commonly known as the ‘White Australia’ policy) was originally designed to exclude non-British (‘alien’) migrants via the dictation ‘assimilability’ test (Jakubowicz 2009). In 1945 Australia’s low birthrate and the need for unskilled labour led the Government to promote and assist increased migration, particularly from Britain. Assimilation policies were implemented in 1947 as increasing numbers of non-British European people began to migrate to Australia following the end of the War. Assimilationism defined ‘successful’ settlement as being the achievement of ‘invisibility’ through learning the English language, adopting Australian cultural norms and becoming “indistinguishable from the Australian-born population as rapidly as possible” (Smith et al. 2011:4). This describes a one-way process whereby immigrants are ‘absorbed’ into their new environment and their distinctive cultural identity and practices repressed. The assumption was that this process would not be difficult and settlement support was thus confined to the provision of hostel accommodation and limited English language tuition (Spinks 2009:2). The assimilationist approach however, proved to be unsustainable.
Integration

In the mid-1960s there was a dramatic increase in the rate of immigrants returning to Europe to live, many of whom were feeling marginalised by assimilation policies and practices (Jakubowicz 2009). In recognition of the difficult adjustment challenges many new arrivals (refugees and other migrants) experienced, and that they may not want to surrender their cultural identity, Integration was introduced as the official settlement policy (Spinks 2009:2). English language and other settlement support services were now slowly expanded. Essentially though, the Government took it for granted that migrant ‘ethnic’ community organisations and personal social networks would provide much of the resources and support required to address settlement needs (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003:28). In the same period, the controversial dictation test was dismissed and non-Europeans migrants were accepted on the basis of a perceived “ability to integrate readily and their possession of qualifications positively useful to Australia” (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014). Whilst Integration policies (1964 - 1972) reflected the view that new arrivals were no longer required to abandon their linguistic and cultural background, the expectation still remained however that over time their cultural diversity would fuse into a “homogenous ‘Australian’ culture” (Casimiro et al. 2007:57). In sum, Integration was “simply an acceptance of manifestations of ethnic and cultural diversity, such as folklore or ethnic food, which did not challenge the dominant culture” (Burnett 1998:7).

Multiculturalism

The so-called ‘White Australia’ policy was slowly dissolved after 1966 and was formally abolished in 1973 by the Whitlam Labor government (1972 - 1975). In 1975 the Racial Discrimination Act prohibited discrimination on the basis of race and ethnic origin. About this time, Integration was replaced by Multiculturalism which continues to be the current official settlement policy. Whilst Integration suggested a single culture “in which all immigrants would eventually share” (Jakubowicz 2009), the foundation ideals of Multiculturalism dismissed the notion of “the unity of Australian society in favour of an aggregate of different Australian communities and identities” (Galligan & Roberts 2003). In this way, Multiculturalism was generally understood to entail “not a similarity, but a composite” of different cultures (Jupp 2002:86).
In 1978 the Galbally report was released which reviewed the available settlement services and was also highly influential in the development of Australia’s official Multicultural approach. Recommendations were made based on the key guiding principles of equal opportunity and access to mainstream services, the maintenance of culture without prejudice or disadvantage and the provision of programs and services (in consultation with clients) to ensure equality of access and provision (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003:28). Following this report Multicultural policies were further revised and settlement services and programs expanded. New measures included grant increases to ‘ethnic’ community organisations and non-government settlement service providers, increased involvement from volunteers, and the creation of Migrant Resource Centres which provided information and referrals (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003:29). Settlement services were largely restricted to specific and initial settlement needs (e.g. English language classes and interpreting services) whilst more general needs (e.g. housing and employment) were expected to be met by either ‘ethnic’ community organisations or mainstream services (ibid). Attention was progressively focused on measures to encourage refugees to be self-reliant and to access mainstream services as soon as possible. The emphasis on self-help meant that there was very limited investment overall by the government in settlement support.

As a broad concept, multiculturalism has rarely been defined by Australian Governments. In the late 1980s the Hawke Labor Government (1983 – 1991) used the term explicitly to promote respect and support, and indeed to celebrate the maintenance of cultural difference within Australian society. The terms multicultural and Multiculturalism are commonly confused. Multicultural refers to the existence of people from diverse cultural backgrounds living in a society. Multiculturalism on the other hand, originally referred to the policy measures designed to assist new arrivals to ‘integrate’ into the mainstream structures of Australian society without relinquishing their previous cultural traditions (Galligan & Roberts 2003). Multiculturalism now also includes policies and practices aimed to enhance social cohesion through the notions of civic values, rights and responsibilities (ibid).

Multicultural policies have since endured successive governments in various forms (see Jayasuria 2003; Jupp 2007; Jakubowicz & Ho 2013) but the central principle of “acknowledging and respecting Australia’s culturally diverse society” has remained an official policy descriptor (Ho 2013:32). Fundamentally though, Multiculturalism in Australia is an element of an
immigrant settlement policy designed to ‘manage’ settlement outcomes rather than any real concern with cultural maintenance (Jupp 2007:117). As Chiro argues (2009), Multicultural policies have not changed “the dominance of Anglo-Australian hegemony which has reverted to its assimilationist type” (Chiro 2009:3 & 12). Rather, as the following reveals, it has “fostered the illusion of change and inclusiveness without substantially disrupting racialised patterns of power and privilege” (Keddie 2012:2; see also Hage 2000).

Whist Multiculturalism remains as the explicit settlement policy, consecutive government’s have always been centrally concerned with the integration of new arrivals into the core values and institutions of Australian society. Hence, the government’s overarching settlement objective has continued to be that of integration. Although integration has been formally distinguished as being different from assimilation, in essence it is a milder ‘more palatable’ version of assimilation and incorporation, which aims to dissolve the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of new arrivals (Jupp 2007:117). The question though had become, how could the disparity between achieving the fundamental goals of assimilationist-integration and adhering to the core of Multiculturalism be addressed?

The main endeavor of Multicultural policies has been to recognise cultural diversity but at the same time to minimise the possibility of divisions and fissures that could arise from such recognition (Keddie 2012:2). Since the early 1980s this challenge has been addressed through liberal informed policies that have prioritised a commitment to Australia’s national interest, the basic structures and values of democracy, and a ‘reining in’ of cultural diversity. The unifying factor of diversity for Australian Multiculturalism then has been an emphasis on the ‘common good’ and the primary concern for the assimilation of new arrivals into a supposed ‘core’ set of Anglo-liberal Western values and norms, institutions and ‘mainstream’ culture (Keddie 2012:4). During the 1990s ‘mainstream’ Australian culture had been publicly stated to be Anglo-Celtic (Stratton 1998:81). Increasingly the notion of a ‘core culture’ was highlighted as many perceived the dominance of Anglo-Celtic Australian cultural hegemony threatened.

**The Demise of Multiculturalism and Re-emergence of Integration**

Within a broader context of what Hage (2003) refers to as white fear and anxiety about difference and diversity, public support for multiculturalism as a national ideology diminished significantly during the 1990s (Hage 2003). This anxiety was greatly fuelled when John
Howard’s Coalition Party won office in 1996 and in the same year anti-immigration politician Pauline Hanson was elected to Federal parliament. Both were outspoken about their opposition to Multiculturalism as a policy although Howard distanced himself from Hanson’s more extreme views. In her maiden speech to the House of Representatives Hanson stated: “A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united” (cited in Stratton 1998:66). Her key criticisms were that because all Australians were equal, no special treatment or services should be provided to immigrants or Aboriginal people and that Multiculturalism encouraged minority ethnic cultures to dis-engage from ‘mainstream’ society (Jupp 2007: 125). Immigration, she speculated, was changing the fundamental character of the population (Ibid). These views struck a chord with many Australians, as did Howard’s stance.

Howard famously advocated an abandonment of the term multiculturalism to focus on ‘One Australia’ but made some concession when his government implemented a policy of ‘Australian Multiculturalism’ in 1999. However, the principle of ‘respect for cultural diversity’ was articulated through the language of a ‘new nationalism’ and the principles of ‘civic duty’ (Keddie 2012:5). This was reminiscent of previous ideologies that were embedded in the idea of conformity to a set of Anglo-Celtic cultural values (Jayasuriya 2003:7). In functioning within the idea of a ‘core culture’, Multiculturalism now served to marginalise ‘so-called ethnic cultures’ (Stratton 1998:206) and essentialise their differences as ‘negative Otherness’ (Henry-Waring 2011:2). Yet as Jupp (2007) notes: “as long as a diversified immigration and refugee program continues…. Australia will remain a multicultural society with a varied rather than uniform culture” (Jupp 2007:119).

In the past decade or so, there has been renewed public and political interest in the concepts of integration (as assimilation) and social cohesion both in Australia and in other major Western refugee receiving countries. This has largely been in response to several highly publicised violent incidents that have fuelled debate over the ‘acceptance’ of some migrant groups (Spinks 2009:3). Most significant of all was the 9/11 ‘terror attack’ in the U.S (2001). Other events include: the Bali bombings (2002); the London bombings (2005); and the Cronulla riots (2005), involving a violent dispute between Lebanese-Australian and Anglo-Australian young men in Sydney. In 2007 a number of ‘African-gang’ based violent incidents occurred in Melbourne. In response, the Coalition Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews announced the restricted intake of refugees from Africa due to claims about ‘African-gang’ based violence and what he suggested was the failure by ‘African refugees’ to ‘fit’ into the ‘Australian way of life’
and integrate at an acceptable pace (Due 2008:1). Andrews asserted that: “Australia has the right to ensure those who come here are integrating into a socially cohesive community” (Due 2008:1). This example shows how refugees are often deemed as being ‘successfully’ or ‘unsuccessfully’ integrated - ‘successful’ understood as being absorbed into ‘mainstream’ culture.

Following these events, numerous political and social commentators across the political spectrum accused Multiculturalism of undermining ‘ethnic’ integration and threatening social cohesion by fostering cultural separatism and accentuating racial and ethnic divisions (Lopez 2005; Jakubowicz 2008 & 2009). Increasingly they became intolerant of what they saw to be ‘unhealthy’ ethnic enclaves, which they associated with anti-social activity, criminal behaviour and even terrorism (McPherson 2010:547). John Howard and Pauline Hanson have been especially outspoken about emphasising what they see to be a link between cultural separatism and various forms of social ills. ‘Ethnic enclaves’ are represented as oppositional to ‘mainstream society’ and a threat to Anglo-Australian core ‘values’, beliefs, traditions and norms. Diversity and difference is seen to threaten both the safety of the population and character of Australian society (McPherson 2010:553). This perceived threat to social order and Australian interests fuelled a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 1972) in some sections of society and located refugees as ‘outsiders’. The media played a critical role here in inciting and reinforcing this fear by promoting negative cultural stereotypes and representing refugees as unwilling to adopt dominant social-cultural norms (Joint Standing Committee on Migration 2013:34-36).

Amid the above concerns, the notion of integration gained support as the ‘middle road’ between the extremes of assimilation and multiculturalism and was increasingly viewed as being synonymous with ‘successful’ settlement (McPherson 2010:547). Yet the term integration was most commonly used by politicians, the general public and media to infer a process of assimilation into ‘mainstream’ Australian society. The tacit assumption is that ‘successful’ settlement as integration means conformity and commitment to an Anglo-Celtic (and Christian) Australia. The expectation here is that refugees will ‘change their values and behaviour in order to ‘fit in’ with the existing society’ (Castles et al. 2002:114).

In light of fears about cultural separatism, Howard’s key concern was about ensuring social cohesion within a diverse population through the allegiance and responsibility of new arrivals to Australia. The assimilationist-integration settlement model he overtly favoured resulted in the
gradual dismantling of the structures of Multiculturalism. The focus shifted away from supporting diverse ethnic and cultural identity to that of building a common national identity through shared values and norms, shared symbols, shared ceremonies, civic duty (responsibilities and rights) and gaining citizenship. The first step though was to clarify who ‘we’ Australians are in relation to ‘them’ and here the Australian Values Statement and Citizenship Test proved to be important vehicles (McPherson 2010:554).

In 2007 Howard introduced the Australian Values Statement. Most visa applicants to Australia (both permanent and temporary) are still required to sign this document, which acknowledges that they will respect the values and obey the laws that support ‘Australia’s way of life’ (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007:3). These values include support for parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, mutual respect and tolerance, peacefulness, equality of the sexes, and English as the national language (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2007:4). In pledging their allegiance to ‘Australian’ identity and a supposedly homogenous, static set of norms and values, the hope was that the traditional cultural identity and practices of new arrivals would weaken.

In the same year the Citizenship test was also introduced by Howard, which was designed to promote ‘successful’ integration and social cohesion (Jakubowicz 2009). The right to citizenship is ‘earned’ by demonstrating English language proficiency and knowledge of Australian history, ‘values’ and customs. The government defended these measures by saying they were “necessary to ensure the successful integration of migrants into the host society, to protect the Australian ‘way of life’ and to reinforce the fact that Australian citizenship was a privilege not a right” (Tavan 2009:125). As Bennett and Tait (2008) have pointed out though, the process has the potential to be “divisive, destructive and discriminatory” (Bennett & Tait 2008:77). Refugees fare much worse than other immigrant categories. For example, in 2013 there was a 0.02% failure rate of applicants in the Skilled Stream, 2.6% from the Family Stream and an 11.2% failure rate for those classified under the Humanitarian Program (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2013).

Since Howard, and in the face of fierce opposition, Multiculturalism as a policy has persisted. In the most recent policy, *The People of Australia: Australia’s Multicultural Policy*, launched by the previous Gillard Labor Government (2010-2013) in 2011, the government reaffirms its “unwavering support for a culturally diverse and socially cohesive nation” (Department of Social...
Services 2014). This has since been updated (15 May 2014) by the Abbott government but remains largely unchanged. In addition to promoting Australian ‘values’, Government settlement related policies and programs have a central aim to foster social cohesion and tolerance between diverse cultural/ethnic groups and society at large. The key objectives are to “assist them to integrate as peacefully and harmoniously as possible” as well as “participate in Australian society as quickly as possible” (Spinks 2009:4).

As it stands, the current settlement policy outlined in The Settlement Journey: Strengthening Australia through migration (2013; last updated 7 March 2014) simply states the following:

The Australian Government’s settlement policy supports the economic, social and humanitarian benefits of migration. This involves: addressing the needs of new arrivals to help them develop the knowledge and skills they need to become active and independent participants in Australian society; and governments and society being responsive to the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of migrants (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2013:4).

It goes on to assert that the ‘cornerstone’ to the achievement of ‘successful’ settlement (and by implication ‘integration’) is through the active participation of new arrivals in the economic, social, cultural and political realms of ‘mainstream’ society (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2013:10). Increased participation via work, study and/or volunteering for example, has been considered by governments to be the means for building social capital, improving social cohesion and social inclusion and encouraging integration. Further to this, ‘successful’ settlement is built upon gaining a sense of independence and ‘community’ connection. According to the document:

Feeling part of a community can strongly influence a new arrival’s comfort and happiness about living in Australia. Whether it be family and friends, the local community, an ethnic or religious group, sports or arts related or the broader Australian community, feeling connected to and welcomed by others can overcome the sense of isolation that is often a feature of the initial settlement experience (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2013:10).
Aspects of this policy and its formula for ‘successful’ settlement will be teased out and scrutinised throughout this thesis. For now it is suffice to say that in reality, building connections to the ‘broader Australian community’ within the local neighbourhood is the principal objective and focus of related programs and practices. The current Abbott Government’s (2013 - present) government’s commitment to enabling and supporting connections within family and ethnic/religious groups in particular remains doubtful, as I will later show. For instance, recently there has been a clear shift away from supporting ethno-specific groups. This was evidenced in December 2013 when it was announced that the government was cutting $11.5 million in grants through the Building Multicultural Communities Program, which was abolished in July 2014 (Kukolja 2013). This has affected more than 400 ethno-specific and multicultural organisations nationally and 50 in South Australia (ibid).

**Social Cohesion**

Since 9/11 Australian Governments have used the term Multiculturalism more as rhetoric to promote harmonious community relations and develop social cohesion. The importance of social cohesion for policy makers lies in its ability to provide a framework for measuring social progress rather than economic. The key aims of the social cohesion agenda are to erode “disparities, inequalities and social exclusion” and to nurture “the social infrastructure of neighbourhoods, social relations, interactions and ties” (Hudson *et al.* 2007). Social cohesion is an ambiguous and confusing concept and has been heavily criticised by academics (e.g. Cheong *et al.* 2007; Flint & Robinson 2008; Keddie 2012). In a broad sense it refers to social ‘connectedness’ or ‘solidarity’ and the ties that bind society together and prevent it from fragmenting such as trust, social order, common values and purpose in society, and a sense of (place attachment) belonging (Forrest & Kearns 2001). In the past decade or so, governments have adopted the position that ethnic diversity erodes trust and social cohesion. However, numerous studies (e.g. Hooghe 2007; Letki 2008; Hickman *et al.* 2008; Uslaner 2012; Demivera 2014) have found the relationship between diversity and social cohesion to be highly complex and that social and economic inequality are much more significant factors in generating a lack of trust and social cohesion.

Social cohesion policies and programs have a focus on implementing organised social ‘bridging’ activities at the neighbourhood level between people from diverse backgrounds. This is in order to allow for the development of shared ‘mainstream’ values, achieving common
goals, encouraging integration and promoting a unified Australian national identity (Harris & Young 2009). Social ‘bridging’, with regards to refugees and other migrants, generally refers to the social connections between people from dissimilar ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds (Ager & Strang 2008:178). Social ‘bonding’ on the other hand, refers to the social connections between family members and people of similar ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds (Ager & Strang 2008:178). Governments regard ‘bonding’ social relations as undermining social cohesion and integration whilst ‘bridging’ relations are seen as important facilitators. Surely, the downfall of Multiculturalism has been strongly linked to its “disproportionate emphasis on social bonds, at the expense of social bridges” (McPherson 2010:551). This is despite evidence from studies (e.g. Ager & Strang 2008; Nannestad et al. 2008; Larsen 2011) that have demonstrated that ‘bonding’ relations do not impede the establishment of ‘bridging’ relations and can facilitate the development of trust and social connections to wider society. Certainly the emphasis on social ‘bridges’ neatly fits with the assimilationist-integration model rather than that of Multiculturalism.

Governments have viewed the development of a sense of belonging to an Australian national identity for new arrivals as being critical to ‘successful’ integration and social cohesion (Wille 2011:80). As Wille (2011) has observed though, “notions of belonging and social cohesion are often discussed with regard to the dominant culture where the focus is on, in the case of Australia, ‘Australian values’, ‘fitting in’, and ‘common identity’” (Wille 2011:80). Here the framework of social cohesion is clearly based on ideas of homogeneity instead of ‘diversity and complexity’ (ibid). In being distinguished as different, refugees are constantly reminded that they do not belong here and, as Henry-Waring (2011) asks, how can refugees belong when their difference is embedded in a context of ‘Otherness’? (Henry-Waring 2011:8). I argue that the development of social cohesion is contingent upon social equity and inclusion and reducing discrimination and racism. Or in other words, a perceived erosion of social cohesion is better understood as a consequence of social exclusion rather than increased diversity. The more excluded people feel, the harder it is for them to feel as equals, actively participate socially, and feel a sense of belonging.

It appears that whilst Multiculturalism remains as an explicit policy, its core principle of promoting respect for cultural difference has now been replaced by assimilationist-integration goals of social cohesion, conformity, solidarity and consensus. Australian Sociologist Andrew Jakubowicz (2009) has written that: “Australia’s integration future seems now to be firmly set...
upon a course in which cultural recognition of difference is subordinated to proprieties of social cohesion” (Jakubowicz 2009). At the heart of social cohesion policies is the belief that community cohesion can only be achieved by imposing an Anglo-Australian assimilation agenda on diverse communities. In doing so, the goals of building social cohesion are potentially achieved via the social alienation of ‘Others’ who have not fully embraced the dominant culture, language and ‘values’ of ‘Australian’ society (Cheong et al. 2007). In emphasising “homogeneity, cohesion and consensus” over “material and cultural difference”, and “responsibilities to society rather than rights”, the shift from Multiculturalism to assimilationist-integration diverts attention away from fundamental “economic, material and structural inequalities” and injustices, as an approach for social policy discussions (Cheong et al. 2007:29). A step was made towards addressing this when in 2008 the Labour Government established a National Social Inclusion Board to oversee the development of a social inclusion agenda.

Social Inclusion

Social Inclusion was initially developed as a multidimensional model for understanding disadvantage in Europe and attracted international attention when the Blair Labour Government was elected in 1997 (Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria 2009:8). Social Inclusion was underpinned by the ideology of the Third Way, which was heavily influenced by the ideas of sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998) who became a key advisor to the Blair government. In Australia, the interest in social inclusion and its application to policy reflected a concern for the causes and effects of social disadvantage, and the need for subjective as well as objective measurements of individual and group participation (Fozdar 2011:169). A social inclusion perspective allowed for disadvantage to be examined via multiple dimensions of exclusion as well as economic (Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria 2009:8). This enabled both the distributional (lack of resources) as well as relational aspects (lack of social ties to family, friends, local community, institutions and general society) of exclusion to be examined and of particular note, encompassed the notion of ‘social-relations deprivation’ (Bhalla & Lapeyre 1997).

