

**Working Conditions of
Vietnamese-Australian People
With Limited English Language
Skills**

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FOURTH YEAR HONOURS THESIS

**WORKING CONDITIONS OF VIETNAMESE-AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE WITH
LIMITED ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS**



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CERTIFICATION

I certify that the work contained in this thesis is my own, and that it contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or equivalent institution. I believe, to the best of my knowledge, that this thesis contains no material previously published or written by other persons, except where due reference is made in the thesis.



21/10/99.

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SYNOPSIS

This dissertation examines a number of aspects of the Vietnamese-Australian community and traces their progress from the mid-1970s when the bulk of these migrants were refugees. The rates of unemployment over the past two decades for this group are the focus of much research and the results of this research are discussed at length. Similarly, the types of employment that these people entered are studied in depth by eminent researchers, and these results are also discussed.

The main focus of this study, however, concerns the working conditions of members of the Vietnamese-Australian community who are not very proficient in the English language. A number of these people were interviewed for this project and produced some very important data. The interviewees talked of their working conditions, which included their rates of pay, and the entitlements that they should legally receive, but do not. There are a perceived number of reasons for the plight of these workers, and the people who endure such pay and conditions discuss these reasons.

This paper looks at who are these employers that are quite literally cheating their employees. It was discovered that these employers were, in the majority of cases, Vietnamese-Australians who were exploiting the most vulnerable members of their own community. It is found that these employers are not perturbed about their illegal operations and make no great effort to hide the fact that they are operating illegally.

This thesis is critical of the government and the trade unions for what could best be described as a lack of concern for the Vietnamese-Australian community. That such illegal practices are flourishing on the backs of these unfortunate workers is a sad

indictment on our government, unions, and the departments responsible for enforcing the compliance of labour laws.

A number of observations as to the illegal activities of the employers are made, and the lack of interest shown by both the governments and unions. Some recommendations are made in regard to alerting the public about the scandalous practices of these employers, and suggest that some Vietnamese-Australian people be trained as inspectors with the power to walk in unannounced to any workplace and check the working conditions that apply there.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years Vietnamese settlers in Australia have suffered from high unemployment rates - officially around 30 per cent - over three times the national rate for the Australian population. A number of studies have been conducted in an attempt to find the reason for such a difference in the unemployment rates between the Vietnamese-Australian community and the rest of Australia. This study intends to build on the previous work carried out by prominent researchers by looking at the working conditions that a particular section of the Vietnamese-Australian community find themselves in.

The purpose of this study is to begin finding out who are the Vietnamese-Australian people that are employed in the various non-union factories and shops, what are the working conditions and why are they working there? These are some of the issues that will be uncovered for analysis and discussion. The people concerned are the 'invisible workers' who are not the subject of a great deal of serious study. Because they are outside the mainstream of workers they are ignored by governments, unions, and to some extent even by their own Vietnamese-Australian organisations.

Unlike other migrants who came to Australia of their own free will, the first Vietnamese people who came to resettle in Australia were refugees. They were fleeing a repressive regime. As is evident in the literature, there has never been a time when these people were welcomed with open arms to this country. It was more the case of fulfilling our international obligations regarding the accepted number of refugees. The fact they were from Asia triggered lingering doubts as to whether the abolition of the White Australia Policy was a good idea. Since those early days little

has changed in the status of the Vietnamese-Australian people. Viviani (1996: 2) notes that they are, on almost every measure, suffering more than other Australians. They have the highest rates of unemployment, and along with Aborigines, are the most frequent targets of racist behaviour.

There are perceptions held within society regarding Vietnamese-Australians, which in part are the result of the views expressed by influential figures about the 'Asianisation' of Australia. These expressed views tend to promote discrimination against the Vietnamese-Australians

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

When South Vietnam fell to the communists in 1975, a dilemma was created for Australia which was related, in the first part, to the question of its obligations to those Vietnamese who were seeking refuge; secondly, what to do with the increasing numbers of Vietnamese 'boat-people' who were landing on Australia's shores. It was only in 1973 that the White Australia Policy had been officially abolished, and there was still a large number of Australians who continued to fear an Asian invasion and the consequences that might have had on our political and social values.

--- the fear that a significant change in the racial composition of the Australian people would inevitably mean the erosion of deeply held political and social values. The other part of the threat mentality was related to this: the fear of the vulnerability of Australia to violent invasion from Asia (Viviani 1996:7).