According to the former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the aim of social inclusion policies is to create prosperity with fairness via the “full social and economic participation of all Australians” (Gillard 2008). Gillard revealed the Government’s approach to social inclusion in a
speech (28 February 2008) saying that to be socially included means to secure a job, access services, connect with others in life through family, friends, work, personal interests and local community, deal with personal crises and to be heard (Gillard 2008). Significantly though, Gillard acknowledged the “value of informal relationships and social networks alongside the basic material goods and services that everyone also needs” (ibid). Whilst the national statement on Social Inclusion A Stronger Fairer Australia (2010) acknowledged the additional challenges faced by refugees and other migrants, addressing their needs was not a specific priority.

The concept of social inclusion is closely linked to that of social exclusion. Although there is no commonly agreed upon definition for social exclusion, related policies have a fundamental focus on addressing issues of poverty, inadequate social participation, a lack of social integration and power imbalances. Social exclusion is a complex multidimensional and dynamic process rather than an outcome (Giddens 1998; Levitas et al. 2007; Sen 2000). Giddens (1998) writes that: “Exclusion is not about graduations of inequality, but about mechanisms that act to detach groups of people from the mainstream” (Giddens 1998:104). This points to the critical need for governments to address structural issues in order to develop a socially inclusive society and social cohesion. It has been clearly demonstrated that social exclusion can lead to a lack of social cohesion (see UK Cantle Report of the Community Cohesion Review Team 2001).

People of refugee background commonly experience forms of exclusion due to multiple factors such as: material poverty; language barriers; poor health; lack of access to affordable, secure housing; racism and discrimination; lack of employment; negative media stereotyping; lower educational outcomes; lack of access to services; and lack of access to social networks of support (Multicultural Development Association Inc. 2011; Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria 2009; Beirens et al. 2007). The conditions of settlement are therefore likely to make it difficult to be able to ‘fully participate’ and I contend, many are likely to experience forms of exclusion and marginalisation. It was of great concern then that on the 18th September 2013, the very day Tony Abbott was sworn in as Prime Minister, the Social Inclusion Unit was dissolved.

Multiculturalism has not fundamentally altered the dominance of Anglo–Australian cultural hegemony. Over the past few decades, assimilationist-integration has remained synonymous
with ‘successful’ settlement despite the representation of ‘integration’ as being positioned between the extremes of Assimilation and Multiculturalism. This conformance-based model places the onus on new arrivals as individuals requiring action and problematises them as ‘outsiders’. In this way they are constructed as being ‘a problem’ in need of ‘fixing’ which contributes towards their social alienation. In doing so, governments have largely ignored the institutional structures that have produced social and economic inequalities of opportunity, and racist, discriminatory practices that can further marginalise refugees and other migrants. Social cohesion is clearly valued above cultural and linguistic diversity, yet its potential ‘achievement’ may be at the expense of the social alienation of refugees and other migrants. The paradox then is that in marginalising ‘minority’ refugees from the ‘majority’ population, the current integration model has the real potential to create social exclusion and disconnection.
Integration and Social Capital

I have argued that Australian Governments have maintained the view that ultimately, ‘successful’ settlement means assimilationist-integration. This section examines the issues and assumptions underlying this approach, which focuses attention on the conformity and control of refugees and migrants. From a policy perspective ‘successful’ settlement is a set of prescribed activities, the assumption being that new arrivals will become ‘integrated’ when they participate in economic, social, cultural and political realms of ‘mainstream’ Australian society. This positivist approach over-emphasises the practical aspects of settlement and functional, ‘measurable’ indicators. In doing so it obscures the complex experiences of people of refugee background and their subjective goals and desires. The following locates this thesis within recent literature that has given a central focus to exploring the social relations of refugees in the context of settlement. These studies have overwhelmingly employed the concepts of integration and social capital as a framework.

Integration

During the past few decades there has been a considerable body of literature (e.g. Valtonen 2004; Ager & Strang 2008) that has examined the multiple aspects of refugee integration. This has coincided with integration becoming a key policy objective for several major Western refugee receiving countries and as such, these studies are largely situated in the context of England, Canada, the US, Europe and Australia. Recent debates have focused on critiquing the concept of integration itself (Castles et al 2002), examining the relevance of integration ‘indicators’ (Phillimore & Goodson 2008) or social capital (McMichael & Manderson 2004; Morrice 2007) to explain the process, and whether ‘ethnic’ diversity erodes social cohesion (Hooghe 2007; Letki 2008; Cheong et al. 2007; Demireva 2014).

There are numerous issues and assumptions surrounding the concept of integration. The first assumption that underlies political discussions in Australia is that a set of static, homogenous values and norms exist in Australian society. How is this imagined though when in a democratic society people are likely to have lifestyles, opinions, interests and notions of what constitutes ‘good’ that vary considerably (Castles et al. 2002:114)? What is clear is that refugees and other migrants are represented as having values and norms that are in opposition
to ‘mainstream’ values and the ‘integration’ agenda (McPherson 2010:554 Li 2003:7). It is also noted that the ‘mainstream’ population are not compelled to adopt these supposed values.

A second key assumption behind the assimilationist-integration approach to settlement by successive Australian governments over the past few decades is that ethnic diversity erodes trust and a sense of solidarity and social cohesion, particularly at the neighbourhood level. A recent example of the assumed link between ethnic diversity and concerns about social cohesion is provided by the current Diversity and Social Cohesion Program which is funded by the Federal Government (see Department of Social Services 2014a). These grants target ‘higher need communities’ with low levels of social cohesion such as those with high levels of cultural diversity. Putnam (2007) has argued that people living in highly ethnically diverse neighbourhoods are less likely to trust and be socially engaged with other residents than people living in other areas because fundamentally they are less ‘similar’ to each other (Putnam 2007). In his view diversity tends to drive people towards ‘hunkering down’ and subsequently can lead to social alienation and segregation (Putnam 2007). Studies (e.g. Costa & Khan 2003; Stolle et al. 2008) in the US in particular, have also found that people living in ethnically and racially diverse areas are less likely to trust their neighbours or become involved in local ‘community’ or political activities.

The perception that diversity erodes social cohesion however is flawed according to several scholars (Forrest & Kearns 2001; Hooghe 2007; Letki 2008; Hickman et al. 2008; Demivera 2014). Hooghe (2007) for example, points out that generally research that uncovers a strong negative relationship between diversity and social cohesion tend to use the notion of trust as the major indicator of social capital and social cohesion when it is only one of several elements. These studies also tend to overlook the fact that racially diverse neighbourhoods are often strongly linked to low socio-economic status (Letki 2008:9). Neighborhoods with high levels of unemployment and crime can produce a sense of powerlessness, suspicion, anxiety, alienation and a lack of trust among residents (Letki 2008:105). Consequentially people are less inclined to engage with one another and less likely to develop a sense of neighbourhood attachment. The relationship between diversity and social cohesion is highly complex and context specific and issues of deprivation, disadvantage and how people relate to each other must also be considered (Hickman et al. 2008). Studies (e.g. Letki 2008; Demireva 2014) that have broadened their key research focus beyond the notion of trust and have considered contextual factors, have found that ethnic diversity can contribute positively to social cohesion and that
economic inequality is much more significant in explaining varying levels of social cohesion.

A third common assumption is that ‘successful’ settlement involves addressing measurable indicators. Scholars (Korac 2003:52; Castles et al. 2002:124) have noted that, in the context of refugee studies, the term integration is mostly understood in relation to its functional aspects. The literature reveals a heavy emphasis on functional indicators or, the practical aspects of the integration process that are viewed as quantifiable such as employment, language, housing, education and health. Integration involves more than addressing functional indicators however. Integration is multi-dimensional and therefore can only be understood by using qualitative methods to explore the inter-relatedness between these ‘indicators’, the experiential dimension of integration, and the different factors that can impact on the process (Phillimore & Goodson 2008:309). This is especially so when seeking to gain insight into the role of social relations and networks in supporting the process of settlement and fostering a sense of social connectedness to society. It is crucial that subjective factors are emphasised by policy makers and academics whom insist on developing ways to measure ‘successful’ integration and settlement.

Settlement related policies in Australia suggest that new arrivals become ‘integrated’ when they participate in economic, social, cultural and political ‘mainstream’ activities. For refugees this would mean learning English, getting a job or studying, adopting ‘Australian’ socio-cultural norms and eventually gaining citizenship and voting. Castles et al. (2002) suggest that integration is a complex process that may occur differently for individuals in each of the various sectors of society (Castles et al. 2002:113 & 115). For example, a refugee may have citizenship and the right to vote in political elections but experience forms of exclusion in relation to employment or education. Or, they might have a job but experience forms of exclusion in relation to “culture, identity and everyday forms of social interaction” (Castles et al. 2002:115). Clare Daley’s (2007) case study of an inner-city refugee settlement in the UK revealed a common perception that many of the long-term refugee residents were ‘successfully’ settled because they were “well-integrated into mainstream structures” however, they largely remained socially ‘isolated’ and detached from other residents. (Daley 2007:165). So, can a person be truly ‘integrated’ if they are feeling socially disconnected?

In Korac’s (2003) ethnographic study of refugees from the former Yugoslavia living in the Netherlands and Italy, the findings strongly suggested that: “personal satisfaction and
assessment of integration success goes beyond simple, measurable, indicators, such as individual occupational mobility or economic status" (Korac 2003:63). Importantly, so-called integration ‘success’ also included the ability to build closer ties with ‘established’ members of society. This is exemplified in the following comments from a Bosnian doctor who described his ‘integration’ experience as living a ‘parallel’ life:

I am employed in a Dutch medical firm, I speak Dutch language well, my child goes to a Dutch school and soon he’ll speak Dutch better than his mother tongue, but we live a parallel existence, because we don’t have any real contact with Dutch society. We are neither accepted nor rejected..... I do what I am told to do, and everything is going according to ‘integration’ rules that we ‘refugees’ have to follow. We didn’t have to integrate really, you see, we just had to do what we were told (Korac 2003:56).

This highlights how ‘top-down’ prescriptive approaches to integration, that require refugees and other migrants to undertake certain activities in order to ‘fit in’, does not necessarily lead to deeper feelings of social connectedness and belonging to society at large. A related assumption is that undertaking these ‘activities’ will not be difficult. As earlier stated, refugees are likely to encounter multiple forms of exclusion, inequality of access to services, restricted opportunities for work and study, poverty, and racism and discrimination. Under these conditions there is the real potential that many will feel socially disconnected rather than ‘integrated’.

Integration is often assumed to be a “singular, universal, stage-sequential and regularly paced process to which all individual immigrants or refugees are exposed” (Castles et al. 2002:126). Lejokole has emphasised that the concept of integration signifies “complex and inexhaustible experiences” (Lejokole 2008:23). It is a process that begins before arrival in the country of settlement and is influenced by multiple factors including gender, age, level of education, whether previously lived in a rural or urban area, family and social networks, personal character, English language competency and experience of war and trauma etc. Integration is a process that is also shaped by the political, social and material conditions of settlement as well as the intentions and aspirations of the refugees themselves.
Relatedly, refugees and other migrants are often judged as being ‘successfully’ or ‘unsuccessfully’ integrated. This was evidenced by Kevin Andrew’s comments mentioned previously about the supposed ‘failure’ of ‘African refugees’ to integrate at an acceptable pace in Australia. The process of ‘becoming’ ‘successfully’ integrated and resettled we know can take around 10-15 years or even longer for many people of refugee background (Flatau et al. 2014:31). Note that Commonwealth funded settlement support services are only available to be accessed within the first 5 years of living in Australia. This suggests that, according to the Australian Government, settlement has an end date - refugees are expected to be ‘well’ settled and ‘integrated’ within 5 years.

**Social Capital**

Over the past two decades policy-makers and academics have commonly held the simplistic view that the concept of social capital can explain the process of integration and thus, ‘successful’ settlement. Recent literature reveals the heavy adoption of the concept, which highlights the centrality of social relations or networks to understanding refugee integration. For refugees this would mean initially utilising the resources that are assumed to be available through ‘bonded’ networks of family and people who share a similar ethnic-cultural background. Later on the expectation is that they would develop ‘bridging’ relations with members of the ‘host’ society via their participation in work and study and social cohesion programs. The assumption is that in doing so, differences will be obscured, trust will be fostered, ‘Australian’ norms and values will be adopted and a sense of belonging will develop to a national identity.

The following section critiques Putnam’s (1993, 2000 & 2007) conceptualisation of social capital, which underpins settlement policies in Australia. This approach I argue, is limited for two key reasons. The first is that it is not broad enough to accommodate the structural inequalities and other forces people of refugee background are likely to face in rebuilding the social networks, which are considered to be integral to this model of social capital. The second reason is that in promoting an emphasis on ‘bridging’ relations it undervalues the significance of ‘bonding’ relations with family and people from a similar ethnic/cultural background to social well-being and the process of settlement.

The concept of social capital has been highly criticised (e.g. Gamarnikow & Green 1999; Morrow 1999; Fine 2001) and is confusing because it lacks a precise definition. Social capital is
typically referred to as a ‘social good’ by terms such as social energy, community spirit, community networks, extended friendships, community life, social resources, informal and formal networks, good neighbourliness and social glue (Harper 2001:6). It is also frequently regarded as the solution to social problems. The underlying notion here is that group participation can have positive outcomes for both the individual and the community (Leonard 2004:930). Just as social capital can unite people however, it can also divide them (Li et al. 2003:500).

Bourdieu’s (1986 & 1992) conceptualisation of social capital has highlighted the power dynamics embedded within social groups, the complex and subtle forms of inclusion and exclusion, and how unequal access to valuable resources can contribute to the production and maintenance of a person’s social and economic position within society (Cederberg 2012:60). From Bourdieu’s perspective, social capital is embedded in issues of social class and the reproduction of power relations. Primarily he was concerned with how economic capital could be combined with cultural, social and symbolic capital to generate and reproduce inequality (Morrice 2007:161). Each form of capital he argued could be converted into other resources (principally economic) in order to secure advantage or overcome disadvantage (Bourdieu 1986). He describes social capital in the following way:

.... the sum of the resources, actual and virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:119).

Bourdieu’s related concept of habitus refers to the embodied socialised norms that guide our behaviour and thinking, and which form a link between subjective agency and objective position (Morrice 2007:161). Bourdieu’s social capital framework reveals that differentials in habitus ensure that some individuals or groups may not be able to access more advantageous forms of social capital due to their unfamiliarity with “the tacit rules, norms and expectations and traditions” and consequently, can be greatly disadvantaged (Morrice 2007:161 & 164). Resettling people of refugee background are likely to have limited durable relations and connections to social networks and therefore have restricted access to social capital. Furthermore, not all social networks lead to advantage because they may in practice contribute to, or reinforce existing patterns of disadvantage.
Over the past few decades Putnam’s (1993, 2000 & 2007) version of social capital, as comprising ‘networks of civic engagement’ (Putnam 1993:167), has been most influential to policy makers and academics in Australia and other countries. Putnam largely views social capital as an attribute of ‘communities’ and as such he has mostly confined his attention to local geographic communities, organisations and neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, his work has increasingly been applied in relation to refugee and migrant settlement. This dominant approach to social capital has largely formed the framework of settlement related policies in Australia. The application of this approach to migrants, and particularly refugees, as way of explaining ‘successful’ settlement however, cannot be taken-for-granted as we shall see.

Putnam’s conceptualisation of social capital refers to the resources derived from social networks of mutual support and the norms of reciprocity, trustworthiness and obligation that develop among their members (Putnam 2000). According to Putnam, low levels of social capital are seen to weaken participation in the economic, cultural, social and political spheres of society. He proposed that: “the social capital that is built through encouraging voluntary associations is the cure for social inequality and lack of cohesive social trust associated with ethnic diversity” (Putnam 2003 cited in Cheong et al. 2007:29). Participation in informal social networks was considered to be the next best thing to formal volunteerism.

The conceptual foundations of Australia’s settlement model derived from Putnam’s views about social capital address concerns about social exclusion and fractured social cohesion. Here policy makers have been profoundly attracted to the idea, and conveniently so, that a person or group can overcome disadvantage by extracting the resources available to them via their social networks (Cederberg 2012:61). This approach to social exclusion of course costs the government nothing. According to this ‘mainstream’ economic rationalist, opportunistic view, social relations and networks are solely seen in instrumental terms. That is, as a resource which can be taken advantage of, in order to achieve policy outcomes (Morrice 2007:162). For people of refugee background, social capital has the potential to provide valuable resources such as informational, practical, material and emotional support, as well as social introductions (McMichael & Manderson 2004:89). Hence, the basis of social relations is reduced to rationality and efficiency. Yet, as I hope to later demonstrate, social relations are highly complex and are often formed and maintained for mostly non-instrumental reasons.
Policy makers also saw the potential that social capital, with its emphasis on trust, could enable the development of social cohesion. Putnam has argued that: "the more ethnically diverse the people we live around, the less we trust them" (Putnam 2007:147). In Putnam’s model, social capital is stimulated when people socially interact with each other, the hope being that differences will be obscured, trust and a sense of belonging will develop, and ‘community’ cohesion will prevail. However, increased contact does not automatically lead to the development of common ground, increased understanding and better relations, and prejudice is not necessarily produced by ignorance (Harris & Young 2009:519). Furthermore, superficial casual contact is not enough to create lasting attitudinal change (Amir 2002) and can even reinforce negative stereotypes (Uslaner 2012:23).

‘Bonding’ and ‘Bridging’ Relations

The concept of social capital has been most heavily applied in refugee studies as a tool to ‘categorise’ the different forms of social connections that presumably explain the process of integration. Here again Putnam’s work (1993, 2000 & 2007) has been especially influential to both scholars and policy makers in distinguishing between two forms of social capital networks: bonding (ties to people who are like you in some important way); and bridging (ties to people who are unlike you in some important way) (Putnam 2007:143). In refugee-centred studies, the concept of ‘bonding’ most commonly refers to relations with family and those from a similar ethnic, cultural or religious background, whereas ‘bridging’ refers to relations with people from a different ethnic, cultural or religious background (Ager & Strang 2008:178). Putman considers ‘bonding’ social capital to be socially exclusive and ‘bridging’ social capital to be socially inclusive (Putman 2000).

‘Bridging’ social capital is regarded as more valuable for social cohesion by government’s because of a “fear that minority ethnic groups may bond too much within their communities at the expense of integration into wider society” (Cheong et al. 2007:29). The assumption is that ‘bonding’ is within a minority ethnic group and ‘bridging’ is with the ‘mainstream’ population. Social ‘bonding’ is therefore viewed by policy makers to be negative social capital and an ‘obstacle’ to integration, and social ‘bridging’ is regarded as positive social capital and a necessary precondition for the ‘achievement’ of productive social capital and ‘successful’ integration.
Researchers (e.g. Anthias 2007; Klvanova 2009) have viewed ‘ethnic’ bonded networks as having negative social capital for refugees and other migrants. For instance, Klvanova (2009) has argued that the ‘bounded’ character of bonded social networks can hinder access to desired resources from the ‘host’ society and restrict social mobility (Klvanova 2009). Other studies (Daniel & Knudsen 1995; Hynes 2003 & 2009; McMichael & Manderson 2004; Valenta 2008) have revealed that ‘bonded’ networks are vulnerable to fractures caused by internal divisions, coercion, mistrust and competition. Additionally, these networks have been regarded as hindering integration because they encourage ‘alternative norms, values and behaviours’ and inhibit a person’s desire to build ‘bridging’ relations with members of ‘mainstream’ society (Li 2003:5).

On the flipside, other studies (e.g. Strang & Ager 2010; Nannestad et al. 2008; Larsen 2011) have shown that a person’s strong attachment to a ‘bonded’ network does not limit wider social engagement. Rather, ‘bonded’ networks can facilitate the development of ‘bridging’ relationships and general trust in society and thus, foster integration (Ager & Strang 2008; Larsen 2011). People who feel secure within their own group identity are more likely to be accepting of people who are dissimilar (Harris & Young 2009:519). In other words, those with high levels of ‘bonding’ social capital are also likely to have high levels of ‘bridging’ social capital (Nannestad et al. 2008). In McMichael and Manderson’s ethnographic study (2004) of Somali women, they found that separation from family and a lack of social ‘bonds’ in Melbourne “precluded the establishment or maintenance of trusting relations” with other people (McMichael & Manderson 2004:93). Therefore, refugees who have access to networks of support from family and those who share a common ethnicity and culture are more likely to build stronger relations with members of wider society (Nannestad et al. 2008; WWC 2008; Larsen 2011).

Australian governments have viewed the ethnically and culturally ‘bonded’ social networks of new arrivals in solely instrumental terms. They take it for granted that these networks will automatically provide important practical and material support during early settlement. ‘Bonded’ networks are thus tolerated in the early period of settlement. Ultimately though, ‘bonded’ networks are seen as just a stepping-stone to joining ‘the team’ of ‘mainstream’ society. People of refugee background are expected to initially exploit the resources that are supposedly available through these networks, but then progressively weaken these ties and move on to building ‘bridging’ relations as quickly as possible. Put another way, integration is seen as a
process of moving from step one, ‘bonding’ relations to step two, ‘bridging’ relations. This echoes Putman’s suggestion that “social bonding is good for ‘getting by’ and social bridging is critical for ‘getting ahead’” (Putman 2000:23). Therefore, the expectation is that people of refugee background must be prepared to form social ‘bridging’ relations with members of ‘mainstream’ society.

Nonetheless, many people of refugee background encounter multiple hurdles in their efforts to build ‘bridges’ and form friendships with members of the ‘host’ population, which can often lead to feelings of social alienation and detachment from society. The key issues have been identified as a lack of opportunities to meet others (Daley 2007), racism and discrimination (Casimiro et al. 2007; Ramsden & Ridge 2012; Fozdar & Hartley 2013), as well as the perception that the ‘host’ society is somewhat closed to ‘outsiders’ and therefore difficult to access (Cederberg 2012). In order for bridging social capital to develop then, there is a need to create increased opportunities for social interaction within an informal context and people may need to be “encouraged and motivated” to do so (Harris & Young 2009:519).

My position is that the concepts of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital are limited in explaining the process of integration for people of refugee background. The preoccupation in the literature with describing forms of social connections in terms of these simplistic categories does not adequately capture the complexities of these relations, which are likely to overlap, intersect and vary across individuals and groups, and shift over time. The bonding-bridging model is also problematic on a number of other levels. It tends to polarise refugees and members of the ‘mainstream’ society into two homogenous and distinct social groups and in doing so, fails to acknowledge inherent differences within as well as internal divisions, tensions and power dynamics (Cederberg 2012). Generally, studies that make the bonding-bridging distinction reveal a tacit assumption that ‘successful’ social integration is achieved via a linear process of building ‘bonding social capital’ followed by ‘bridging social capital’. Furthermore, social ‘bridging’ does not necessarily contribute towards the social ‘integration’ of refugees or their sense of belonging to society at large because it can result in exposure to discrimination and racism (Valenta 2008:7).

It also cannot be assumed that ‘bridging’ to the ‘host’ population will be generally advantageous for people of refugee background in terms of access to valued resources. Scholars who stress the importance of ‘bridging’ social capital for refugees in ‘getting ahead’, overlook the
differential value offered by particular social networks and, they do not distinguish between the various forms and levels of resources held by individual members of the ‘mainstream’ population (Cederberg 2012). As Leonard (2004) has pointed out: “making the transition from bonding to bridging social capital may not necessarily lead to the positive outcomes envisaged by Putman but rather reinforce existing social, economic and political inequity” (Leonard 2004:942). As such, scholars and policy makers have often failed to acknowledge the structures that produce disadvantage and exclusion.

Putnam’s social capital theory may be a useful tool for capturing the positive and practical ways in which people settle in a new country (McMichael & Manderson 2004:89). Yet it does not have the depth to adequately explain the diversity and complexity of their everyday lives and experiences nor the process of their settlement. The key point is that people of refugee background should be able to decide whom they wish to form social relations with rather than feel compelled to form ‘bridging’ relations determined by government policies. In everyday life, people of refugee background are likely to interact with a range of different people such as neighbours, friends, fellow students and workmates and service providers with whom they may or may not share a common ethnic or cultural background, religious membership, life experience, gender, age or key interest. People of refugee background have varying abilities, desires and opportunities to access and engage in ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social relations and networks.

Research suggests that the capacity of a person of refugee background to rebuild social capital through the development of reciprocal and trusting relations is broadly determined by their pre-migration experiences of war and displacement (e.g. issues of mistrust and trauma), the present political and social environment (e.g. policies, discourse, discrimination and racism), and their intentions and aspirations for the future (McMichael & Manderson 2004:93). Multiple factors can impede network building such as housing instability and geographic isolation, lack of transport, financial hardship, social restrictions, poor mental and physical health, time restrictions and language/cultural barriers. Studies (McMichael & Manderson 2004; Goodkind & Deacon 2004; Williams 2006; Ryan 2011; Smith 2013) have demonstrated that many of these factors are likely to be more profound for women than men. Hence, network building can be complex and often highly problematic and this has implications for policy makers who in my view, need to take account of the experiential dimension of settlement in their formulation of social capital.
It is important then to examine the different forces that can impact on a person’s ability to access and engage in various social networks as well as to highlight their own motivations, tactics and network preferences (Castles et al. 2002:129). I argue that many women want relationships that are more meaningful than the reductive and instrumental ones reflected in the Government’s social capital-based settlement model. They want friendships and relations that are enjoyed for their own sake. After all, as Daly and Silver (2008) have pointed out, “even if people do call on their friends for favours, most people are with their friends for non instrumental reasons” (Daly and Silver 2008:554). A friendly wave from someone living in the same local area or a smile from a stranger may not lead to greater access to desired resources or advantageous social contacts, but it may be important for feeling a sense of acceptance and contribute to a person’s everyday subjective well-being. Moreover, many women of refugee background are likely to have limited connections to social networks and therefore have restricted access to social capital.

I argue the need to move beyond the preoccupation by academics and policy makers with the simplistic categories of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social relations as contexts for the production of social capital and process of integration (Ager & Strang 2008:178). In order to better reflect the needs of the women in this study, I propose an alternative framework for discussing social relations, friendships, belonging and social connection that does not divide society into ‘mainstream’ and ‘other’. These women suggested that the following elements were most significant: family living in close proximity; ethnic/cultural ‘community’ relations based on trust; friendly neighbours who they could rely on if they needed help; and close diverse relations with other people who they shared an affinity with. I acknowledge that these elements of relations may also overlap with each other.
Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter two describes the methodology that has informed this study and the research methods used. An ethnographic approach has been adopted and the methods of in-depth interviews and participant observation employed in order to explore the nuances of how policies and practices play out in the lives of the women in this study. Details are provided about where, when and how the fieldwork was undertaken. An outline is given of the women who were involved in this study and the main ethical issues I have considered. I conclude with my fieldwork reflections.

Chapters three, four and five are structured according to the domains of family, ethnic-cultural ‘community’, and neighbours. The women in this study saw these relations as forming the core of their social world and sense of social connectedness in their pre-migration lives. According to the government, these relations are also considered as playing an important role in overcoming feelings of social isolation in the initial settlement period and enhancing a sense of being ‘connected to the community’. In each of these domains I critically engage with related government policies and practices and then draw on the fieldwork findings to explore how they relate to the lives of the women as they re/built such relations. I also highlight some of the relational and practical issues that complicate the re-establishment and building of relations within these domains.

Chapter three underscores the fundamental importance of family to the process of settlement. Despite this, the government’s restrictive family reunion policies serve to keep people of refugee background separated from their loved ones. This chapter examines these policies and argues the critical need to prioritise the facilitation of family reunion and adopt a fairer, more flexible, less expensive and quicker process. I demonstrate how family separation can impact significantly on the women’s ability to socially participate, progress with their settlement and make future plans. At the same time, I also raise some of the tensions that can emerge within some families in the settlement context due to their reconfiguration and changed dynamics. In determining if and how families are reunited, reconfigured and supported, I conclude that government policies can have a crucial impact on the women’s general sense of well-being, levels of social engagement and sense of social connectedness.
In chapter four I highlight the key role that ethno-cultural ‘community’ networks can play in providing settlement support, social opportunities and reinforcing a sense of belonging. I discuss the consequences of the Australian Government’s withdrawal of funding to ethno-specific groups arguing that this may contribute to the erosion of trust and solidarity between their members. I then explore the women’s engagement with ‘ethnic’-cultural ‘community’ networks. I challenge the common assumption that they have easy access to a pre-existing supportive ‘community’. I also highlight the problems some women had in re-establishing ‘community’ ties in the context of settlement and in particular, how mistrust can shape their level and quality of engagement and attachment.

Chapter five looks at social cohesion policies and programs, which aim to increase social engagement between residents living within the same local neighbourhood. These programs were found to be largely irrelevant to the lives of the women in this study. On a broad level, these women wished to have more supportive neighbourly relations however, I show that many factors could hamper their capacity and desire to do so. These include a lack of affordable long-term housing, lack of opportunities for building one-on-one relations, lack of appropriate facilitated opportunities and perceptions of unfriendliness and racism.

Chapter six highlights how problematic network rebuilding can produce or exacerbate profound loneliness and social disconnection. It provides a detailed account of how these issues impacted on the everyday lives of some of the women as well as the process of their settlement. I explore how loneliness is influenced by family separation, the existing level and quality of social contact, as well as by nostalgic memories of a rich pre-migration social life. There is an assumption that the longer a person is living in the country of settlement the more people they will meet, the more support they will receive and the less lonely they will feel. I challenge this simplistic picture arguing that whilst this may be the case for many women, for others it is much more complicated. I demonstrate how women of refugee background can experience intense periods of loneliness and social alienation regardless of their level of English, participation in work and study and length of time living in Australia. I argue that whilst loneliness can be a force motivating increased social engagement it can also be an impediment. The longer these women feel lonely, the more likely levels of emotional distress will increase and reduce their capacity to socially engage confidently and build close relations. This has obvious implications for the women, but also for policy makers. I argue the critical need to give this issue more attention.
Finally, I summarise the key findings of the study and discuss the implications for both the women in this study and the government. I then reflect on what we can do to better address social disconnection before providing my concluding comments.
Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

The fundamental objective of this thesis is to interrogate the Australian Government’s current settlement model by exploring how policies and practices relate to the lives of women of refugee background. In order to address this aim I have provided an ethnographically detailed portrait of the lives of a small group of women. An ethnographic approach has enabled me to focus on the women as individuals and illustrate their unique experiences, concerns, actions and desires. In doing so, this study is an attempt to challenge the notion of ‘the refugee experience’ as an essentialised ‘uniform condition’ (Eastmond 2007:253). It is also an attempt to challenge the inclination to view refugees as undifferentiated, depoliticised and ahistorical universal humanitarian subjects (Malkki 1996).

Ethnography is the principal methodology used by anthropologists. This approach aims to capture and describe in detail the worldview and lives of the people being studied by using observations and first-hand experience. Traditionally, the defining features of ethnography are participant observation, an emphasis on examining the social context and being immersed in the field site for an extended period of time (Whitehead 2005:3). Ethnography is considered to be a flexible and creative process of discovery. It begins with the intention to thoroughly explore a research topic rather than with a predetermined hypothesis to be tested and informants are treated as the experts on the topic being studied (ibid). The findings are therefore regarded as an “intersubjective product constructed by the relationship between the researcher and the study population” (Whitehead 2005:4).

Ethnographic fieldwork is considered central to anthropology and in its most characteristic form involves the researcher participating in the daily lives of the people being studied, observing, listening, asking questions, recording detailed field notes and collecting any available data that sheds light upon the research topic (O’Reilly 2012). Arguably though, the methods and field sites used by the ethnographer will differ according to the study group, research topic and social, cultural and political context. This policy-focused research necessitated a particular approach.
Wedel et al. (2005) contend that studying policy requires rethinking ‘the field’ as a geographically bound place (Wedel et al. 2005:39). Often the study group consists of ‘loosely connected actors’ (ibid). According to Shore and Wright (2005): “the sheer complexity of the various meanings and sites of policy suggests they cannot be studied by participant observation in one face-to-face locality” (Shore & Wright 2005:11). They advocate the need for different perspectives and multi-site ethnographies: “which trace policy connections between different organisational and everyday worlds, even where actors in different sites do not know each other or share a moral universe” (ibid). These assertions by anthropologists further support my decision to study women from different countries of origin/ethnicities. In order to capture a range of perspectives then, this study involved multiple field sites throughout suburban Adelaide with a diverse group of women who were ‘loosely connected’ by policy processes.

An ethnographic approach was critical in enabling me to build rapport and trust over time with the informants during the fieldwork. Building trust is a process that is not easy and can take time. Hynes (2003) suggests that there is “a boundless universe of mistrust that needs consideration when conducting research with refugees, much of which will remain unknown to the researcher” (Hynes 2003:14). In order to develop trust, I was particularly aware of the need to be respectful, sensitive to social and cultural needs, open and honest, and to fully explain the research aims, process and implications to the informants. Some of the more specific steps I took to gain trust are outlined below.

Six months were spent doing fieldwork from September 2013 to February 2014 in the Adelaide region. The fieldwork largely involved spending time in the homes of the women being studied. Due to my employment, it was not considered appropriate for me to live with the women. I was also very mindful of not intruding on the lives of the informants any more than necessary, particularly when many were experiencing multiple challenges associated with their settlement. I did however, spend lots of time with the women chatting, eating and drinking together, socialising with their friends/family and accompanying them during routine activities as well as to special events. Also, given my prior work experience with this group, I felt adequately equipped with lots of contextual knowledge that helped me to further understand their lives.

The ethnographic ‘toolkit’ I employed during my fieldwork consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews, narrative methods and participant-observation. Together these methods allowed me
to understand the nature of social network disruption to the lives of the women in this study and how it impacted on their everyday lives. Interviewees were pooled from the client lists at the Australian Refugee Association (ARA) by staff according to the following selection criteria: current or previous female ARA clients; living in Australia between two and eight years; and aged over 18 years. It was thought that those who had been living here for more than two years had had more time to adjust to their new environment, reflect on their settlement experiences, and were more likely to have developed a moderate level of English language competency.

The 1951 United Nations Convention for Refugees defines a refugee as a person who has been forced to flee their country due to:

..... a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country..... (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2014)

This definition determines the eligibility of formal refugee status. All interviewees had successfully had their refugee status recognised. Asylum Seekers were excluded from participating in this study for the very reason that they are much more restricted in terms of their participation in employment and English language classes for example, and in accessing settlement support services. I therefore concluded that they face much more complex settlement and social engagement impediments that justify specific research attention.

The sampling frame comprised of women from a range of cultural backgrounds as well as faith, social status, age, level of education and English language competency, family situation and structure, financial situation, length of time living in Australia, place of residence and current circumstances. This allowed for diverse perspectives and experiences to be reflected. More than half of the women stated that they were single. Their ages ranged from 25 to 53 years (average 33 years) at the time of the interviews and they had been living in Australia from between 2 and 8 years (average 4 years). With the exception of one woman from Africa, all interviewees agreed to have their country of origin identified. These countries are as follows: Burma (1); Burundi (4); Bhutan (2); Afghanistan (3); Somalia (1); Iran (3); Rwanda (2); Congo
The names of all the interviewees have been changed to preserve their anonymity. I acknowledge here that in recounting the experiences of the women from this broad range of countries there is the risk to perpetuate the tendency to homogenise their experiences. Whilst I have illuminated some patterns of commonalities and differences in my research findings, an essential consideration throughout this project was to distinguish these women’s unique experiences as much as possible.

Twenty-four women were recruited for the initial interviews and all were asked if they would like to participate in further interviews. For most, conflicting work/study and family responsibilities made it difficult for them to continue to be involved. Some however had the time and interest to take part in subsequent second, third or fourth interviews, and these formed a ‘core’ group of five women. These women were those who most identified as being socially disengaged. All the women in this study except for one elected to participate in the interviews in their home environment where they felt more comfortable and safe. The more formal part of the interviews lasted between one and two hours. All were offered the use of interpreters but most had a preference to conduct interviews in English. In four cases interpreters were engaged.

Potential interviewees were provided with information about the research aims, the types of questions asked in the interviews, how long it would take, what would happen to the data and information concerning confidentiality. This information was explained as fully and honestly as possible. All were given as much time as they needed to consult with others and consider their involvement. All agreed to participate and each signed a consent form. Consent was asked again before each succeeding interview. Every interviewee was given a voucher to compensate for her time and inconvenience. Permission was granted by nineteen of the women to audiotape the interviews and in the other cases, the interviews were recorded using handwritten notes. Each audiotaped interview was painstakingly transcribed in full and included details about the interview context.

More formal interviews were conducted with the following key informants: both a social worker and a nurse from a migrant health service; current and former women’s leaders from Burundi, South Sudan, and Iraq; a social worker from a refugee women’s parenting group; and facilitators of two women’s language and social support groups. Ongoing conversations and consultations were also conducted with bi-cultural workers (from Burma, Bhutan, Afghanistan and Burundi) and other staff at ARA during the study.
The participant observation method I employed during the fieldwork involved interacting with the women as much as possible, continuously inquiring, observing and listening carefully, and recording detailed notes and ‘thick’ descriptions about their everyday norms and practices. This method allowed for a more in-depth picture of the complex aspects of the social life of the women to be built. It also gave me a further opportunity to explore the social contexts of the women’s lives and as an ‘outsider’, enabled me to gain insight into their ‘insider’ perspectives. Participant observations were primarily conducted with the women from the ‘core’ group and this allowed me to participate in aspects of their everyday life and special events including shopping and having meals, going to the library, enrolling at university, socialising with friends/family, applying for work, watching television, attending a Citizenship ceremony and attending a Persian New Year festival. Importantly, this method also allowed for spontaneous stories to emerge from every-day life over a period of time in settings where the informants felt comfortable.

Due to the involvement of people of refugee background in this research, ethical considerations and reflexivity were considered to be especially paramount. I was particularly mindful of the potential vulnerability of the informants and so made every effort to ensure that their involvement in this study did not cause any harm. For example, I was particularly aware that sensitive issues could emerge from the interviews and the possibility that, due to past trauma, some participants may experience some degree of psycho-social discomfort. To help manage this risk, informants were asked if they had any concerns regarding their participation in the research before the interviews commenced. They were also reminded that they did not need to talk about anything that made them feel uncomfortable and that they could stop the interview at any time. Women assessed as being particularly vulnerable were excluded from this research by ARA staff and questions that were potentially sensitive in nature, such as those regarding traumatic events that lead to their migration, were therefore avoided.

As both a worker for ARA and a researcher, I was highly self-aware of my potential power over the informants and how this could result in the women modifying their responses. Extra care was taken to separate my roles, to reassure the women that I would maintain confidentially, and that their involvement in the research had no bearing at all on their current or future relationship with ARA. None of these women were clients who I worked directly with.
This study is interpretive and at issue here is the potential danger of misrepresenting verbal and non-verbal data. My personal experiences and cultural assumptions were therefore ‘filters’ through which the information provided by the informants has been edited and re-edited and represented as text (Eastmond 2007:252). The central concern was to represent the informants in a way that is respectful and does them justice. To address this, follow-up interviews were undertaken with most informants to verify the information they provided and to make any necessary changes. All interviewees were asked if they would like a copy of the interview notes or transcript. Nineteen women received a full transcript of their interview/s and were asked if they would like to make any changes. None did.

The fieldwork was both a challenging and highly rewarding period. I got to know some extraordinary women and felt privileged that they trusted me enough to share their personal experiences. They were extremely generous with their time and many said that they found the research topic interesting and important. A few months into the fieldwork it was obvious that a warm and strong relationship had developed between those women in the ‘core’ group and myself. The women enjoyed humor and we often shared jokes and laughed together. My impression was that they eagerly anticipated our sessions and they would sometimes phone me if they had not heard from me in a while. Often we shared a sense of sadness when it was time for me to leave. In the end, focusing on the smaller ‘core’ group allowed me to develop a much richer understanding of their unique circumstances. These women showed an appreciation of my interest in understanding their lives and several suggested that they found that sharing details of their personal life with someone they had learned to trust was a really positive experience. This was the most rewarding outcome for me.
Chapter 3: Family Fragmentation

It is widely recognised that the presence of a supportive family plays a critical role in the process of settlement. This chapter examines how government policies and relational issues shaped the capacity of the women in this study to rebuild their lives with their families. For the vast majority of people from a refugee background, the flight from war and conflict results in separation from family members and this can have a significant impact on their experiences in recreating their lives in a new country. The need to be reunited with family has been consistently shown in the literature, as well as in this study, to be of the highest priority for those who remain separated. Nonetheless, the most notable factor that contributes to ongoing family separation is the Australian Government’s highly restrictive Family Reunion policies. The core issues underlying these policies have been identified as insufficient places for family reunification, the inflexible definition of ‘family’, and the enormous cost and length of time involved in processing applications. Families are also often under considerable stress in the context of settlement. Typically they are reconfigured differently due to the absence of some members and/or additional members residing in the same household, which produce new roles and changed dynamics. Settlement challenges add to these pressures and consequently families can be vulnerable to breakdown.

This chapter aims to critique the government’s Family Reunion policies and to provide an insight into how family fragmentation can impact on the everyday lives and future goals of the women in this study. I argue that these policies can significantly impede the process of re-establishing family and in doing so, are fulfilling neither the government’s settlement agenda nor the critical needs of the women in this study. The absence of a supportive ‘intact’ family can reduce their ability to socially engage, build social networks and social capital. Family separation can increase a person’s vulnerability and can curtail or even stop the progression of settlement plans. I argue that a woman of refugee background who remains separated from close family members is unlikely to feel fully included in Australian society.

The critical importance of the family unit has been emphasised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that: “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State” (article 16: United Nations General Assembly 1948). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has also explicitly recognised the value of family to the settlement process:
...the family unit has a better chance of successfully...integrating in a new country than do individual refugees. In this respect, protection of the family is not only in the best interests of the refugees themselves, but is also in the best interests of States.... Respecting the principle of unity of the family is one of the primary means of protecting the refugee family (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1999: points 16 & 7).

More recently, the UNHCR stressed the fundamental importance of family in “promoting the smoother and more rapid integration of refugee families given that they can reinforce the social support system of refugees” (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2012:3).