Viviani writes that the fear of the invasion of the 'boat-people' was unfounded as the number of those people who arrived in such manner totaled 4,000 over a twenty year period, 1975 – 1995 (ibid: 158). It may well have been that Australians were living in the shadow of the White Australian Policy and the politicians were nervous about which way to jump. They may well have been concerned with a voter backlash should the government of the day be seen to encourage more Asian refugees to come here than was necessary to meet their international obligations.

The Whitlam Labor Government offered a “niggardly” response on the numbers of Vietnamese it permitted to enter Australia by 1975 (Lawrence 1983:1; Viviani 1996:8). According to Lawrence (1983:1) and Viviani (1984:61) a mere 366 Vietnamese were allowed into Australia before the fall of Saigon, of which 283 were orphans. There were a number of reasons for the Whitlam policies. There was a desire by the Labor Government to avoid offending Hanoi. Second, a large scale evacuation would be seen as a lack of faith in the Vietnamese Communist Party at a time when Whitlam was calling Hanoi’s victory a vindication of Labor’s policies on Vietnam (Lawrence 1983:4). There was also a fear that to bring large numbers of anti-communists to Australia could create political havoc and there was a fear that their agitation for the liberation of their homeland could well cause friction between Australia and Vietnam (*ibid.*).

The Whitlam government had no concrete policy on refugees, and according to Lawrence (1983:5) and Viviani (1984:55-57), it was coming under fire from the Liberal party over Whitlam’s favouring of Hanoi. Whitlam suspected the Liberals were clamouring for a greater refugee intake as they were rabidly anti-communist and were likely to favour the Liberal Party when voting. This had been the case with refugees from Europe after World War II (*ibid.*). There were other factors involved as well, including unemployment, which was of great concern after the recession of 1974;

In subsequent years the official unemployment level in Australia has exceeded 6 per cent contrasting with the 1-2 per cent level of the 1950s and 60s. This reduction in migration also reflected the Whitlam Government’s conviction that Australia could maintain good relations with its Asian neighbours, and that a

bigger population was therefore not essential for defence. The new program also reflected a new perception of the problems migrants faced in adjusting to Australian society, even though Grassby's notion of 'multiculturalism' was replacing the assimilationist assumptions of the 1950' and 60s (Lawrence 1983: 3-4).

Whitlam was to later boast that his government's reforms in immigration and ethnic affairs were responsible for migrants preferring the Labor Party to the Liberal Party (Whitlam 1985: 507). He was relentless in his counter-attacks, blaming a succession of coalition governments for Australia's disastrously wrong intervention in the Vietnam conflict (Viviani 1984: 57). There were serious divisions within the Labor Party on the refugee problems, as there were within the Union movement. Many believed that Australia's involvement in the war was a blunder, and unlike the United States, had no responsibility to the Vietnamese refugees, while others argued that because of Australia's involvement there was a moral responsibility to accept some refugees. The Government certainly was not sending any clear messages to the community regarding immigration policies.

Right throughout the period 1975-1978, Viviani (1984:53) writes that Australian governments avoided making any major commitment to the settlement of Vietnamese refugees in Australia, and that three distinct periods emerged. The first covered the period 1975 to early 1978, when the Australian governments made no commitment to settle refugees in Australia. The height of the refugee crisis occurred in the second period from early 1978 to mid-1979 when attention was focused on the problems that were besetting Southeast Asia, and the first of the boat-people arrived on Australian shores. This period was one of political struggle over these issues, and ended with

Australia accepting significant numbers of refugees. The third period saw the issues of refugees and resettlement disappear from the public agenda. There were still lingering doubts among the Australian population about abolishing the White Australia policy, and there were still divisions within the Australian community regarding Australia's role in the Vietnam War.

The inflow of refugees from Vietnam presented Australia, a nation itself largely settled by migrants, with new problems regarding their entry and settlement. The demand that Australia should settle significant numbers of Vietnamese inevitably raised deep-seated Australian sensitivities about Asian migration and rekindled the political divisions of the Vietnam War period (Viviani 1984:53-54).

There can be little doubt that this was a difficult period for the Australian Government, and its political stance would impact on Australia's relations with the ASEAN countries. Lawrence (1983: 8) writes that some wild statements were forthcoming from a number of politicians. Clyde Cameron, for example, insisted that the Vietnamese arrivals were not genuine refugees, but were right-wing activists or those who had made their fortunes on the black market, some even criminals. He also intimated that these refugees were bringing in an incurable strain of venereal disease. Tom Uren claimed that the reason for the Vietnamese coming to Australia was for the 'soft life' to be found here (ibid). Although not the official views of the Labor Party, these views found favour with a section of the community at that time, and there is evidence that such views are held by many today – perhaps some of the votes for Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party indicate that these sensitivities to Asian migration are truly deep seated.