Australian governments have acknowledged the crucial role of families in building a socially cohesive and inclusive society in social policies which highlight “strengthening families and relationships at a micro level” (Hulse & Stone 2007:118). For example, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2014): “how well families function is a key factor in their ability to nurture personal wellbeing and serve as the basis for a cohesive society” (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014). One of the dimensions of the nation’s social progress that is measured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is ‘family, community and social cohesion’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014). The website states:

Families and communities are the building blocks of society and national life. The quality and strength of people’s relationships and bonds with others - their family, friends and the wider community - are important ingredients of a cohesive and inclusive society. Families generate care and guidance which support the development of healthy functioning individuals and the values underlying civil society.

According to the Refugee Council of Australia, family forms “the building block of good settlement” (Refugee Council of Australia 2012). The family unit can ease the settlement process in providing financial assistance, physical care, identity affirmation, spiritual guidance and the facilitation of social adjustment (Wilmsen 2011:47). The presence of supportive family can also increase a person’s ability to “negotiate services, access education, establish strong social networks and find a job” (Refugee Council of Australia 2012:7). Ketelers (2009) argues that the family unit is at the centre of protection, self-reliance and solidarity and forms the
building blocks of community, social stability and cohesion (Ketelers 2009). Furthermore, Staver (2008) suggests that for refugees: “the family can be an important anchor in a social world turned upside down, sometimes remaining the only stable social structure in an otherwise disintegrated society” (Staver 2008:6).

Wilmsen (2011) contends that: “an almost universal consequence of refugee experiences is the destruction of the family unit” (Wilmsen 2011:44). Often members have died during conflict or ‘gone missing’, or have been forced to take different routes in order to seek safety and new opportunities. Family separation can create severe negative psychological, social and economic impediments to the settlement process by reducing a person’s ability to socially participate and thus increasing their vulnerability (Rousseau et al. 2001; McMichael & Manderson 2004; McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009; Connell et al. 2010; Wilmsen 2011; Refugee Council of Australia 2012). Family separation and unresolved reunion is associated with depression, anxiety and somatization (Schweitzer et al. 2006). It produces feelings of powerlessness (Swan 2013) and exacerbates experiences of post-traumatic stress and bereavement (Rousseau et al. 2001; Wilmsen 2011). Studies (McMichael & Ahmed 2003; Valtonen 2004; Schweitzer et al. 2006; Atwell et al. 2009; McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009; Schweitzer et al. 2011) have found that for those who remain separated from family members, reunification is commonly their highest settlement priority in addition to, and often over and above, employment and language. This study concurs with these findings.

**Family Reunification**

Australian Government policies dictate whether or not a person can be reunited with family members. Although I did not specifically ask the women in this study about their views of these policies it was explored when family separation issues were raised, and these policies have obvious implications for the women who remained separated from family. Overall, the main concerns raised by the women and highlighted in the literature are related to: the high cost of application; the long wait involved in the determination process; the complexity of forms and limited access to affordable migration advice; the government’s rigid and narrow definition of ‘family’; the age limit of dependency set at 18 years; and the stringent requirements of establishing proof of relationship (Refugee Council of Australia 2012; Wilmsen 2011). Helen, a refugee women’s health worker explains:
And this process is terribly inflexible, expensive, and costly. So that definitely contributes to social isolation because what women want, and anybody wants is to be reunited with family.

The central issue is that there is a very high demand for family reunification but few places within the overall Humanitarian Programme (2013 - 2014). In 2013 the program was expanded from 13,750 to 20,000 places only to be reduced again this year. Currently the Abbott government accepts a total of 13,750 places annually including the offshore settlement of refugees, humanitarian entrants, and those who are granted asylum within the country’s borders (Phillips & Karlsen 2014). At present the main avenues for humanitarian entrants applying for family reunification are through the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) or through various visa sub-classes within the family stream of the Migration Program (Refugee Council of Australia 2012). In the 2012 - 2013 period only 503 visas were issued in Australia under SHP and between November 2012 and June 2013, 1,066 visas were granted under the Family stream of the Migration Program (Refugee Council of Australia 2014a). Given that less people have the opportunity now to seek asylum within Australia’s borders, the Abbott Government has pledged to create more places for SHP entrants than in previous years in the 2013 - 2014 Humanitarian Programme (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2013a:7). This remains to be seen and to date, I have not heard of many successes.

The chief way that humanitarian entrants (who have Australian citizenship) can be reunited with family members is via the Special Humanitarian Programme (SHP). The highest priority is given to what is commonly known as ‘split family’ applicants in which ‘proposers’ sponsor members of their ‘immediate family’. ‘Immediate family’ is confined to a spouse or de-facto partner, dependent children (including step) aged less than 18 years (unless married, engaged or in a de facto relationship), or parents (for those who are aged under 18 years) (Refugee Council of Australia 2012:12). Parents must have at least half of their children living permanently in Australia to be eligible (ibid).

In order to be considered a ‘split family’, the family member/s must have been previously declared on the proposer’s original application for a humanitarian visa and the application must be made within five years of its issue (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2013a:7). Firstly, it often takes more than five years to trace the whereabouts of some family members. Secondly, many people do not include all of their children on the original application
thinking that they are more likely to be granted a visa for settlement in Australia if they have a smaller family. Mistakes are also commonly made on the original document due to confusion, misinformation and translation problems. ‘Immediate family’ members cannot be recognised retrospectively and this of course is a source of enormous heartbreak for many people who are consequently likely to remain permanently separated from loved ones.

The fundamental issue here is the Australian Government’s narrow definition of ‘immediate family’, which is based on the Western concept of a ‘nuclear family’ and does not allow for actual family structures or dependent relationships. It does not recognise, for example: children who are adopted on a customary basis; customary marriages; polygamous marriages; nieces or nephews who may be orphaned and living alone; siblings; children aged over 18 years; and dependent relatives and non-relatives. The implications are that an orphaned child aged under 18 may be prevented from being reunited with a brother or sister, or a person who was previously the head of a household may be prevented from being reunited with siblings who were dependent on them. It also means that parents are often indefinitely separated from their children who are aged over 18 years and who are still considered in many cultures to be dependent until they are married. Adopting a broader definition of family that more adequately reflects the ‘form and function’ of refugee families is of critical importance (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009:33).

In many non-Western countries the notion of family is often not fixed and can encompass extended family members and people who are not related by blood or marriage, but by which relations have been formed through “obligation, affection and dependence” (Lewis 2008:694 cited in McMichael et al. 2011:180). For instance, those considered as integral members might be people from the same tribe or region and/or those who “have come to rely and depend on each other” (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009:2). Family might include an unrelated orphaned child of a neighbor who is not legally adopted. The notion of family is also made more complex due to experiences of war, displacement and settlement because families of circumstance are often formed and reconfigured in different ways (ibid).

The second priority within SHP, which is a much tougher level, is given to close ‘dependent’ family members who are living outside their country of origin and have ‘compelling reasons’ for migration based on subjection to human rights violations in their home country, degree of connection to Australia, consideration of alternative settlement countries and the capacity of
the Australian ‘community’ to provide settlement (Refugee Council of Australia 2012:9). Successful applications are determined by the strength of the relationship between the proposer and applicant with priority given to partners, children, parents or siblings (including step relationships) who don’t meet the ‘split family’ criteria (ibid). Relationships with other family members such as grandparents, grandchildren, cousins, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, and step-relations are given the next priority (ibid).

The issue here is being able to provide the necessary documentation to establish family links. This can be particularly difficult in the absence of marriage and birth certificates. It is also necessary for the proposer of a ‘dependent relative’ to demonstrate that they are fundamentally reliant on them for financial, psychological or physical support (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009:5). In reality, this is often very difficult to establish.

The family stream of the Migration Programme provides another means for family reunification. A proposer can sponsor other family members such as elderly parents, children, partners and carers. The proposed family member does not need to be living outside their country of origin nor subject to human rights violations (Refugee Council of Australia 2012:10). They must however, meet strict health and character requirements (see Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2014a). The health assessment excludes many elderly parents who may be considered to be a ‘burden’ on the health system.

One of the main issues raised in relation to family reunion under the family stream concerns the enormous cost and length of time of processing, which can often take more than two years. The sponsor will need to pay for the application fee ($3,000 - $4,000), all airfares, medical tests, the visa itself (about $3,000) and they (or somebody else) is legally committed to provide financial support for a certain period (usually 2 years or 10 years for elderly parents) (Refugee Council of Australia 2014a:41).

Another key concern is the strict documentation requirements (e.g. passport, marriage and birth certificates and police check) which make it exceedingly difficult and often impossible to have a successful outcome (ROAC 2014a:40). For example, a person who is stateless will not be able to obtain a passport.
The UNHCR’s upholds the rights of a refugee family to be protected and respected and a person’s entitlement to family reunion in the country of asylum (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1999). It recommends that Government’s should treat applications for family reunification in a fair, humane and ‘expeditious’ manner (ibid). It advocates a more culturally sensitive, liberal and inclusive definition of family that extends beyond the traditional ‘nuclear family’ and acknowledges close relationships of dependency (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2012:7). It further recommends that visa fees and administration costs be reduced or waivered and that applications should not be rejected based solely on the lack of documentary evidence; other guidelines should be developed as well as training for decision makers (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2012:13 & 16). These key recommendations have not been translated into practice in Australian however, and the Government’s commitment to preserve the family unit and reunite refugee families remains highly questionable.

In consideration of the adverse impacts of family separation, the government has a critical duty to prioritise the reunion of people of refugee background with those who they share a strong emotional bond and to facilitate a quicker, less expensive application process. Prolonged family separation can adversely affect a person’s health and well-being and reduce their level of participation as well as agency. Family is not just important internally but also externally in the sense that through family members a person can increase their external social links. Additionally, family separation may hinder a person’s ability to advance in their settlement in seeking opportunities and planning a future. Family separation can therefore significantly undermine the process of building a sense of social connectedness.

‘Family is 100% we stay together in one place’

All the women in this study were separated from key family members when they first came to Australia and most were still separated at the time of the fieldwork. Many faced complex challenges in rebuilding their families. For those who came to Australia with other family members and/or who were reunited upon their arrival, the first year period was largely characterised by feelings of joy, relief and excitement about having the opportunity to rebuild their lives together in a safe environment. The hope was that other family members would be able to join them. For those who had family members already living here, these relations proved to be vital in providing assistance with immediate practical settlement needs, general
orientation, as well as emotional support. These relations were also critical sources for re-establishing social contacts and meeting new people.

For those women still separated at the time of the fieldwork, unresolved family reunion was consistently described as being the most prevalent source of emotional distress and most painful aspect of their settlement. This is exemplified in the following comments:

Yes, I think this topic this matter is my most problem, yes. I always thinking of them [family], my mind is busy for them, I really miss them. (Maryam, Iran, 30’s)

Always I am thinking about them. Not seeing my mum, it’s really hard. I want to see my mum, and it totally affects my life here because I love and miss my family! (Delbar, Iran, 30’s)

Settlement issues are compounded by anxieties about the welfare of family members left behind (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009:4). Most of the informants talked of their stress and worry for the well-being and uncertain future of family members ‘back home’ who were typically still living in unsafe conditions and experiencing extreme hardship. They also expressed feelings of shame, guilt and powerlessness in not being able to control the situation and provide more help. Some were so upset that they denied themselves license to enjoy their life here. Helen, the refugee women’s health worker, puts it like this:

I’ve seen so many women during the week, and they are so distressed because they know that their families are experiencing hardship, financially, emotionally, and in a number of other ways. And they feel that they cannot, they don’t have permission to even start to enjoy a little bit their life here because they know that their relatives and their friends are having a hard time.

A key point here is that family separation not only impacts on the everyday health and well-being and levels of social engagement of a person, but also on their capacity to undertake new opportunities and make future plans (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009:24; Refugee Council of Australia 2012:4). Some of the women in this study were so overcome by these anxieties that they were somewhat immobilised in their ability to move forward in their lives. For example, when I asked Zola (D.R Congo, 20’s) about her future goals she replied:
I have big aim but now my arrow is not straight, going down like this, so I can’t say anything. My arrow is like this now because of my problem…. I am sick, I am lonely and depressed. I can’t do anything, just stay at home! What can I tell you….. I just want to bring my parents, my sister [to Australia]. It is very difficult for me.

Several women were unmotivated to learn the English language, meet new people, seek employment and they also commonly suspended making future plans. In this way, their capacity to participate socially and economically was greatly diminished, thus evidencing the need for the government to prioritise family reunion.

One of the key impacts of family separation for resettling refugees is that they do not participate or follow future goals in the way that they would if they were united with their family (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009). For example, for all the mothers in this study, extended family had customarily played a central role in providing childcare. A lack of this support in the settlement context meant that many had to defer participating in English language classes or working. Several women mentioned that they could not afford childcare and did not trust leaving their children with strangers. Hence, many had limited opportunities to leave the home and increase their social engagement.

Family separation impacted the women’s settlement in other ways. Most sent regular remittances to family members still living overseas. This can have a significant impact on the economic and social well-being of those who are experiencing financial hardship. Many women spoke about the constant struggle of trying to maintain an adequate life here and at the same time, provide support to family members overseas. In some cases women made the decision to give up English language classes or other studies in order to take up work and fulfill this familial obligation. In a few cases, and at significant financial cost, women were compelled to travel overseas to see family members, often to provide support to elderly parents ‘left behind’. The increased economic burden placed upon many people provides further evidence of the need for the government to make family reunification a priority.

Numerous informants talked about their feelings of devastation following failed attempts to sponsor family members to come to Australia to live. Others are still waiting. Vestine (30’s, Rwanda) has been waiting for nearly two years for her application to be processed to sponsor
her husband who is living in South Africa: “It’s so sad, I just call them [Immigration Department] all the time but they told me I have to wait”. Vestine’s parents and siblings were all killed during the genocide in her country. Her husband, she said, was the only person she had learnt to trust since and the only social tie she has maintained overseas. Here in Adelaide she said she felt socially ‘isolated’ and was experiencing deep depression. Each visit she talked tearfully about the painful separation.

Assa (D.R Congo, 25) had been waiting for eighteen months with no word about the progress of her application. In her desperation she has even considered returning to a refugee camp in Africa to be reunited with her mother and siblings:

It’s so hard I swear, I think if I can, I will go back the way I am feeling because I am finding life hard. I know here is a good place, its safe, but having no parents it is too hard.

Coco (Rwanda, 20’s) had not seen her brother for 15 years and recently started the process of sponsoring him to live in Australia. The following illustrates her family’s frustration and stress in dealing with the separation:

Sometimes it’s hard to cope with life. Like it’s very hard for me to get my brothers’ documents because, you know, money, and I don’t work. I heard that if you are a refugee and you left your family behind you can bring them. Yeah, and then, you know my mum has been trying to bring my brother. Even when we were living in Kenya, she tried UNHCR to help get my brother but nothing could be done because they could say because she doesn’t have this document, allowing her to be a refugee, so she couldn’t help out. And my brother just stayed away for years, and years, suffering, suffering. I just started processing, it went to Kenya yesterday. I hope, I hope and I pray, because I miss him, and I want to see him. I believe that if my mum sees him she would be the happiest woman in the world because he is the only son in my family. And sometimes she don’t want to talk to him [on the phone], because she thinks that she will not feel good because she does not see him [in person]. I even tried to show her my brother’s picture, and she doesn’t want to see them… she just wants to see him.
Many women spoke of the agony of realising that their future would involve permanently living apart from family members who have been granted asylum in other Western countries: “I miss my family most of all because now everyone is in a different country” (Heba, 40’s, Iraq). Maya (Bhutan, 30’s) for instance, was overjoyed to be recently reunited with her elderly parents and sister after four years separation. Nevertheless, her excitement was tainted by the knowledge that her two brothers are now permanently resettled in Canada with their wives and children. She reflects:

Family is love. Family is 100% we stay together in one place – not another place. Not in the same house but close. Every time we need family. I need my sisters and brothers and they need me also. (Maya, Bhutan, 30’s)

For Maya then, family means love, unity, mutual support and living in close physical proximity to each other. Indeed, physical closeness was what the women most yearned for. For example, Grace’s (20’s, Africa) application to sponsor her family, and also her mother’s separate application, was rejected last year by the Government. Recently her family was permanently resettled in America. She describes her torment in the following way:

Living in a country at war, you get separated, and in camp, still separated. After you come to Australia, still separated. I think still now I feel lonely, I think I will feel that until they [my family] could be here. I think I will never stop thinking that.

Since their arrival six of the women in this study had been successful in sponsoring other family members to live in Australia. In one case a woman sponsored her husband after many years of separation and this relationship ended in divorce. In the other cases though, family reunification was pivotal to the women’s positive settlement; increased happiness and well-being, enhanced sense of belonging, peace of mind and the acceptance of a future living in Australia. Ruth (D.R Congo, 40’s) talked about how she felt when she was eventually reunited with her orphaned niece and nephews following a lengthy, painful and arduous sponsorship process:

I was very happy, I even cried because of happiness. When I saw them I remembered the pain of being separated and how they used to live like poor people. They were very young and had no one to look after them, they were living by
themselves [in a refugee camp] and whoever wanted to feed them would give them food. I didn’t have peace or sleep well until now.

From the women’s perspective, family separation and breakdown can cause immense anxiety, sadness and loneliness which can restrict their level of agency and impact on their motivation to learn English, seek work or study opportunities, and build and maintain relationships. In reducing their ability to socially participate, their vulnerability is increased. Family separation can stop many women from progressing with their settlement as well as making plans for the future. For the particular women in this study, family had clearly provided the foundation to their pre-migration social world and sense of social connectedness. I therefore argue that a refugee background woman who remains separated from close family members, is unlikely to feel fully included in Australia’s society.

Reconfigured Family

Yet the family unit is not only threatened by fragmentation due to physical separation but also by the multiple pressures placed upon it in the settlement context (Busch Nsonwu et al. 2013). For those women in this study who were reunited with family members on arrival in Australia or subsequently, the outcome was not always entirely positive due to changed dynamics and often the need to adapt to new roles within the family. A reunited family can face significant challenges in achieving stability and the longer members are apart the more difficult this can be, particularly when they have had quite different life experiences. The death of, and/or separation from family members during war and processes of displacement and settlement, typically create families of circumstance that are configured differently than they otherwise might have been (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford 2009:2; Refugee Council of Australia 2012:2). The different social context, different configurations of family and multiple settlement pressures, can place the family unit under enormous pressure and result in the breakdown of relationships (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1999).

Six of the women in this study had experienced the estrangement from family members (father, brother, husband, uncle) since their arrival in Australia. Assa (20’s, D.R Congo) and her sister left their mother in a refugee camp and came to Australia to be with their father, step-mother and step-siblings. Her father and step-mother have since separated apparently due to domestic violence. She recalls:
When my step-mother left, my daddy kept threatening us bad. Yes, so hard. But everyone said you must stay with your father. Then we left to go to step-mother's and asked her and my step-sisters to please accept us, but family problems keep coming. Then we decided to move and be independent and face our own problems and maybe life will be a little easier. I am like an orphan now because I have no mother and no father. Even at school I am having so much problems at school because I can’t focus very well. I have to do everything on my own. I never lived lonely before especially because I am the youngest. I was living with my mother and sister in Africa.

The household composition commonly changes during settlement and this often means that people live with extended family members. Relationships and roles within the family can change markedly. A relationship with an aunt, uncle, brother or cousin for example, can become considerably more important in the context of settlement and in the absence of other family members.

Family roles are also commonly changed. Teenagers often take on the role of ‘language brokers’ because they typically learn the new language much quicker than their parents and subsequently take on new responsibilities (Davidson et al. 2008). Some single mothers talked about the dual pressures of trying to fulfill the role of both mother and father to their children. Sometimes a teenage son or brother-in-law might assume the role as head of household if the father is absent. Sometimes too, there are changes in a person’s capacity to earn wages and this might lead to a woman finding work because her husband or partner is unable to. Often this can challenge a man’s traditional role as the family provider. In some families this was a positive change but in other cases it generated enormous stress. All these changes can produce different family dynamics and tensions, which can potentially create emotional distance and alienation between family members and the breakdown of the family unit.

Several single mothers talked about the challenges associated with losing their parental authority as their children gained what they saw as greater independence and freedom in Australia. Intergenerational tensions coupled with settlement pressures can put some families under huge stress (McMichael et al. 2011; Busch Nsonwu et al. 2013; Centre for Multicultural Youth 2014). Emotional distancing and alienation from children (Baolian Qin 2006) and
teenagers in particular, was experienced by several mothers in this study as their children adjusted to their new environment at a much faster pace. Several women said that they experienced problems when their children rejected traditional notions of what constituted ‘acceptable’ behavior within their family. These women particularly raised the fact that children’s legal rights in Australia are in conflict with their traditional cultural norms. One issue that was frequently highlighted is that eighteen year olds are legally recognised in Australia as being adults and therefore have the right to be independent, access Centrelink and leave home. Three single mothers had experienced heightened distress and loneliness when their child left home. Mary (30’s, South Sudan) explains the issue like this:

Like here they say when you are 18 they say you can live on your own, you can do work. And its very challenging, particularly for the African culture, because that’s not what it is back home. And then here, children, because I think they get the information from school, from their peers, from Centrelink, hear that when you are 18 and you are not happy living with your parents, you can go. So like now its very stressful to people if the child is moving away and leaving the parents alone.

Teenagers are encouraged to be independent in the Australian context and they typically have many more opportunities to learn the language, adjust to the new environment and build social networks than their parents. They may also move out of home at a much earlier age. These factors can lead to a mother feeling emotionally alienated from her children and can potentially create or compound feelings of social disconnection and loneliness.

In practice then, rebuilding family can present significant challenges and it is of critical importance therefore that the Government provides adequate resources to keep families intact as they negotiate changes within, as well as various external settlement pressures. In my view, supporting the family unit, expanding the number of places within Family Reunion and facilitating an easier, more flexible, cheaper and quicker process of family reunification is a fundamental strategy for governments to improve the settlement outcomes of people of refugee background.

Clearly, what these women wanted was for significant family members to be living in close proximity and that this would increase their subjective well-being and levels of social engagement. In determining whether and how families are reunited, reconfigured and
supported, government policies can restrict a person’s capacity to socially participate. The consequences for policy makers are that opportunities to access and build social capital can be significantly diminished. The consequences for the women are that family separation and alienation between members can reduce their ability to be socially engaged and develop a sense of social connectedness, especially if they have been unable to establish wider social networks. Remittances can also serve to keep many in a cycle of financial hardship that can reinforce or produce marginalisation. A person can find it difficult to focus on rebuilding their life here when family reunion is unresolved. Often the process of settlement is halted and plans for the future suspended and they may be less likely to reach out and create new relations. With this in mind, it is obviously in the best interests of the Government to protect the integrity of families of refugee background.
Chapter 4: Ethno-cultural Community Engagement

In a broad sense, the notion of ‘community’ has long endured as a ‘potent symbol and aspiration’ and is used prolifically by academics in the social sciences and public policy makers in Australia, both generally and in relation to migration settlement (Brint 2001:1). One of the pillars of ‘successful’ settlement, which is linked to personal well-being and life satisfaction, is “being connected to the community” through family and/or friends, the neighbourhood, an ethnic/religious group or sports/arts related activities (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2013:10). The current settlement policy states that: “feeling connected to and welcomed by others can overcome the sense of isolation that is often a feature of the initial settlement experience" (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2013:10). Often the first priority of many new arrivals is to make contact with people who share an ethnic-cultural background in order to gain support, social opportunities and a sense of community belonging. The government acknowledges that: “[ethnic] communities play a vital role in Australia’s diverse society by advocating on behalf of their members and helping to build strong communities” (Department of Social Services 2014c). Despite the rhetoric however, in practice the government has recently withdrawn the provision of resources and support to ethno-cultural specific communities, which suggests an objective to enhance the development of wider relations.

This chapter explores the often highly complex and challenging process of re-establishing and building relations within an ethnic-cultural ‘community’ in the context of settlement. It reveals both the positive and negative aspects of association by illustrating the women’s experiences and concerns. The purpose is to critique the government’s approach to ethno-cultural communities in the current settlement model. I argue that this approach is flawed for two paradoxical reasons: in undervaluing their significance to the process of settlement; and in failing to account for issues of mistrust. Whilst the women in this study generally placed a high value on having a sense of membership to a ‘community’ of people from a similar ethnic/cultural background, it was found that their level of engagement was largely contingent on a perceived absence of mistrust. Hence, it would be more helpful to talk about ethnic community relations in a way that acknowledges the difficulties some people of refugee background have in re-establishing these connections rather than assuming an unproblematic
solidarity within a ‘bonded’ community. I suggest here that contingent ‘community’ relations based on trust may be more appropriate.

There is an erroneous common assumption that people of refugee background have automatic access to a pre-existing, strong, supportive ethno-cultural community network soon after arrival in the country of settlement. Certainly, this simplistic notion of ‘community’ is embedded in the concept of ‘bonding’. Although this may reflect the experiences of some people, this study uncovered a much more complicated picture of ‘community’ attachment. Whilst ethnic-cultural communities can play a vital settlement role, especially for those who don't speak English, at the same time, mistrust and internal divisions can be prevalent. War and conflict can often result in the breakdown of trusting relationships and tensions between people from the same country and even ethnic group. These tensions can continue to inform relations in the settlement context. Mistrust can therefore be a key force that can impact on a person's desire and capacity to rebuild ethnic-cultural ‘community’ links.

As earlier stated, interpersonal trust is a central element of the Australian Government’s Putnam inspired conceptualisation of social capital. It is fundamental to policies related to social cohesion and integration that promote participation, group membership and community engagement. In this view, trust is seen as the ‘social lubricant’ that enables access to social networks and resources (Wang et al. 2009:135). This version of social capital however, does not deal with issues of mistrust. The expectation by policy makers is that people of refugee background will be readily trusting of the new society in which they live thereby building the conditions for trust and social cohesion to develop in society at large, rather than visa-versa. Settlement policies are based on unrealistic assumptions about the capacity of people of refugee background to develop trusting, reciprocal relations. This has policy implications because mistrust is likely to influence levels of social engagement and contribute to social disconnection for many women.

The concept of community is highly contested and its exact meaning remains elusive. There are many assumptions and issues associated with the concept that have been critiqued by numerous anthropologists (see Amit & Rapport 2002 for overview). One of the key assumptions is that ‘community’ is often assumed to be bounded or as Grodzins Gold (2005) so aptly puts it: “a package in which relationships and responsibilities; identities and ideals; motivations and morality are neatly contained” (Grodzins Gold 2005). Hence, community is
frequently represented as being cohesive and homogenous and in doing so, masks internal divisions, competing interests, hierarchies of power and dissent. One of the key problems with the notion of ‘community’ though is definitional. According to Cohen (2002), its meaning has become so vague that it has essentially become meaningless (Cohen 2002). However, whilst the term is highly problematic, as long as it is used in social policies it is necessary to employ the concept. Importantly though, the women in this study placed significant value in the notion of ‘community’.

The popular usage of the term ‘community’ signifies a group of people that share something in common such as a recreational interest, an occupation, a culture, ethnicity, religion, or geographic locality. This commonsense understanding of community interprets social relations as being characterised by mutual support, familiarity, harmony, affection, stability, consensus, loyalty and safety (Brint 2001; Fremeax 2005). Regardless of how it is defined or represented, the notion of community is typically linked to notions of solidarity and cohesion and evokes warm and positive connotations. However, there is a long history of studies that have shown that the comforting image of harmonious and cohesive ‘communities’ is a misguided assumption due to the prevalence of self-interest, internal coercion, power and division (see Kelly 2003). Furthermore, whilst ‘communities’ can nurture inclusiveness in a shared sense of identity and solidarity among its members, they can also exclude those deemed to be ‘outside’ the group.

**Community Organisations**

The re-establishment of co-ethnic social relations and networks has been highlighted in the literature as being critical to the process of settlement for refugees. The desire to attach to those of a similar background can be an especially important coping strategy when language, cultural and religious impediments exist (Whittlesea Community Connections 2008:7). These networks can be an invaluable source for practical and emotional support, access to information, a sense of ‘community’ and security and an opportunity to reproduce language and culture (Cederberg 2012:63).

The literature has also emphasised the central role that formal ‘ethnic’ community organisations play in providing settlement assistance to it’s members, particularly in the early stages (Refugee Council of Australia 2014b). They can facilitate social opportunities, offer
material and practical help, defend the interests of the group, promote its culture and reinforce a sense of identity and belonging (Kelly 2003:38). Membership may also provide a protective buffer from exposure to discrimination and racism (Valenta 2008; Beirens et al. 2007:225). Often these organisations serve to fill a void in the provision of government funded settlement services. The significance of ethnic-cultural community organisations has also long been recognised by successive Australian Governments in providing culturally appropriate settlement support. For example, according to the current settlement services guidelines overview (Department of Social Services 2014d) it states:

Ethno-specific organisations play a crucial role in the settlement of newly arrived migrants and refugees, as they understand the immediate needs of new arrivals and have ready access to networks through which new arrivals can be identified, contacted and supported.

These organisations were once thought by Australian governments to play an important role in facilitating the ‘integration’ of new arrivals. Since 9/11 though, they have been viewed as undermining social cohesion and integration. Subsequently the pool of potential government funding to ethnic-cultural organisations has steadily decreased as fears have increased about the creation of ‘ethnic enclaves’. In reality, the current government only supports ethnic ‘communities’ in their efforts to share their food and music, and encourage their members to join the Australian community, as evidenced in a recent funding round for the Families and Communities Programme (see Department of Social Services 2014b).

I have mentioned previously that Tony Abbott abolished the Building Multicultural Communities Program in December 2013, which has effectively meant that over 400 organisations across Australia (40 in Adelaide) have been significantly impacted by funding withdrawal. The future of these organisations, which are already likely to be chronically under-resourced, will be uncertain. Typically they rely on volunteers who are often unable to commit sufficient time. Competition for scarce resources has meant that many have shifted focus from the ‘substantive goals’ of support service provision to that of organisational sustainability and thus securing funding (MacKenzie et al. 2012). When there is a lack of adequate resources and government support, “misinformation and divisions can be perpetuated within communities” (Refugee Council of Australia 2014b:14).
The withdrawal of government support to these organisations provides evidence of an objective
to undermine the re-establishment of ethnic/cultural relations for new arrivals. I argue the
critical need to provide more resources and support to these organisations because many
people of refugee background are likely to miss out on key settlement assistance and social
opportunities. Furthermore, these organisations can play a key role in rebuilding trust and
shaping future attachment. My main point here is that, for people who choose to seek such
connections via formal organisations, it will be increasingly difficult to locate them and to have
their needs addressed adequately.

‘Where is my community?’

‘Community’ was a word very familiar to all the informants in this study and what they claimed
as ‘theirs’ was readily suggested to encompass people who broadly shared a common ethnic-
cultural background and sometimes also religious. Here there was often a complex overlap
between country of origin, ethnicity, cultural identity and faith. For the purposes of this thesis I
focus my attention on co-ethnic/cultural affiliations. The women expressed a range of degrees
of connection that could be characterised by one of affinity and dependence, ambivalence, or
even disdain and alienation, but never indifference. ‘Community’ was articulated both in how
they were similar to other members and how they were different. Whatever the case though,
each time the women talked about the notion of ‘community’ their views were typically charged
with strong emotions.

For those women who had built such close community ties, adjunct to family, these relations
tended to form the locus of their social world. Almost half of the informants said that they were
actively engaged in a community of people from a shared ethnic/cultural background as well as
religious. These women indicated that engagement in a community of solidarity was extremely
important to them for accessing practical, informational and emotional support, gaining advice,
meeting new people, reinforcing and forming identity as well as feeling a sense of community
belonging.

For some women who were separated from family, reforming a ‘community’ connection was
especially vital yet making the connection was often not straightforward. Several women spoke
of how they did not know where ‘their’ community was in Adelaide because there was no

62
office/building or common meeting place and they did not know the phone number of a contact person. Often no such formal organisation existed. This was the case for Farrah (40’s, Iraq):

Before I am looking ‘where is my community to help me?’ the same as our language, a leader... but no, nobody. I asked through the mosque where is my community, the place to help me, same like Melbourne or Sydney. They say no, not any place. You can go to the Lebanese Centre for Women or the Muslim Women’s Association..... But nobody help me from my [Iraqi] community!

Leyla is a women’s leader also from Iraq and she is sympathetic to the difficulties women from her community face in seeking support from others who speak their language. She has tried to secure funding to formalise the women’s group she facilitates but has been unsuccessful. She expressed considerable frustration because she knows many women are really struggling and are socially ‘isolated’ but she finds it very difficult to reach them:

And how are they going to find us? We have to find them because if they don’t have numbers for people to call ... Like for me, if I don’t have office somewhere, how are they going to find me? I think that the first time when they come, someone should give them a list of numbers; this is the number to call where you can get help.

I have heard many women talk about the problems they have encountered in locating ethnic-cultural ‘community’ organisations and clearly this is an issue that needs addressing. Contact information needs to be provided by settlement workers at the earliest opportunity to those who wish to be connected. This means that policies that existed at the time of the fieldwork were not being implemented effectively. This also means that in the future, given the more recent government funding withdrawal, it will be increasingly difficult to make contact in this way.

Several women in this study spoke of feelings of ‘community’ detachment that were generated after seeking help at formal community organisations which did not have the capacity to provide adequate support. They did not feel comfortable, nor necessarily know how to, seek help from services elsewhere. Not knowing how to go about meeting people from their background outside of these organisations they were largely left unsupported, feeling ‘lost’, disappointed and for some, mistrustful of ‘their’ community. These negative experiences would sometimes shape their future level of attachment. In other words, the consequences of the
funding cuts are that many people will miss out on critical support, the opportunity to meet other people, form friendships and rebuild trust.

Numerous studies (e.g. Nannestad et al. 2008; Larsen 2011) have shown that, contrary to the dominant view, the establishment of social ties within an immigrant ‘community’ group may foster the development of social ties and general trust in broader society. The authors in these studies claim that refugees are more likely to be tolerant of differences and build wider relations with professionals, neighbours and others, when they are embedded in a network of trusted family and relations based on shared ethnicity. Hence, the bonding/bridging model is too simplistic to explain the process of ‘integration’.

In my study it was found that, for those women who enjoyed strong ties with family and/or an ethnic-cultural ‘community’, they were also it seems, much more likely to trust others and have built durable, diverse friendships through their extended contacts. These findings present more evidence for the need for the government to provide adequate resources and support to ethno-cultural specific organisations in order to give those people who seek contact, more opportunities to form such relations and allow trust to develop. That said, as we shall later see, having the capacity to re/build trusting relations with co-ethnic/cultural ‘community’ members might be very difficult or even undesirable for some.

**Keeping a Distance**

Many women in this study preferred to keep some distance from ‘their’ community. For several, engagement was limited to attending key cultural events and festivals. Maintaining some form of contact was important for these women though in enabling them to reaffirm their identity, speak their native language and reinforce their cultural background. For instance, while Coco (20’s, Rwanda) was generally guarded about forming close relations with others from her country she was happy to be involved in a Rwandan dance group because it reinforced her cultural identity. Here community can be seen as a source of ‘ambivalent attachment’ that nourishes a person’s cultural roots (Hage 2005:468). A further example of this can be seen when Delbar (30’s, Iran), who largely avoided mixing with others from her country, eagerly celebrated the Persian New Year by attending three formal cultural events, one of which I accompanied her to. She was very excited to introduce me to her Iranian acquaintances and proudly talked about her cultural background and the meaning of the festival.
About half of the women indicated with great sorrow, that they did not feel a strong sense of attachment to ‘their’ community in the context of Adelaide. Like Delbar, many chose to keep a protective distance. This challenges the often taken-for-granted view that people of refugee background have a strong desire to be connected to a ‘community’ of people from a common ethnic-cultural background following arrival in a new country. This was exposed when Vestine (30’s, Rwanda) needed to find housing during her first year here and a caseworker pressured her to seek help from her ‘community’:

..... they told me you must found somebody to share. I say I can’t share with anyone, I don’t know anybody here! And they said you must make friends. They told me I have to go to our community, like Rwanda community. I told them I don’t want to see them! They say you have to go there to your community and talk to Rwandan people to find somebody to share with and help you.

It is also often taken-for-granted that people of similar ‘ethnic’-cultural background have the resources, time and capacity to provide support to one another. Often people of similar background, particularly those from new and emerging ‘communities’, simply cannot help one another in the same way that they would like to or may have done in their pre-migration lives because they are also often experiencing significant challenges. The settlement context then, often produces conditions that are not conducive for rebuilding ‘community’ ties. This is another reason that ‘community’ organisations need to be funded more adequately because it may be the only point of ‘community’ contact for some people. To return to an earlier point made, some ethnic communities can be a poor source of social capital.

A different context also means that some people have different priorities. Numerous women spoke of how people from ‘their’ community had ‘changed’ in Australia and suggested that they were much more competitive and individually minded, and less supportive of one another than ‘back home’:

The people coming to Australia from my community are different here, they just thinking about the future and taking money and be selfish without thinking about if you need help. (Farrah, 40’s, Iraq)
A deep sense of sadness was often conveyed by many of the women about the loss of collectivity, mutual support and trust that they suggested had previously characterised their pre-migration experiences of ‘community’. Farrah often lamented the fact that she had not been able to rebuild the strong sense of attachment she had experienced in Iraq and this created a profound void in her life. She talked about the tension between her desire for attachment to co-ethnic-cultural-religious ‘community’ but at the same time, to keep a protective distance:

If you are a part of the community you feel you are not far away from your country. Because in here there is a big country and sometimes you feel alone, that’s why you need the community with you. Everyone, if you ask everyone, Arabic people, you say I need community, but at the same time I don’t need community, that’s two things at the same time. I told you why, because if you contact with your community you feel happy and not very far away from your culture, your language, your religion. But at the same time, too many people gossip and talking ‘where is she going, how much you take, how much you get, what is he or her husband doing, or what she is wearing, or is she a spy’. That’s why the people in same culture need the community and doesn’t need…. I must be careful with Iraqi people, I do not trust. I feel not good and that’s why I go back to escape from anyone from the community. I don’t want a problem with anyone, I am a social person. But before in my country I feel accepted, but here, I feel not very good and I go [away] from my community. (Farrah, 40’s, Iraq)

Many of women in this study also chose to keep a protective distance and others chose to cut ties entirely due to issues of mistrust. To reiterate my previous point, the common assumption that people of refugee background are readily connected to a pre-existing ethno-cultural community of solidarity for support and social connections after arrival is unsound. Although this may be the case for some, the findings of this study revealed a much more complex depiction of ‘community’ connection.

**Mistrust**

The findings of this study showed that being associated with an ethnic-cultural ‘community’ could often be a source of anxiety and stress, particularly due to issues of mistrust. War, torture and exile commonly produce mistrust in relationships with family, friends, neighbours, community institutions and/or society (Behnia 1997). Mistrust may have developed because of
religious, gender, ethnic or political persecution and as such, trust at the societal level dissolves according to perceived differences between people (Hynes 2003). Negative experiences with members of family, co-ethnic or co-religious ‘community’, the ‘host’ society and social services, influence a person’s capacity to rebuild trust (ibid). Governments, NGO workers, service providers and members of the ‘host’ population may also mistrust refugees (Raghallaigh 2013) and their accounts of persecution (Eastmond 2007). As Raghallaigh (2013) points out, this creates a vicious cycle of mistrusting relationships (Raghallaigh 2013:86).

The literature has highlighted the issue of mistrust for people of refugee background in various contexts from initial threat to third country settlement (Daniel & Knudsen 1995; Hynes 2003 & 2009; Behnia 2004; Eastmond 2007; Larsen 2011; Rainbird 2012; Raghallaigh 2013; Lenette 2013). Curiously though, only a handful of studies (e.g. Raghallaigh 2013 & Lenette 2013) have had a primary focus on a theme of mistrust in the context of Western settlement. Raghallaigh (2013) explored the notion of mistrust among unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the Republic of Ireland and found that it was fundamentally a means of self-protection. Interviews revealed that many respondents had grown up in an environment where people habitually treated each other with suspicion. Mistrust produced suspicion of others and a hesitancy to create strong relationships in the settlement context.

The notion of group-based trust refers to when people are regarded as having more trust in those who share a similar background (Behnia 2008). The idea is that the closer a person is to you, the less risk is involved and the more likely you are to trust them. There is a common assumption therefore that mistrust occurs between individuals who are fundamentally different from one another. However, in Lenette’s ethnographic study (2013) of single African mothers of refugee background living in Brisbane, it was demonstrated that mistrust could equally occur between people who were fundamentally similar (Lenette 2013). The main sources of mistrust for the women in her study were the people with whom they shared a common ethnicity, culture and/or country of origin. The study revealed how these mothers were cast as ‘outsiders’ from co-ethnic community members due to their marital status, drawing attention to how some strong ‘ethnic’ networks can also be exclusionary.

Trust/mistrust was a key theme that was raised throughout the fieldwork and was integral to the lives of more than half of the women. Many indicated that mistrust was a significant issue currently impacting on their everyday social interactions: “My biggest problem is trust with the
people. I feel this, I can’t trust any people” (Farrah, 40’s, Iraq). Mistrust was informed not only by their pre-migration experiences of conflict, war and social tensions, but also by their settlement experiences. Often mistrust was reinforced or exacerbated due to initial negative experiences.

My fieldwork revealed that, for the small group of women who suggested mistrust to be a significant everyday issue, the main source was essentially social proximity or, those people with whom they shared a common ethnic or cultural background. In their view, this had a greater impact on their subjective well-being than other sources of mistrust because these relations had been so fundamental to their sense of community belonging and identity in their pre-migration lives. The women were therefore more likely to trust people who were outside their ethnic-cultural group and therefore socially distant. This study therefore supports the findings of Lenette’s study (2013) of African mothers.