There were many reasons for the rise of Pauline Hanson, not the least of these being her appeal to a racist element in our culture. She has continually attacked the two most visible groups in our society, Aborigines and Asians, accusing both of being non-contributors and other things besides.(Bullard 1998).

One of the advantages the Vietnamese refugees had over earlier migrants was that the earlier migrants had set up their own media, both print and radio from scratch, whereas the Vietnamese had little difficulty in establishing their own assorted media as all the facilities and networks were in place. Ethnic newspapers, radio and television tended to make these ethnic minorities feel less alienated, enabled them to keep in touch with events in their homeland, and helped to give them a political voice here in Australia. Jupp (1984) states that broadcasting in languages other than English began in 1958, was staffed by community members and financed by ethnic organisations. It was to be fully twenty years before the ethnic communities were to get their television station. The advent of the television station Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) in January 1978 was another factor in assisting migrants in their resettlement, although there were many opposed to the multi-cultural aspects of SBS. Despite the official abandonment of the assimilation policy, there were many influential people who found the idea of multiculturalism unpalatable. Protests came from many quarters, stating that this was a divisive policy, accusing it of being run by elitist intellectuals, and claiming it to be the most 'sinister' broadcasting development ever to take place in Australia. These accusations came from the likes of Brigadier Greville, the Chief of the Army in South Australia, the former chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board, Kerry Packer of Australian Consolidated Press, and Senator Townley (Jupp 1984:106-107).

These arguments could be summarised as: divisiveness, cost, and lack of relevance, with the addition that the present television is good enough for most of us (even if it is not very good) and therefore, migrants should not want anything superior, an argument from a truly philistine position. In addition, Senator Townley is not anti-migrant, he is simply anti-migrant language and anti-migrant culture; that is to say, he does not mind migrants so long as they are totally assimilated (Jupp 1984:108).

The Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA) produced a report on multicultural television in 1986 and detailed the policies and objectives of the Special Broadcasting System (SBS), and some of these objectives are worthy of mention:

- *to assist Australian residents from all ethnic groups to maintain their languages and develop their cultures.....*
- *to promote tolerance and mutual understanding between the members of Australian society and an appreciation of the diverse, multicultural nature of our society.....*
- *to present to non-English speaking residents of Australia programs in community languages, and at the same time to encourage and facilitate the learning of English and other languages.*
- *to provide information and advice on the rights and obligations of residents in Australia and on other matters which will assist non-English-speaking migrants to settle.*
- *to encourage the learning of English (Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs 1986).*

Egalitarian in principle, these objectives were something that the very frustrated ethnic communities believed were missing from the Australian Broadcasting

Commission's (ABC) and commercial radio programming. The ethnic communities had given voice to their frustrations with the ABC through their print media, accusing the ABC of ignoring migrants in their programming and simply catering for the Anglo-Australian population (ibid:109). Jupp (1984) states that behind the scenes "...there is an elite which operates with low visibility..", who promote the status quo and who see multi-culturalism as pandering to various minority groups who are unrepresentative of the general community.

The attitude towards other cultures that was so often expressed was one of irrelevance, 'another time and another place', or one of 'no real value': in other words, a philistine attitude towards the languages and cultures which one in three Melbournians holds dearly as past and present sources of identity, in addition to his or her loyalty to Australia. The argument against multi-lingual and multi-cultural television that was often used was that it was divisive and this was constantly repeated (ibid: 112).

Despite these prevailing attitudes the Fraser Government persisted with the ethnic broadcasting proposal, and, in fact, increased funding substantially for both television and radio. The Government also allowed SBS television to use the facilities of the ABC in areas not served by SBS at times when the ABC was not broadcasting (Jupp 1984:112-113). SBS has achieved remarkable success in the twenty years of operation, and continues to serve the ethnic communities well.

The period 1975-1995 saw 158,512 Vietnamese settlers arrive in Australia. In the early years of 1975-1980 Australia had a strong manufacturing industry, particularly in Victoria and New South Wales, and those early refugees had little trouble finding employment, irrespective of English language skills. However, the increase in the

intake of refugees – 6,800 refugees arrived between 1975 and 1978, while the next three years saw the arrival of 35,915 refugees (Bureau of Immigration and Population Research 1991: 3) – and the recession in 1982-83 saw the beginning of employment problems for those born in non-English speaking countries, including the Vietnamese community (Brooks and Williams 1995:8-10). This was a period when jobs in the traditional manufacturing (particularly in the motor vehicle industry), construction, wholesale and retail trade, and in community services were being lost by the thousands (Viviani 1984: 216).