Several women highlighted the fact that war and conflict creates deep divisions and mistrust between people from the same country of origin/principal settlement, the same ‘ethnic’ group and even the same family. Pre-existing tensions continued to shape relations during settlement and this was particularly the case when conflicts were still ongoing:

You know Congolese people, we have a sickness, a very big sickness of corruption, you know. If I know someone is my enemy, my enemy can buy me through my relatives, you understand. So my family can betray me or sell me for money. So even we are Congolese, but between us Congolese, we have some people who are working to the enemy. It means it’s not trust 100%, even family, is not trust. It’s not trust, there is no trust! (Zola, 20’s, D.R Congo)

Iraqi women’s leader Leyla explains the significance of trust in reuniting her community:

I don’t know how to explain it to you but there’s lot’s of tension in our community. So that’s why it’s hard to bring them together, because they are from lots of different background, lots of different cultures, different languages, different religions. But like if you think about it, 15 years ago, we have been together, but after that, whatever’s been happening there has been affecting them here. For me I find it’s very difficult to develop the trust with them. Now they trust me a lot and so I can help when they
come in and talk to me. They know they will not hear about our conversation anywhere. For example, if they are coming to me and telling me something, they are 100% sure it is in here between me and them, even if no paper between me and them. But it took me while to do this….

Mistrust can be exacerbated by the context of settlement. Communities that have been recreated often bring together people who are largely unknown to each other and consequently people don’t know whom they can trust. These people may be from the same country, but they are usually from different regions and have diverse backgrounds in terms of economic, educational and social status, for example. Some may be highly educated while others may be illiterate, some may have lived in rural areas and other may have lived in cities. Some may be from a dominant majority ethnic, religious or political group and others from a persecuted minority group. This can result in suspicion, mistrust, internal division, infighting for power and fragmentation within ‘ethnic’ communities re-created in the country of settlement (Kelly 2003:42). Vestine (30’s, Rwanda) recalls:

When I came here I was thinking we’re from the same country, but it's different like, different, like some they are from different areas. So, and the refugees are here for different reasons. So when I come here I was even scared of them and did not trust.

Having knowledge of people was intimately linked to trust. Many women nostalgically recalled how ‘community’ in their pre-migration lives had generally consisted of extended family, neighbours and friends who were largely living in the same localised area. The women did not distinguish between pre-war and post-war times, or country of origin or country of first asylum. Typically though they had real knowledge of each other and their families and they suggested that lots of trust had developed between them.

Farrah (40’s, Iraq) talked about how the link between knowledge and trust impacted on her desire to find a husband:

I’m thinking about a husband, but I can’t choose Arab people living here because I not trust. I not trust them in Australia for someone to marry. Someone came for me to ask me ‘you can marry me?’ but I am not sure about him, I don’t need that. Because I don’t know about the people, about their past, you know. I do not know about him or
if I can trust him. In my country you know about the people. I think if I go back to my country to find someone and bring here is better because my child needs a dad.

Some women had formed close ties with a few individuals from their ethnic group or country of origin only because they were well known to other trusted friends or family members (who were often living overseas). Maryam (30's, Iran) explains:

I prefer to don’t contact really much [with other people from Iran]. Some friends that I knew from before, maybe. But from my country, honestly I don’t like really to be friends you know, really close friends unless I know about them. I am very careful with contact them. (Maryam,30’s, Iran)

A few formed the opinion that some were ‘not genuine’ refugees and had changed their identity to claim refugee status; they were here for other reasons such as economic, spying or ‘stirring up trouble’. As Delbar (30’s, Iranian) said:

I can’t trust any Iranian people because some of them are here for some reasons, different reasons, I don’t know, just for spying or something like this. I should be careful.

Hence, many women were more likely to trust people from different backgrounds, as Golnaz (30’s, Iran) articulates:

In here, me and my brother and my sister not wanting to meet any Iranian people. Trust is a problem. I trust with Australian people better. People from Iran, I can’t trust! People from Australia and other countries are different, I don’t know why. I think for refugees, if you are asking, tell you same like me. Some Iranian people here are very good but... You are Australian, you understand people from Australia are good or bad. Same with Iranian. I am looking in the face and I understand this family good or no, just the face and speaking two, three minutes. Every Iranian will tell you the same thing, not just me. Just looking and speaking, I understand this person or family good or no.
For Golnaz, trust was a feeling. Her suggested ability to read people meant that trust was everyday, practical and tacit.

Peteet (1995) proposes that ‘trust is a fragile and situational concept, easily broken but difficult to restore’ (Peteet 1995:169). Although several women said that they really wanted to learn to trust more freely they did not know how to do so. Vestine (30’s, Rwanda) reveals:

How you can trust people? I will try sometimes. Sometimes when I was in South Africa my counselor she told me I must make new friends and I told her how, and she say if you are meeting people say hi, talk to them. But I cannot do that. And I told her if I say hi and they not respond how can I keep trying, waiting other people? I can’t do that, its not easy. I don’t know how I come to trust someone but sometimes I will say I will not trust anyone!

A number of women simply did not trust that people from their region of origin had their best interests at heart. For some, the notion of trust was based on a faith or a belief in the good intentions of another person; that they will not harm, ‘trick’ or, according to Mary (30’s, South Sudan), take advantage of you. She explains:

Yeah, trust is a problem. We actually meet but there are some issues that have to be confidential. You don’t need to release all that you have, because if you do that, some people will take advantage of that. So you don’t need really to tell everything about yourself.

Mistrust was commonly articulated as involving the inability to be confident that another person would keep personal information about you ‘a secret’:

I still feel that I don’t trust people much. In our culture you don’t tell everything. Because even if I meet someone from my culture, they will just go and tell another one, and another one….. (Grace, 20’s, Africa)

To not trust means you can’t say everything to that person, everything in your mind, you can’t say to that person… I can’t trust that person, just I can trust God. Because
if you say something, it's not secret to somebody, it's not secret. Its just somebody knows about everything in your mind. (Delbar, 30's, Iran)

In practice we have seen that for the women in this study, rebuilding a social world through close ethnic-cultural ‘community’ engagement cannot be taken-for-granted. For some, the process of gaining ‘community’ access and support and rebuilding social ties can be a relatively straightforward, mutually supportive and highly enriching experience. For others though, it can be much more difficult and complicated by issues of mistrust. ‘Community’ attachment, as experienced prior to migration, may no longer be integral to their everyday lives. A lack of ‘community’ support may be strongly felt and I stress that, for those who wish to, facilitating initial contact during early settlement may be really important for rebuilding trust and shaping future relationships with other ‘community’ members, as well as with those from more diverse backgrounds.

Ethno-culturally specific ‘community’ organisations can play a significant role here. I have argued the critical need for the government to expand their support to these organisations/groups in order to strengthen their capacity to support their members. Given that these relations can foster trust building and the development of wider social ties it is crucial that opportunities are provided to enable its development. Insufficient funding and resources can serve to undermine the development of trust, network building and social capital. Anxieties about ‘ethnic enclaves’ were found to be a misconception of the women’s behaviours and desires - they wanted to establish closer ties to the wider population. Their accounts of ‘community’ demonstrate that the concepts of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ are not adequate terms to describe or explain the complexities of these relations. Many of the women did not seek more community engagement because from their perspective ‘community’ is strongly associated with issues of mistrust. Community engagement was therefore contingent upon a perceived sense of trust. The government’s settlement model in relation to ethno-specific communities is therefore deficient for two contradictory reasons. First, it underestimates their fundamental significance to the process of settlement and wider network building. Second, it does not take account of issues of mistrust. The consequences for failing to address these issues are that many women may continue to find it extremely challenging to rebuild social relations and overcome feelings of social disconnection.
Chapter 5: Neighbourly Relations

The term ‘community’ in current settlement related policies is mostly used in reference to building social cohesion in local place-based communities. Putnam’s version of social capital rests upon the notion of community as being a geographically bounded area (Morrow 2001: 54). Neighbourhood based social networks have been widely viewed as the building blocks to social cohesion (Castells 1997; Forrest & Kearns 2001:2130). Since 9/11, neighbourhoods with high levels of ethnic diversity (and which are also often economically and socially deprived) have increasingly been targeted for social cohesion policy interventions in Australia. As earlier discussed, the key assumptions underpinning these policies are that social cohesion facilitates social and economic inequity rather than visa versa, ethnic diversity erodes trust and social cohesion, ethnic minorities are the ‘problem’ in need of ‘fixing’, and that increased contact between minority ethnic groups and the so called ‘mainstream’ population will produce more tolerance, understanding and social harmony. This chapter is concerned with the government’s current social cohesion and diversity program, which supports projects that are designed to strengthen relations between local residents through ‘bridge’ building activities. The theory is that, in learning to get along with your neighbours, a sense of cooperation, tolerance and mutual obligation will develop. Trust and a sense of belonging are the expected outcomes. The government’s hope is that this would further encourage the adoption of shared ‘mainstream’ values, the development of integration and sense of Australian national identity.

This chapter investigates how the social cohesion program’s objectives relate to the lives of the women in this study, who all expressed a broad desire to build supportive relations with their neighbours. The essential aims are to understand how the Program and related projects work in practice, and to show the everyday experiences, understandings and concerns of the women about neighbourliness. I argue that the social cohesion model is defective for several key reasons. Firstly, it is unrealistic because many women’s social networks are likely to be widely dispersed. Secondly, a lack of secure affordable housing means that many are forced to move house, and often neighbourhood, multiple times. Consequently they may be less committed to their local area and less likely to have opportunities to build strong relations. Thirdly, the purposes of ‘bridging’ projects did not correspond with the women’s subjective understandings of neighbourliness or their engagement preferences. In sum, this study found that the current
social cohesion program was largely ineffective for building one-on-one neighbourly relations and was otherwise irrelevant to the lives of the women.

Local Community Cohesion Programs

The government currently offers Multicultural Affairs grants through the Families and Communities Programme, which broadly aim to strengthen relations and build social cohesion in diverse local areas (Department of Social Services 2014d). The program supports projects that meet the following key objectives: to provide cross-cultural education; to address prejudice; to address tensions between groups; to develop the practical skills of a group in order to increase their capacity to ‘participate meaningfully in society’; and to engage a cultural group in ‘mainstream’ activities (Department of Social Services 2014d:3). Here we see that the ‘project’ of strengthening neighbourly relations is not really about getting to know your neighbours on a personal and more than superficial level after all. Rather, they are all about reducing prejudice and tensions and increasing participation in ‘mainstream’ activities - the examples they give being sports and choirs. Bridge-building activities in diverse neighbourhoods typically focus on harmony building and most often take the form of dialogue and education between social groups assessed as being different (usually ethnically) and somewhat antagonistic towards each other. Yet the targets of these programs are the minority ‘at risk’ groups themselves. In other words, they are not focused on addressing racist beliefs and prejudice embedded within broader society. Instead they are focused on minority ethnic groups adjusting their culture, or assimilating, in order to diminish differences and increase tolerance levels.

It seems to me that much of the work of social cohesion has largely shifted to that of minority groups who are assumed to be ‘the problem’ in need of ‘fixing’. In this way, attention has been redirected from the ‘mainstream’ population, who clearly has much work to do in terms of overcoming prejudice/racism and increasing the inclusiveness of minorities through respect and acceptance of difference. For example, in Uslaner’s (2012) comparative study of diversity and social cohesion in Australia, the United States, the UK, Canada and Sweden he found that overall, majority whites were far less likely or willing to have friends of different backgrounds or accommodate differences than ethnic minorities (Uslaner 2012:209).
In the last funding round (2013-2014) of the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program South Australia, the three successful projects focused on: addressing ethnic and religious intolerance and division among Burundian, Congolese and Rwandese though leadership workshops and cultural events; addressing racial intolerance in a northern area through educational campaigns, forums and cultural events; and increasing participation in sports among diverse groups through a soccer program (Department of Social Services 2014e). As this study revealed though, the women who most desired increased social engagement did not necessarily feel attached to an ‘ethnically’ based group and they were also not interested in attending group meetings and educational forums. They were also not interested in playing soccer.

In my view, the project of ‘bridging-building’ at the local level is ambitious and misguided. As Cheong et al. (2007) has commented, migrants who are living in economically deprived neighbourhoods are more likely to be interested in gaining employment, finding secure long-term housing and accessing supportive social services than “engaging in the shared, time consuming project of community building” (Cheong et al. 2007: 41). One of the main issues with social cohesion policies and programs however is that they overlook the fact that people’s social networks are likely to be geographically dispersed across cities and suburbs, nationally and internationally. In reality, it is likely that neighbourhood residents ‘inhabit quite different social worlds’ (Forrest & Kearns 2001:2128). As I will show, this was particularly the case for the women in this study who had little choice about where they lived and as such, they were less likely to be invested in their local area.

According to Hickman et al. (2008), accessibility to affordable, long-term quality housing is a key factor that underpins social cohesion (Hickman et al. 2008:91). The authors suggest that: “housing frames people’s access to community and places them in a very immediate relationship to their neighbourhood” (ibid). Clearly, the longer a person lives in a neighbourhood the more likely they are to build relationships with other residents (Forrest & Kearns 2001:2131) since a high tenancy turnover can significantly impact on a person’s level of commitment to a residential area (Morrison 2003:115). It follows then that high mobility erodes familiarity and trust building within a neighbourhood and directly undermines government social cohesion initiatives.
In practice, many people of refugee background are unable to choose where they live (Flatau et al. 2014:24). Humanitarian entrants are far less likely to own their own home after the first 5 years than other migrants (Fozdar & Hartley 2013:37). With tougher eligibility criteria and lengthy waiting lists for public housing, most are forced to compete on the private rental market (Holas et al. 2013:45). Numerous issues can restrict their access such as financial hardship, racism and discrimination, language difficulties, unemployment, lack of rental history/referees, lack of understanding of the rental system and family structure (Fozdar & Hartley 2013:37; Flatau et al. 2014:24; Holas et al. 2013:45). This means that people of refugee background are frequently unable to live near their friends and/or family

‘In Australia it is not so easy to make friends with your neighbours’

For the women in this study, the neighbourhood potentially offered an important context for meeting people, making friends and developing a sense of place-based community and social inclusion. They indicated that in their pre-migration lives, a sense of community inclusiveness was experienced, expressed and reinforced through their day-to-day interactions with their neighbours. Thus, neighbours had formed an essential part of their social world and sense of social connection. Typically they shared a common ‘ethnic’ and/or cultural and/or religious background and even if not on close personal terms, they were often well known to each other.

Many women found however, that positive relationship building with neighbours in the context of Adelaide was not easy to achieve.

In my country we usually have coffee in the morning with neighbours, but here there is nothing. Even if not so close to them, in our country we just say hi to our neighbours and it’s a comfort. It was very hard, until I make a friend with my neighbour here. It took me nearly a year to make a friend and up until now the friendship has continued…. But it was very hard, very hard. In Australia, it is not so easy to make friends with your neighbours. (Leyla, 30’s, Iraq)

The women in this study were living in various areas throughout suburban Adelaide. Very few had friends or family members living nearby. As expected, they had mixed experiences with their neighbours. Relations were described as ranging from very negative and tainted by racism to being close and an important source of support and friendship. Most women were
on very superficial but friendly terms: ‘we just say hi’. Whatever their experiences have been here though, each time I raised the topic of neighbours the women became much more animated and expressed strong opinions.

For Seqeeba (Afghanistan, 55), neighbours formed the core of her social life in Adelaide. This was not always the case though. It took numerous relocations before the family eventually settled where they had been living for three years. Seqeeba had since formed close relations with her three more recently arrived Afghan neighbours. Typically they saw each other on a daily basis and frequently shared food with one another. Seqeeba’s husband even created a gap in one of her immediate neighbour’s fence to allow direct access. Her daughter explains:

We have our next door neighbours here and we even have a thing from our yard where we can go straight to their house. They’re Afghan, and when they came my mother was so happy and she said ‘my gosh, we actually have a neighbour who we can connect with!’

These neighbour-friendships were critical to Seqeeba’s social life because she was largely bound to her immediate area. Due to her numerous health issues, low level of English and lack of confidence in catching buses alone, she was totally dependent on others to drive her places. Before her Afghan neighbours moved into the area she felt very lonely and socially alienated. Seqeeba’s sense of attachment to her local area then, was essentially fostered through her capacity to form relations with those who shared a common background.

Seqeeba had also developed a relationship with her Greek neighbor, despite their inability to communicate in a common language, after coaxing her daughter to take ‘special’ food to her. This was reciprocated and a ritual began. The two women have been exchanging food for several years now and Seqeeba feels a strong sense of connection to her. This highlights the significance of food to facilitating and maintaining social ties as well as Seqeeba’s agency.

At the same time, Seqeeba has experienced racism multiple times in her neighbourhood and this produced a belief that people do not like or accept her living there. Consequently she has stopped going for walks alone in her area. Her daughter continues:
My mum feels alienated because she has the idea that everyone hates us. So she wouldn’t even go out for walks because she would feel that people hate us walking on the streets and they would see us and say ‘bloody refugees and boat people’! And we have had that happen in this neighbourhood. I have also experienced it multiple times, people call you names. I’ve had people saying ‘get out of my country, get the f**k out of my county’ and so they do have an impact on you, as hard as you try, it really affects you.

Incidents of racist harassment generated a need for Seqeeba to be cautious about interacting with people in her neighbourhood outside her cultural group. Perhaps unsurprisingly, qualitative studies (Daley 2007; Ager & Strang 2004) in the UK have found that people are most inclined to seek relations with others from a similar religious, linguistic, cultural and ethnic background and retreat from the broader population, particularly when prejudice and racism were experienced. On one level then, Seqeeba managed to develop a strong sense of social inclusiveness to her neighbourhood, but on a general level, following racist harassment, she felt socially excluded.

Several other women expressed feelings of social exclusion following incidents of racism and hostility directed from people living in their neighbourhood. For instance, one hot day last summer I visited Farrah (40’s, Iraq) only to find her shaken, confused and in tears. She told me about how she had just been hosing down her front porch when a neighbor across the road started shouting racist abuse at her. It later transpired that the neighbour was angry that Farrah had ‘wasted’ several buckets of water. Farrah has apparently had many misunderstandings and problems with her neighbours who in her view are essentially hostile because she is a Muslim.

Another time tensions were generated when Farrah had to delay having somebody mow her lawn because she could not afford it. In Birgitte Larsen’s ethnographic study (2011a) of people of refugee background settling in Denmark, the home garden was seen as the interface between ‘public’ street and ‘private’ home and a space for negotiating social inclusion and exclusion (Larsen 2011a:150). In Farrah’s case, the critical surveillance of her domestic life and perceived malice towards her from her neighbours pushed her to extend her social distance from strangers generally living in her area and to socially retreat. Social
exclusion was therefore experienced through judgment, hostility and perceived racism, which in turn restricted Farrah’s capacity to form local social relations.

Several of the women felt the need to keep to themselves following negative experiences with their neighbours. Hickman et al. (2008:100) suggests that: “when the proximity that exists between neighbours is disrupted by bad relations it can affect a person’s sense of safety and the extent to which their home is a haven from the world” (Hickman et al. 2008:100). For Farrah, being a single Muslim mother, finding safety and security within a neighbourhood were of the highest priority and her sense of insecurity following these incidents was deep-seated.

Numerous women had nothing to do with their neighbours and asserted that they would hesitate to ask for help in an emergency:

I am living in this house, ok. I don’t know my neighbours. I think if I need help, they will not help me here! Sometimes I will go outside and he or she is sitting watching and I say hello, how are you? Nothing. One and a half years living [here] no, I not understand this way! (Golnaz, 30’s, Iran)

Overall, only six of the women had formed close durable friendships with either previous or current neighbours. For example, Vestine (30’s, Rwanda) and Grace (20’s, Africa) lived opposite each other in the same housing complex when they first arrived in Adelaide two years ago. They both laughed when they explained how it took a few weeks before they noticed each other because they were both too scared to venture outside during that time except when necessary. Eventually when they did meet each other, the two formed a connection and they have since become good friends. They now live a considerable distance from each other on opposites sides of the city and visits involve catching two buses. Both women were unfamiliar with their current neighbours, and other friends/acquaintances were living in various other suburbs. So, whilst the social world of some women like Seqeeba are essentially geographically confined, for others it is widely dispersed. For this reason Vestine and Grace did not feel a strong sense of attachment to their neighbourhood.

Heba (40’s, Iraq) has also had a really positive experience with her first neighbours who she has remained in touch with after five years and moving house twice. This older couple
welcomed her and her family shortly after they arrived. Heba describes them as her ‘Australian mum and dad’ and regularly catches up with them for a meal or coffee. When I spoke to her she had been living in her house for about three years. In contrast to her previous experience, Heba had barely had a conversation with any of her neighbours. Apparently they were usually busy at work and rarely seen outside their home and so there was very little opportunity to get to know them.

Other women made similar comments about how their neighbours tended to stay in their houses a lot in Australia and/or work odd hours, making it very hard to interact socially: “it’s like you don’t even know who exists or who stays next to you” (Jawana, 20’s, Afghanistan); “here everyone stays in their house” (Assa, 20’s, D.R Congo). Tara (50’s, Bhutan) had been living in the same house for over a year. When I asked her if she knew her neighbours she replied: “No, I don’t. It’s hard to say hello because how they are, we don’t know, we never see them”. In Clare Daley’s UK study (2007) of relations between refugees and other residents living in a local area, she found that a lack of opportunities to meet one another was one of the key issues that hindered relationship building (Daley 2007:168). My study supports this finding. The women frequently complained about the lack of opportunities they had to get to know their neighbours.