As the decade progressed there was a decline in manufacturing industry overall, with many companies relocating offshore in search of greater profits for their shareholders (Swan and Bodie 1999). Nguyen D.T.(1994: 26), using data from DEET, details that between 1971 and 1991 most industries had some growth, while the manufacturing industry declined by 1.31%. This had a decisive impact on the Vietnamese workers as most were employed in those industries that were declining. The Vietnamese were unable to find jobs as easily as before. Viviani (1984) points out that the 1981 census revealed that for those Vietnamese in the labour market, 73.7 per cent were in the workforce and 36.3 per cent were unemployed. Of those in work, almost 70 per cent were employed as tradesmen, labourers and process workers, which was more than double the rate for Australians in those occupations (Viviani 1984: 210, Nguyen D.T. 1994: 23, Phat, Thai 1996: 53).

Changes to the structure of the economy and an increasingly competitive job market had a more severe impact on the Indochinese community than any other group of people in Australia. Viviani (1996: 2) notes that on almost every measure these people are suffering more than other Australians. They have the highest rates of

unemployment, and along with Aborigines, are the most frequent targets of racist behaviour. There is still a strong perception, dating back to the 1950s and 1960s, that Australia is a destination target for the so-called “Asian Hoardes”, the “Red Menace” and the “Yellow Peril”. Despite the hysterical press treatment at the time, no such treat eventuated. This theory has never been given a chance to die a natural death as every so often it is resurrected with the arrival of some more boat people to our shores. Even though only 2,000 boat people have arrived between 1976 and 1989, the press wildly distorts the issue every time a boat arrives with illegal migrants. As Viviani (1996: 11) writes, the number is tiny in comparison to the number of onshore illegal migrants— over 80,000 people.

Since other countries have received on their borders literally hundreds of thousands claiming asylum and have coped somehow with these, it is surprising how sensitive Australian politicians and bureaucrats are to this small number of arrivals by boat. This sensitivity is not founded on any credible fears of an influx of arrivals because the experience of the greatest exodus in the history of Southeast Asia simply did not result in such an influx in Australia. Rather it is founded on fears of adverse public opinion (*ibid.*).

Kalantzis (1994), Hawthorne (1994), and Viviani (1996) write of the negative perceptions that abound in the community regarding Indochinese migrants. This in part results from the views of prominent figures such as the historian Professor Geoffry Blainey, Bruce Ruxton of the Returned Services League (RSL), and radio commentator Ron Casey. (Viviani 1996: 39). Many Australians are willing to accept migrants as long as they willing to become more like ‘us’-ie., by speaking English, conforming to the mainstream social and cultural norms, by ignoring the political problems in their homeland, and to avoid living in ghettos. Viviani believes that there

is a "...bedrock of popular attitudes among Anglo-Australians that fears the ghetto as the symbol of all that can go wrong with migrant settlement and integration" (ibid.). Images that fuel these views are the sights of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the inter-ethnic massacres in Rwanda, and the continuous problems occurring in the black ghettos of America.

It is views such as these that lead to discrimination against those who appear different from the Anglo-Australian. This discrimination becomes entrenched in many important areas of life, including employment. Jamieson (1986) shows that employment is a major area of discrimination, and it is one where people were most frightened of taking any action against perceived discrimination. In a time of high unemployment, few people with jobs are prepared to complain of discrimination for fear of repercussions, which could jeopardise their jobs.

Strange results from a survey conducted by Evans and Kelley (1988) offer contradictory evidence to that obtained by Jamieson (1986). Evans and Kelly found that hirers did not discriminate. Despite this denial of discrimination, they continue, stating that when there is discrimination (described as a negative attitude) the principle reason is usually a lack of English. This discrimination is said to have occurred mainly in metropolitan areas and was felt more by the Vietnamese than Greeks or Italians, and by males more than females.

Examples are detailed by Jamieson (1986), as a result of her research into discrimination, highlighting the difficulties encountered by non-English speaking peoples. People talked of unrealistic English language requirements used to discriminate against them when they applied for jobs. In these cases the applicants had friends working in these organisations, so they knew exactly how much English

was required to do the job. “For example, a demand that a worker be required to read and write English when there was no reading and writing involved in the job was seen as to be very discriminatory by non-English speaking people” (Jamieson 1986: 17). People told of applying for vacancies that they knew existed, but when they got to the employment office they were told that there were no vacancies.