Many also complained that one of the main difficulties they had in developing relations with their neighbours was the fact that they had found it so hard to find secure and affordable housing in neighbourhoods that were judged to be safe and secure. This in turn created the need to move house multiple times. Housing instability was one of the key settlement concerns raised by the women. Many had no choice but to move every one or two years when leases expired and since the time of the fieldwork I know of five women who have had to move house and reluctantly, relocate to a new neighbourhood. Financial hardship compelled most of the women to live in areas of existing economic and social deprivation. With the exception of three women, all were renting privately or living in public housing in areas where there was a high residential turnover. This meant that for those who were fortunate enough to find decent long-term housing, it was also likely that their neighbours would be transient.

Many of the women were also not able to live in areas where they could be close to family and/or friends. Maryam (30’s, Iran) for example, was unhappy living where she was and
wanted to move to an area where people she knew were living but could not afford to do so. She had been residing in an apartment block for two years and described her neighbours as being ‘unfriendly’. One day she recounted the ordeal she experienced when she was accidentally locked out of her apartment for three hours and was ignored by all passing neighbours. She was horrified and felt fundamentally alienated by this experience and insisted that it would never happen in Iran. Like many women, she exclaimed that she would hesitate to ask a neighbour for help even if she really needed it. She remembers:

Yeah, and it was winter at that time and I sit there, and I was so disappointed I started to crying, because I don’t know why I didn’t remember. I had a bad feeling, and I told myself ‘why you forgot to bring your key?’ And I sit there, but I saw so many of my neighbors come to go to their house, but they didn’t help me or anything. It was strange for me because they saw I was sitting there, I was crying, but they just pass, nothing! Yes, nothing to say but, for example, if it happened in my country, people, especially neighbours, will help you, ask you what happen or ask you something. But they didn’t care, they didn’t mind!

This poignant account depicts the disappointment many women felt about the differences they experienced between their neighbours ‘here’ and those ‘there’ in their pre-migration life. These women remembered nostalgically, strong and mutually supportive relationships and a sense of unity. Neighbours ‘there’ were often at the centre of these women’s social world and several said that they were ‘like family’. Jawana (20’s, Afghanistan) recalls:

Our social circle was essentially our neighbours, and then everyone else. Definitely neighbours are really important, they’re with you in everything.

The women talked in general terms about the neighbourhood’s they had once experienced, the term referring to some place, or several places they had lived during some period/s of time before they migrated to Australia. Several had lived in the same neighbourhood for most of their life before migrating to Australia. Mary (30’s) had lived with her family and clan members in South Sudan for many, many generations before fleeing to Uganda. She emphasised that she knew everyone living in her general area and felt free to visit, eat or even sleep at anyone’s house at any time. Assa’s (20’s, D.R Congo) recollection was similar in some ways:
In Africa you are free, you can go to your neighbours and everything, but here everyone is in their house. Everyone was free to go to somebody else’s house. Here you have to make an appointment to go to somebody’s house. In Africa if you have free time you just go to your neighbour’s house and talk and laugh.

Grace (20’s, Africa) describes the difference between her experiences of neighbours living in a refugee camp in Malawi and that of Adelaide in the following narrative:

Yeah, here it is different. Even if I was in Africa without my family, yeah it would be hard, but it wouldn’t be hard like now because here you are not supported by neighbours with anything. But in Africa we are close to our neighbours, they are friends. Neighbours would come and check with you and everything to see if you’re ok, and they could help create a feeling of family and just talk with you and help you. You don’t have time to be lonely, you are always with people, sometimes just with neighbours. You spend more time together, helping each other. We share together and even if your neighbour don’t have salt or something, cooking oil, they come and you give to them, and maybe they can give to you. And if you don’t have food, some people who have food help you also. And sometimes they will just come if you ask. Good neighbours… Yeah, the families know each other. Even in the whole of my area I could know most of the people and they could know me, most of them. Yeah, it’s different. Even if we have neighbours from Africa living here, still you do not really know your neighbours, it’s not like you will be talking to them much…. Yeah we see each other but not that much, not like before.

Overall, the women in this study suggested that the intrinsic value of neighbourliness in their pre-migration lives was a matter of familiarity, friendliness, mutual respect and the provision of support. This provided them with a sense of security and social connectedness. Neighbours were commonly friends. The women who had enjoyed close neighbourly relations in their pre-migration life, and found the situation to be less inclusive here, suggested that the contrasting experiences compounded any feelings of loneliness and social alienation.
Whilst most of the women essentially desired to build close friendships with their neighbours then, in practice this often proved to be very challenging. In the context of Adelaide, many reluctantly adjusted their expectations of their neighbours and came to be satisfied with acquainted and superficial but friendly contact. Thus, a tension existed between what the women wanted and what they were able to achieve. In reality, the women’s neighbours were not necessarily people they liked or knew well or had much affinity with, but they did aspire to be at least on sufficiently friendly terms to be able to depend on them in a crisis. My impression was that for most of the women, what ultimately mattered and defined a sense of neighbourliness in the context of Adelaide was a comfort in knowing that they could turn to their immediate neighbours if they needed help. It is concerning then that many of the women indicated that they were not confident that they would be able to do so. Experiencing the neighbourhood as ‘community’ and a domain of support and friendships was therefore an ideal for many women that they were not able to realise.

Although many women suggested a priority to get to know their immediate neighbours, they also generally expressed an openness or desire to get to know ‘friendly’ people living in their general area from diverse backgrounds. Their ‘bridge-building’ preferences though were to engage in small group activities of interest (suggested to be cooking, gardening, sewing) that enabled them to socialise in a non-threatening environment, and where there were opportunities to make more than superficial casual contact and build friendships one-by-one. This indicates the need, as Harris and Young (2009) have also noted, that governments must be responsive to how local people prefer to engage in bridge-building activities (Harris & Young 2009:530). When I asked some of the women if they had information about any social groups or activities in their local council they said they were not aware of any. This indicates the need to make information about social activities in the area, if they exist, much more accessible.

This study found that social cohesion policies do not align with the reality of the lives of the women involved in this study despite the general shared aspiration with the government to build closer social ties within the neighbourhood. Relationship building was often dependent upon having decent long-term housing and a commitment to the area, the absence of racism and feelings of safety, perceptions of friendliness, having the time, and the existence of public spaces and knowledge of opportunities to meet other residents informally, on a one-to-one basis. Significantly, my research supports the findings of the scholars cited earlier (e.g.
Hooge 2007; Letki 2008; Hickman et al. 2008; Uslaner 2012; Demivera 2014) who have found that social cohesion is much more likely to be an outcome of social inclusion, equality and economic/material well-being rather than a precursor.

Social cohesion related policies and practices are fundamentally misguided because the onus for action is focused on the migrants themselves rather than the wider population. As these women’s accounts of their neighbours clearly demonstrate, it is the wider population that is deficient in creating the conditions for building a sense of local community cohesion and harmony. I have also shown that the ways in which ‘bridge building’ is conceived did not correspond to the women’s subjective understandings of neighbourly relations. The project of bridge-building within neighbourhoods focuses on the facilitation of superficial casual contact between people in order to create harmony. These women ultimately wanted to have close relations with their immediate neighbours. Realising that this would be difficult to achieve they adjusted their expectations of neighbourliness. At the very least, they hoped to have friendly relations with their immediate neighbours who could be relied on if they needed help and to experience a sense of acceptance by people living in the general area.
Chapter 6: Social Disconnection and Loneliness

In order to problematise the government’s settlement model I have so far explored how policies and practices fail to relate to the women in this study as they rebuilt their lives with family, co-ethnic/cultural community members, and neighbours. It has been demonstrated that various factors can combine to impinge on their capacity to do so including: restrictive Family Reunification policies; funding withdrawal to ethno-specific and multicultural organisations; irrelevant and ineffective social cohesion programs; inadequate long-term affordable housing; and a lack of sufficiently resourced facilitated social opportunities. Additionally, the current social capital approach to settlement overlooks relational issues produced by changed family dynamics, ethno-cultural ‘community’ tensions and mistrust as well as prejudice, which can further complicate network building. The government assumes that social relationships will automatically occur throughout the course of participation in work, study and/or volunteering. My study shows that in a few cases this is correct however, in the majority of cases it is not. The women in this study who lacked such ties were already actively participating in work and/or study and/or volunteering and broadly speaking language was not a significant barrier to their social engagement.

The current settlement model can significantly shape the process of network rebuilding then. For the women in this study who lacked supportive, durable and trusting relationships, social disconnection and loneliness were typically the cumulative effect. This chapter provides an insight into the context of loneliness and social disconnection exploring how it can shape the everyday lives of the women in this study and the process of their settlement. Three key issues are considered. The first is the relationship between loneliness and level and quality of social contact. Second, how loneliness itself impacts on these women’s capacity to socially engage and build friendships. Third, the extent to which greater discrepancies between pre-migration and post-migration qualitative and quantitative levels of social engagement can impact on feelings of loneliness.

Government settlement-related policies and programs focus on increased social participation, social capital building and fostering local ‘community’ connectedness to enable the development of a sense of belonging to Australian national identity. This model I suggest, is failing. I argue that these women are unlikely to feel a sense of national identity if they
cannot identify with people through intimate relations. This model is also failing to address the needs of these women, which was to feel a sense of social connectedness through family and friends. The instrumentalist/positivist view of social ‘bridging’ by policy makers is focused on measurable outcomes rather than subjective well-being and hence oriented towards frequency of contact rather than the quality of relationship. Defined in this way, the term ‘bridging’ does not adequately capture the women’s desire for opportunities to build close diverse relations with people whom they shared an affinity with. Furthermore, the women who had managed to build close diverse relations were typically embedded within a supportive network of family and/or people of a shared ethnic-cultural background. Put differently, the women in this study who were most likely to be lacking close diverse relations were also lacking support from present family and/or a co-ethnic/cultural ‘community’.

There is a common assumption that the longer a person is living in the country of settlement the more people they will meet, the more support they will receive, the less lonely they will feel and the more ‘well’ settled they will become, suggesting a linear trajectory. The findings of this study however, pointed to a much more convoluted picture. Although many women were able to expand their social networks over time, and tended to feel less lonely overall compared to when they first arrived (especially if they came alone and did not know anybody), others did not. This was usually regardless of their level of English, active participation in work, study and length of time living in Australia. I argue that whilst loneliness can be a force motivating these women to increase their social engagement, it can also often hinder their capacity to do so. Here’s the problem: the longer these women feel this way, the more likely levels of emotional distress can impede their capacity to socially engage confidently, seek support and opportunities, and build close relations. Problematic social network building, lack of support, social disconnection, loneliness and emotional distress can reinforce each other.

Most of the literature concerned with loneliness is from the disciplines of psychiatry, psychology, social work and nursing and they predominantly focus on older people and/or mental health issues. Surprisingly, loneliness has largely been overlooked as a central settlement issue in refugee-centered studies. This is despite being a very common experience and one that can profoundly affect a person’s psychosocial well-being and as such, can significantly impede the process of settlement. The few studies that have paid some attention to this issue primarily frame it within the concepts of social isolation (e.g.
Casimiro et al. 2007; Ager et al. 2002) and social support (e.g. Stewart et al. 2011; Behnia 2004a).

It is necessary here to distinguish between the notions of living alone, being socially isolated, feeling socially alienated, being reclusive and loneliness. For the purposes of this thesis I have adapted the conceptions of anthropologist Klinenberg (2001) in the following way (Klinenberg 2001:505). Living alone is residing without other people in the household. Being socially isolated in the literal sense is extremely uncommon because people are likely to come in contact with lots of people throughout the course of their daily lives. The common sense understanding that I adopt is having limited subjectively fulfilling social ties with people. Feeling socially alienated, as previously mentioned, is a subjective state of disconnection, detachment or isolation. Being reclusive refers to when a person largely confines themselves to a household. Loneliness is a subjective state of feeling alone and deprived of social relations in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively (Perlman & Peplau 1981:31). A person can be living alone and/or have little social contact with others and rarely feel lonely. This might be the case for those people who are alone because they choose solitude or privacy in order to evade undesired social contact and personal relationships (de Jong Gierveld et al. 2006). On the other hand, a person who is experiencing extreme loneliness may live with others and have lots of external social contact but it may be superficial. It is not uncommon to feel lonely in a crowd if a sense of connection or acceptance is lacking.

Loneliness, ‘Depression’ and Social Engagement

There is an assumption that in order to overcome their situation, lonely people would be motivated to increase their social engagement. Although initially this seemed to hold true for the women in this study, later on a much more complex picture emerged. In Jerusalem et al.’s study (1996) of East German refugees in West Berlin the authors found that loneliness was more likely to hinder attempts to build social ties and networks than facilitate them because as a ‘negative emotional state’, loneliness is commonly linked to depression and anxiety (Jerusalem et al. 1996). ‘Depression’ and anxiety can produce a desire to socially disengage and retreat from other people (Kuiper 1989). Loneliness therefore has implications for policies aimed to increase social participation.
Research concerning the mental health of refugees has traditionally had a focus on the impact of pre-migration trauma associated with war and particularly the diagnostic category of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Over the past few decades attention has progressively shifted to the context of settlement as a source of significant stress for people of refugee background (Davidson et al. 2008). Studies (e.g. Miller et al. 2002; McMichael 2003; Fozdar & Hartley 2013) have since demonstrated that experiences of ‘depression’ and other mental health issues are not only related to past traumatic events but also to post-migration stress and the conditions of settlement.

In McMichael’s (2003) ethnographic study of Somali women living in Melbourne she found that women’s perceptions of sadness, loneliness and depression were not only associated with experiences of war and persecution but also to current circumstances of separation from loved ones, the loss of community solidarity, marginalisation and social isolation, and the general difficulties in navigating settlement (McMichael 2003:240). In other words, loneliness and ‘depression’ were, at least in part, a product of settlement policies and processes. She writes:

Their accounts of emotional distress express the profoundly alienating experience of disrupted social relations. While the internal feelings and symptoms associated with clinical depression are likely to be audible to clinicians and other service providers, it is narratives about disordered social relationships that appear as a far more potent sign of distress amongst Somali women (ibid).

The findings of my study support this view. The term ‘depression’ was frequently used by the women and was almost always related in some way to loneliness associated with an absence of family and loved ones as well as a lack of immediate close supportive social ties. In this way, support from family and friends can be seen as countering loneliness and a critical buffer against depression.

In Ager et al.’s study (2002) they looked at the experiences of a small group of socially isolated refugees and asylum seekers living in Scotland who had high levels of depression and anxiety. They found that depression levels increased the longer they had been living there. Whilst living alone and infrequent levels of social contact were not found to be significant predictors of mental health symptoms, participants indicated that increased social
contact was their greatest priority and valued above practical support and counseling. In other studies (Pernice & Brook 1996; Miller et al. 2002; Simich et al. 2003) the absence of family and lack of close friends and supportive relations have been strongly linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety which can compound pre-migration trauma. Conversely, levels of anxiety and depression have been found to decrease progressively as people are able to successfully establish new social ties (Jerusalem et al. 1996).

Caution is needed when using Western biomedical diagnostic categories like ‘depression’ (Tilbury 2007). Anthropology has emphasised the importance of culture in shaping the experience and expression of ‘depression’ (e.g. Kleinman & Good 1985). I did not specifically explore these women’s cultural understandings of the notion but during conversations several women frequently talked about sadness and ‘depression’ simultaneously as exemplified in the following:

I am very sad. Every night I stay awake and I can’t sleep. I take a tablet to sleep, I am depressed. It’s very difficult for me, I miss my family! (Feroza, 30’s, Afghanistan)

Significantly though, the women interpreted their loneliness to be a precursor to depression. Loneliness has been considered to be both a cause and manifestation of depression (Barg et al. 2006). Of course it is difficult to know the actual sources of these women’s depression and it is likely to be inter-related to several pre-migration and settlement factors which can reinforce each other in a continuous cycle of emotional distress. The key point I make here though is that these women were not necessarily lacking friends and feeling lonely simply because they were experiencing ‘depression’. Rather, these women were seemingly emotionally distressed, at least partially, because they lacked close supportive ties.

Regardless of the causal direction though, the longer these women remained lonely the more likely their situation could be complicated by feelings of profound sadness and the more likely they were to be vulnerable to feelings of social discomfort and anxiety, and a lack of confidence in meeting new people, despite their desire to do so. Clearly ‘depression’ is a complex issue and one that is likely to complicate the process of network building for these women. It is difficult to discern more than that based on my research. Thus, a leap cannot be made to conclude that loneliness associated ‘depression’ *in itself* has impeded the process of
network building. Sometimes people’s confidence in their own social competency may diminish when they become socially dis-engaged over time. This may not lead to mental health issues but it might restrict their normal social interactions with people and reinforce personal characteristics such as shyness, low self-esteem and low assertiveness (de Jong Gierveld 2006:490).

‘It’s not good at all feeling lonely’

Almost all the women in this study said that they had experienced some level or form of loneliness during their settlement. At the time of the fieldwork, ten women indicated that they were experiencing significant levels of protracted loneliness and were distressed about their situation. These women are the particular focus of this chapter. All were separated from key family members and lacked close supportive friendship ties despite living in Adelaide between 2 and 5 years. Apparently none had experienced loneliness before. With the exception of one (who had a young child), all were actively participating in studies, work or voluntary activities. Whilst a lack of confidence in speaking English was a partial factor contributing to levels of social engagement for three women, for the others it was not. One woman was married but the rest were single. Five had young children and five were living alone. All indicated a broad desire to increase their level of social engagement and build trusting friendships.

The women expressed their loneliness as sadness and despair about the forced separation from family and friends, and a general lack of supportive social ties in Adelaide. Or, social isolation generated or exacerbated feelings of loneliness and social alienation. Although the broad consensus in the Social Sciences is that social isolation and loneliness are not directly linked (de Jong Gierveld et al. 2006), these women used the terms interchangeably and as we shall see, social isolation and loneliness were closely linked. Loneliness was essentially talked about in five key ways: tied to separation from family/ friends; tied to being deprived of close supportive immediate social ties; as a precursor to ‘depression’; as a first time experience; and as contrasted to the strength and number of social relations that had existed in their pre-migration social world.

Unsurprisingly, loneliness was commonly experienced by the women during the first year or so when they had fewer social relationships and were coming to terms with being separated
from family and friends: “nobody support me, no family, no friends” (Feroza, 30’s, Afghanistan). These women typically emphasised strong feelings of distress, loneliness and sadness during the first year, especially those who were forced to entirely rebuild their networks in Adelaide.

Loneliness was also commonly an issue for those women who had completed compulsory English language classes and were less socially engaged. Loneliness though, continued to be a problem in subsequent years for these women, often as formal support diminished as more practical settlement issues were addressed. Initial social relations built with other new arrivals frequently weakened over time too as people settled at different paces and had different priorities. This sometimes contributed to feelings of loneliness and social disconnection, as Farrah (40’s, Iraq) illustrates:

My friends now have a different life. When I am first coming here and meeting with friends, now they have a really good life. My friend is working now, good money. Me, I am feeling I am struggling still and don’t feel as comfortable to see them.

One morning I was sitting with Farrah at her kitchen table drinking tea when I asked her whether she ever felt lonely and she responded:

Yes, all the time, this is the most difficult problem for me. I am in Iraq with my family, I am first time living alone. I am socially isolated and lonely because I need contact with the people for talking. Here I am living alone and it is very difficult for me because I am hiding from the people you know, not talking. You know every person they need to talk! That’s because social connection with the people should be about talking about what they feel. (Farrah, 40’s, Iraq)

Here Farrah expresses her loneliness and social isolation as being strongly linked to family separation, the absence of adult company and conversation and not being able to express how she feels. In this sense her social ties were ‘unfulfilling’. Although Farrah referred to herself as living alone she was actually living with her young child. She had no other family in Australia though and lacked supportive ties with people from her country of origin and religious background. She had been living here for nearly 5 years at the time. Farrah had a good level of English, was highly educated in her country and had since undertaken tertiary
studies here. She was also actively engaged in various volunteer activities. Regardless of living in Adelaide all these years she had minimal social support and once lamented that she did not have a single close friend here.

In van Tilburg’s survey study (1990) of over 400 adults living in the Netherlands, the link was explored between networks of support and loneliness. It was revealed that, broadly speaking, as the number of supportive relationships increased in a person’s social networks, the likelihood of loneliness decreased (van Tilburg 1990). The findings of my study also suggest a general link between loneliness and supportive relationships. Overall, those women who had not reported loneliness as a significant issue had greater access to networks of support from family and co-ethnic/cultural relations. Conversely, for those women who reported high levels of loneliness, such support was largely absent.

Loneliness often manifested itself as being more profound when the women encountered a problem and were not able to receive adequate social support in the form of practical, material, informational or emotional help. The literature shows that social support can reduce loneliness (Stewart et al. 2011), enhance a sense of belonging (Stewart et al. 2008), and be an important buffer to the psychosocial stress associated with settlement (Simich et al. 2003). The women who lacked support in Adelaide from family and friends were pushed to rely on their own resources or that of service providers and ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973 & 1983) when needed and this was often deemed to be insufficient. This exacerbated their feelings of loneliness. They recall:

Its very hard for me come to Australia because I am alone and nobody help me. It’s very difficult because I am no good, I am sick because it’s too much problem, because I am upset, I am stressed too much and lonely. Because my children is small, my son is sick, and it is big problem. Nobody help me. (Feroza, 30’s, Afghanistan)

Here I feel very difficult because nobody supports me, no family, no friends. Really, I feel lonely and need my community when I need to do something and I need help and when I am facing a problem. (Farrah, 40’s, Iraq)
Many of the women talked about how they felt the loneliest when they were idle and had more time to think such as on weekends, public holidays and when the English language classes they were attending stopped during holidays. When I asked Golnaz (30’s, Iran) to talk about her experiences of loneliness she replied:

No have a job and no have a friend is my most difficult problem! For example, now my classes finished for one month. For one month my English classes finish, ok. Me not have a job ok, and Christmas, not have more money ok. And I’m stay home, stay home, stay home. And, everything finish for Christmas, and I am looking [forwards] again to English class, ok. Even when I am going to English class, 1.30 finish and come back home. Every day the same, same! Boring, boring, boring! Sometime I am crying, because I am looking for a friend…..

Boredom and sitting at home were found to be reoccurring themes during the fieldwork and represented feelings of loneliness as well as a lack of purpose:

It's not good at all feeling lonely. I don't have anything to do, just reading, watching television, the Internet. It's depressing! In Iran I had a really good business and 10 years experience. I had my own apartment, my car, money in my bank account. I had everything, but I left everything! So in Iran, I had a really good life - it should not be something like this. I had a really good life but in Australia my life has changed, it has turned upside down! (Delbar, 30’s, Iran)

Home Alone

Of the ten women who were experiencing loneliness, five were living alone. Two others were living with a young child but referred to themselves as living alone. For five of these women, it was the first time they had lived by themselves and coming home to an empty house (or at least one with no adults) and spending lots of time in solitude, contributed to feelings of loneliness. The emptiness of ‘home’, which was now largely devoid of sociality, was again held in contrast to their previous home life. These women found their situation to be extremely challenging:
Here is the first time to live alone since I was born so it is really hard and I still feel really lonely. (Grace, 20’s, Africa)

Almost all the women who were experiencing loneliness sought to leave the house as often as possible. Here a distinct inside-outside theme emerged where ‘home’ represented loneliness, sadness and a lack of (adult) sociality, a place of ‘too much thinking’ and a form of involuntary confinement:

To me, to settle well will take 20 years. For me, stuck inside myself alone – I don’t have life! To be honest I know my life is here in Australia but I’m hopeless now. I am lonely and feel like I am disabled. (Halieth, 40’s, Burundi)

‘Outside’ on the other hand, represented an opportunity to alleviate loneliness through social engagement and to free the mind of sadness and worry:

I am a single mum. Staying at home is not good for me. I am thinking that’s not good for my mind. I must go out and keep my mind fresh. (Maya, 30’s, Bhutan)

Leaving the house and keeping busy were common coping tactics to relieve loneliness and sadness:

If I stay at home I remember everything and maybe crying or maybe feel sad, you know. You need the contact with the people; you can’t stay at home you know. Yes, I must keep busy. (Farrah, 40’s, Iraq)

I hate to be there because my thinking was especially at home. I try to make myself busy and go outside. When I go outside its better. I am free and thinking free but when I come back here ….. [sighs] (Maryam, 30’s, Iran)

According to most women, experiences of ‘home’ in Adelaide were very different from their pre-migration past. ‘Home’ for example, had previously represented social times such as living with family and sharing meals, socialising and partying with extended family and friends, as well as nurturing, support and security.
Often the home was central to the women’s social life. Maryam (30’s, Iran) clarifies:

> If we had some celebration, in the home we do because outside we are not really comfortable, women are not very comfortable outside in Iran. We can’t wear beautiful dress, make-up and hair, but inside we could do everything, music…. We always have a celebrate together with my family and friends at home.

Vestine’s (30’s, Rwanda) situation was different however. Unlike the other women, both in Adelaide and her pre-migration past, she had a strong preference to be reclusive and at home. Rather than being a place of confinement, ‘home’ represented a place of sanctuary, privacy, and solitude and she sought to be there as much as possible because it was where she felt most safe and secure:

> I feel I like to be at home. To do out, I hate out, I don’t know why but I get tired easily, sometimes if there are many people, sometimes when they are walking around I feel I don’t like to see them.

Vestine had lived alone since she was thirteen years old when her parents and siblings were killed during the Rwandan genocide. Although she got married just prior to coming to Australia, she had not yet had an opportunity to live with her husband who remained in South Africa. She had raised depression and social anxiety, as well as mistrust, as being significant issues that impacted on her everyday life. Unlike the other women experiencing loneliness, Vestine was ambivalent about increasing her social engagement. Whilst she had a desire to build close trusting friendships, she largely chose to withdraw herself from people as a form of respite and protection from sources of distress. The following extract from an interview underscores the complex nature of loneliness and its relationship to ‘depression’ and social dis-engagement:

> Before I was depressed and think I cannot do anything. So especially when I don’t want to meet any people, even I was like, staying in my bed for two weeks, three weeks without eating.

Yet even Vestine was surprised by loneliness, which she said she had not experienced before coming to Australia. Her loneliness was revealed as a form of ‘emotional loneliness’
rather than a broader feeling of ‘social loneliness’ (de Jong Gierveld et al. 2006). According to de Jong Gierveld et al. (2006), emotional loneliness can arise when a person feels a void from the absence of a particular intimate partner or strong emotional attachment (e.g. mother, partner, or close friend) (ibid). Social loneliness can arise when there is an “absence of a broader group of contacts, or an engaging social network (friends, colleagues, and people in your neighbourhood)” (ibid). Emotional loneliness was essentially attributed to Vestine’s separation from her husband. Vestine also suggested that she often felt lonely because she lacked ‘emotional attachment’ to close friends. She said that she only had one friend in Adelaide who she felt she could trust. Vestine largely avoided people and especially situations where people were likely to want to talk to her. For instance, despite members of her church encouraging her to stay back for lunch after the service to socialise she said she never did and instead chose to make a quick exit.

Vestine’s story reflects the complex relationship between living alone, being socially isolated, being reclusive and loneliness. Just because a person is feeling lonely and is socially isolated, it does not mean that they will necessarily seek increased social engagement per se. Likewise, just because a person chooses to be reclusive, it does not mean that they do not experience forms of loneliness.

Most of the ten women who were the focus of this chapter spontaneously mentioned that they had experienced some degree of ‘depression’, either currently or previously, and said that they had been medically diagnosed. Many were taking anti-depressant medication and sedatives for sleeping. Despite this, nine of the women were socially engaged essentially through work, study and voluntary work. They indicated that while they had developed a number of ‘weak’ ties, they had largely been unsuccessful in building ‘strong’ social ties (Granovetter 1973 & 1983). Aside from Vestine, the women in this study who were experiencing loneliness expressed a general desire to increase their social engagement as well as a motivation to do so. More specifically though, all the women in this group expressed a strong desire to build supportive friendships based on trust.
‘I never lived lonely before’

The women who were experiencing loneliness largely perceived themselves to be socially isolated in comparison to their lives prior to settlement. Accounts of loneliness were frequently framed against nostalgic memories of a rich pre-migration social life. Here loneliness was articulated in terms of being relatively socially isolated, quantitatively and qualitatively or, more alone in comparison. Hence, the women’s accounts of loneliness were essentially expressed as a distressing emotional response to disrupted social networks and the disparity between a desired level and quality of social contact and what had been achieved.

Loneliness can also be profound when it is a first time experience. All the women claimed that they had not experienced loneliness in any significant way in their pre-migration life: “I never lived lonely before” (Assa, 20’s, D.R Congo); “You don’t have time to be lonely, you are always with people” (Grace, 20’s, Africa). When the women talked about their diminished social world, experiences of loneliness and lack of support, their situation was frequently juxtaposed and evaluated against memories of their pre-migration social life. The contrast was often very stark. They spoke nostalgically as they described a rich social network that consisted of frequent contact with extended family and close friends, and supportive neighbours and acquaintances. This was how they made sense of their lives its seems, through their social relations and interactions with others. Several women for example, spoke about how they greatly missed being able to walk down a neighbourhood street and be greeted by numerous people who they knew. Typically the women emphasised a strong sense of family and ‘community’ and a more localised, hospitable, supportive, active, intimate and ‘communal’ life. Golnaz (30’s, Iran) provides a picture of her life then:

Here people not come together. For example, at night we are not together. In our country 10, 12 people eat together, sleep together, chat together, share everything, making party, making everything. But here I saw sometimes maybe one month, no one coming. I can’t do anything - it’s very hard!

In comparison to this, the women formed the view that Australia was a society in which people were less open, welcoming and supportive of each other. In their critique they noted that: people stayed in their houses a lot; they didn't offer you food when visiting; you were
asked to BYO when invited to a party; you had to pay for your meal when invited out to
dinner; you had to ring first and ‘make an appointment’ before social visits; and people
commonly chose to live alone. They also observed that: neighbours often did not talk to you;
persons were too busy to nurture relationships; people built fences around their houses;
persons chose not to have children; children moved out of home; people put their parents in
aged care and didn’t look after them; and people were only concerned about themselves and
making money. This is significant because it relocates the ‘problem’ of loneliness from the
individual level to the societal. Loneliness was therefore considered to be a reflection of the
type of society we live in, individualistic and private.

The women strongly suggested that significant discrepancies between their pre-migration
and post-migration social worlds generated an emotional void that accentuated their feelings
of loneliness, sadness and sorrow and even social alienation. Therefore, loneliness was
framed within nostalgic memories of a rich previous social life.

It has been shown that, for the women who formed the focus of this chapter, the process of
time was not a significant element that determined the extent to which they were able to build
close ties and keep loneliness at bay. Many women experienced profound loneliness many
years after they came to Adelaide and, despite the desire to build close ties and friendship
networks, these women had largely been unable to achieve this and the number of their
social ties remained small. It was found that loneliness was inextricably linked to social
isolation or, the degree of fulfilling social contact. In doing so, this study defied the dominant
position in the Social Sciences. Women’s accounts of loneliness were essentially expressed
as a distressing emotional response to separation from family, the absence of friendships
and a general a lack of social support. It logically follows then that the antidote to loneliness
for these women is the comfort of close supportive ties.

Loneliness could impact significantly on everyday life and the process of settlement for these
women. It was also found that whilst loneliness can be a facilitator of social engagement, it
could also be an impediment, because loneliness and its alleviation were complicated by
sadness and emotional distress for many of the women. This is important because the longer
they experience loneliness, the more likely their levels of sadness will increase and lead to or
exacerbate feelings of emotional distress, and the harder it is for them to actively socially
engage, rebuild their social networks, and develop a sense of social connection. The more
socially disconnected these women feel, the more likely they are to experience loneliness. Yet whilst a strong link could be established between family separation and lack of close social ties, social isolation, loneliness, emotional distress, and social alienation, the exact nature of this link remains enigmatic.

Loneliness has implications for policy makers. A lonely and socially alienated woman is much less likely than those who are not, to be able to socially engage confidently and rebuild their social networks. Accordingly, they will have very restricted access to social capital. I assert that much more attention needs to be given to this issue, which has largely been overlooked by academics, policy makers and settlement service providers.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis aimed to problematise the Australian government’s current settlement paradigm in order to understand why so many women of refugee background are experiencing social disconnection and loneliness. On a broad level I have shown how, rather than fostering a sense of belonging to Australian national identity, the overarching assimilationist-integration settlement objective can produce or exacerbate a sense of social disconnection. Numerous issues and erroneous assumptions were found to underpin the government’s version of ‘successful’ settlement. For example, it is assumed that a set of static homogenous values and norms exist, racial diversity erodes trust and social cohesion and that trust will develop through engagement in social cohesion activities. Integration is assumed to be a singular, universal linear process that involves addressing ‘measurable’ indicators and is ‘achieved’ through active participation. It has also been taken for granted that integration can be explained by social capital and that ‘bonding’ relations undermine social cohesion and integration. Relatedly, it is assumed that ‘bridging’ relations will not be difficult to build, and they will facilitate integration and be advantageous in terms of access to valued resources. The assumption that refugees will be able to build social capital through automatic access to ‘bonding’ networks of support then ‘bridging’ relations via ‘participation’ and/or engagement in social cohesion activities is also far-fetched for this particular small group of women.

Policy makers reduce the social relations of refugees and other migrants to the simplistic categories of ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’. Both types of relations are viewed in instrumental terms by way of the extent to which they provide social capital resources and facilitate the process of integration. I assert that the current settlement framework is likely to be ineffective and fraught with problems while it exists within a policy context that favours social ‘bridges’ at the expense of ‘bonding’ relations - both can be critical depending on the person and circumstances. Thus, both elements of network building should be supported and resourced by the government with the view that they can be crucial to the process of positive settlement. I have argued that this settlement framework does not reflect the experiences, concerns and strategies and priorities of the women in this study. I have presented an alternative way of discussing social relations, friendships, belonging and social connections; family living in close proximity, ethnic/cultural ‘community’ relations based on trust, friendly
neighbours who they could rely on if they needed help, and close diverse relations with other people whom they shared an affinity with.

The conceptual foundations of the settlement model, derived from Putnam’s views about social capital, have been shown to be very limited in capturing the complex settlement experiences of the women in this study. In failing to account for the structures that produce disadvantage and exclusion, and issues such as changed family dynamics, mistrust and prejudice, policy makers have overlooked the experiential dimension of settlement.

On a specific level, this thesis aimed to uncover how government policies and practices (or a lack of) can shape the process of network rebuilding. The following key factors were found to impede the process: harsh Family Reunification policies; a lack of resources to ethno-specific and multicultural organisations; misguided and ineffective social cohesion programs; insecure long-term affordable housing; racism and discrimination; and a lack of facilitated opportunities to meet people and build friendships. Hence, policies and procedures were found to disrupt the process of network rebuilding by being divisive and alienating, restrictive, undermining, irrelevant, inadequate or absent. In this way, government policies played a significant role in contributing to the social disconnection and loneliness of many women. The more alienated they feel, the harder it is for them to actively participate in society and rebuild their social networks. Overall, it was found that government policies and procedures did not relate to the lives of the women in this study. This is a problem for both the women and the government.

Family separation, unresolved reunion and family breakdown can produce intensely negative psychological, social and economic consequences for the women. It can limit their desire to socially engage as well as opportunities for network building. Concerns for the welfare of family members ‘left behind’ can also produce anxiety and feelings of shame, guilt and powerlessness. This in turn can reduce a woman’s motivation and capacity to move forward in their lives by suspending their engagement in activities (such as language learning, studies, work or socialising), undertaking new opportunities, and making future plans. Remittances can also place many under great financial pressure, which can reinforce marginalisation. In my view, women who remain separated from key family members are unlikely to feel fully included in society and ‘at home’ in Australia.
The current Government’s withdrawal of funding to ethno-specific organisations is likely to have significant consequences for many people of refugee background. Early reconnection to a co-ethnic ‘community’ is often of the highest priority in order build social relations, speak a common language, access practical and material help, information, emotional support, and to reinforce identity and enhance a sense of belonging. A decline in government funding will exacerbate some of the problems encountered by the women. For example, some had experienced problems locating ‘their’ community often because there was no permanent address or contact person. Some of the women were also disappointed that certain community organisations did not have the time or funds to provide adequate support. Not knowing where else to find help or not feeling comfortable to do so meant that some women missed out on critical support and social opportunities during the early years, and this subsequently impeded the process of their settlement. Early negative experiences in ‘community’ reconnection can influence future levels of attachment and participation as well as wider social engagement. My research found that the women who had support from co-ethnic/cultural relations (and/or family) were much more inclined to trust other people and to have formed durable diverse social relations and networks.

Most of the women had experienced a strong sense of ‘community’ connection in their pre-migration life through their daily interactions with people living in their neighbourhood. They expressed a strong broad desire to become more familiar with their neighbours here however in reality, many found this to be difficult. One of the key issues that shaped network building was the lack of affordable secure housing which meant many had to move house and often neighbourhood multiple times. Social cohesion programs aim to increase social engagement, levels of trust and cooperation between local residents. Nevertheless, it was found that largely they were not relevant to the lives of these women.

Social cohesion policies are based on numerous flawed assumptions such as: ethnic diversity erodes trust and social cohesion; minority ethnic groups are the ‘problem’ and are in need of ‘fixing’; social cohesion facilitates social and economic equity rather than the other way around; and that increased contact between different social groups will lead to more tolerance, understanding and social harmony. One of the best things that the government can do in terms of strengthening neighbourly relations is to direct more investment in public housing and facilitate more equal access to affordable long-term housing. High residential turnover undermines relationship and trust building between neighbours. Local social
cohesion programs also need to be more responsive to the needs of these women. Programs are likely to have limited effect if they do not relate to the lives of the people they are targeting. The implications of irrelevant social cohesion policies and programs for the government are that many women are likely to continue to feel a disconnection from their neighbours and neighbourhood. A person is less likely to feel a sense of belonging to Australia if they don’t feel a connection to their local area and to other residents.

The critical shortfall in the current settlement model is that it overlooks the subjective goals of many women of refugee background. I have shown that a woman’s capacity to resettle in a way that makes sense for their previous experiences may centrally depend on being reunited with family and building friendships with people who they feel comfortable with in order to feel supported, accepted and included in society. I have argued that essentially these women wanted to feel part of a nourishing and inclusive social world with family and friends. Generally speaking, what they wanted was to be reunited with family members, to be able to gain easy access to an ethnic-cultural ‘community’ that has the means to provide adequate support, and to have contingent ethnic/cultural ‘community’ relations based on trust. They also wanted to have supportive, friendly neighbours who could be relied on if necessary and to have more opportunities to meet other people in order to develop trusting friendships one-on-one in an informal safe and friendly environment. So, while it was found that most of the women in this study had achieved the outward markers of ‘successful’ settlement in terms of their English language competency and active participation in work and study, many were still struggling to fulfill their settlement goals and as a result, did not feel a sense of social inclusion or indeed a sense of belonging to Australian national identity.

Whilst the process of rebuilding a social world was found to be relatively smooth for some women, for many others it was found to be problematic and complicated by a number of factors and to varying degrees. The women had differing abilities, desires and opportunities to re-establish and build relations with family, ‘community’, neighbours and others. Pre-migration experiences, the political and social environment, relational issues, as well as their intentions and desires for the future determined their capacity.

Unsurprisingly, the women who were single, without family living here, and who lacked supportive co-ethnic ties, found network rebuilding to be the most challenging. In reality, many women found it difficult to build close diverse relations. Whilst participation in work,
study and volunteering increased their social engagement, typically it did not result in the development of close durable friendships. This meant that a number of women were experiencing profound loneliness and social disconnection and were fundamentally feeling ‘unsettled’.

Network building did not necessarily become easier over time as the women learnt the language and expanded their social engagement. Often there were just not enough opportunities to socialise with others in a comfortable setting where they could build relations one-by-one. Issues of mistrust were found to influence the desires of some women for social engagement. In sum, multiple forces combined to complicate network building for many women, some of whom experienced significant forms of social alienation and loneliness. This in turn could create or exacerbate emotional distress, which was found to complicate further social engagement. Nostalgic comparisons of a rich pre-migration social world were also found to compound experiences of loneliness and social alienation for these women.

What can be done to better address social disconnection among women of refugee background? On a broad level, much more attention, effort and resources are required from the Federal and state governments, local councils and settlement service providers, to enable and support people of refugee background to rebuild their social networks in ways that are central to their everyday social well-being. More specifically, Family Reunification needs to be prioritised by increasing the number of places and facilitating a simpler, more flexible, cheaper and quicker process. More needs to be done to support vulnerable families. Information needs to be provided about opportunities to meet people who these women are likely to feel most comfortable with at the earliest possible stage and this might be best provided though settlement/English language services providers. This information should include contact details about ethnic-cultural groups, local ‘community’ social activities/groups as well as other facilitated social engagement opportunities. Social networks don’t just happen by chance; they must be created, built and maintained. In the face of numerous challenges, and the absence of informal opportunities, facilitated social engagement can provide a key source for intimate relationship building.

For the reasons I have outlined I conclude that the Australian government’s settlement model is defective. It undermines the re-establishment of relations with family and people of similar ethnic/cultural background, which suggests the assumption that this will inevitably lead to
increased contact with the wider population. The current political and social conditions however, have produced an environment where diverse relations do not easily evolve through informal interactions and otherwise there is a lack of facilitated opportunities. The Government’s approach is therefore likely to disrupt the process of network rebuilding and settlement and contribute to feelings of loneliness and social alienation. Accordingly, this will ultimately produce a feeling of disconnection to society and Australian national identity. This means that government policies and programs, which are designed to facilitate ‘successful’ settlement, are failing to fulfill their own agenda, as well as the crucial social needs of many women of refugee background.
References


Department of Social Services (2014b) *Funding Round Summary - Families and Communities Programme: Diversity and Social Cohesion*, 19 June 2014.


Department of Social Services (2014d) *Families and Communities Programme: Settlement Services Guidelines Overview*, May 2014.


Gilad L (1990) *The Northern Route: An Ethnography of Refugee Experiences*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland: Canada.


Lenette C (2013) ‘Mistrust and refugee women who are lone parents in resettlement contexts’, Qualitative Social Work, 0:0, pp 1-16.


Ramsden R & Ridge D (2012) ‘‘It was the Most Beautiful Country I have Ever Seen’: The Role of Somali Narratives in Adapting to a New Country’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol 26:2, pp 226-246.