Many Vietnamese complained that they were discriminated against on the grounds of ethnicity, with employers telling them they were too small and not strong enough to do various jobs. Another incident involved a Vietnamese person who sat for a selection test for a government authority. The person did very well, passed, was interviewed, and subsequently offered a job as a clerk behind a counter. “The offer was later withdrawn on the grounds that the authority felt that if a Vietnamese employee was seen by the public it would not be good for customer relations as it would lead to criticism from other ethnic groups” (ibid.).

A large number of Vietnamese working in factories believed that they were frequently given the heaviest and dirtiest jobs because they were migrants and because they did not speak English very well. They believed that non-migrant workers in their sections were given lighter and less unpleasant jobs. Jamieson (1986: 20) makes the point that most migrants had not heard of the Equal Opportunity Act and the principle of Equal Opportunity was something that did not operate in their countries of origin. Even when the victimisation provisions of the Act were explained, these migrants could not be persuaded that they would be protected if they complained about discrimination.

Jamieson (1986) makes a number of recommendations to help migrants overcome their fear of complaining should they believe they are being discriminated against.

One recommendation is that the Equal Opportunity Act be translated into the various migrant languages spoken in Australia.

... We would suggest that if the Equal Opportunity Act is to be utilised by non-English speaking people then the translation of pamphlets will not be sufficient on its own. Videos in community languages should be prepared and there should be regular and frequent publicity in community languages on 3EA, on television and through the ethnic press. Such information would need to emphasise cases where successful outcomes have been achieved (ibid.).

Other recommendations included the employment of ethnic and outreach workers who could inform the ethnic communities about the Act, encourage and assist people in lodging complaints of discrimination, and advocate on their behalf should they lodge a complaint.

Another area where discrimination against Vietnamese youth is rampant is in the juvenile justice institutions. Brady (1998) writes that Father Peter Norden, the director of Jesuit Social Services, indicated that Vietnamese youth made up one quarter of the young people in juvenile justice institutions, yet they only make up 1.3 per cent of the Victorian population. Father Norden believes that the Vietnamese youths are not committing more crimes than other youths, but are subject to much greater scrutiny, and are being charged with offences that others in the community commit with impunity. The article raises a number of serious issues of great concern to the Vietnamese community, and should be of concern to the whole community.

Figures released by the Catholic Commission for Justice Development and Peace estimated that 139, or 5 per cent, of Victoria's male prisoners were Vietnamese. It is believed the Justice Department has identified the big

increase in the rate of incarceration of the Vietnamese community and is studying the new trend, ... Father Norden, who was aware of the study, said that the discrimination had serious consequences (Brady 1998: 11).

The manager of the Vietnamese Community Support Unit in Collingwood, Mr. Jay Jordens, was also concerned with this trend, and questioned why the police had established an Asian Squad but had not singled out other minority groups. He pointed out that with a youth unemployment figure of about 80 per cent, some of the Vietnamese youth were bound to get into some trouble (ibid.).

Nguyen Cam (1996) writes about a very fundamental problem the Vietnamese face in Australia, and that is trying to understand what is required of them in this country, as there is a very large gap between official government policy and public opinion which leads to a great deal of prejudice against them (Nguyen Cam 1996: 50). This prejudice can even come from those with good intentions, such as treating Vietnamese people like "...African-Bushmen in the last century" by explaining how to work light-switches, electric fans and the like. Most Vietnamese come from an urbanised environment, and because of prolonged association with the French Colonialism and, later, the American forces are familiar with Western type consumer lifestyles. They have also proven their capacity to handle sophisticated technology throughout the War. As Nguyen Cam points out, although the Vietnamese may come from a poor country they have not come from an uncivilised one.

.....the fairly innocuous practice of underestimating the sophistication and skills of Vietnamese refugees among the general Australian public may leave them susceptible to the insidious propaganda of some anti-Asian immigration

crusaders who seek to propagate the view that migrants from Third World countries are *ipso facto* not equipped to live in a country like Australia (ibid.).

Another area where prejudice and ignorance flourish is that of employment, where the qualifications and experience of Vietnamese professionals and skilled workers are basically ignored by prospective employers. As noted by Nguyen Cam (1996), Viviani (1994), Jones and McAllister (1991), Nguyen Trieu Dan (1994), Brookes and Williams (1995), and Hawthorne (1994), only a small number of Vietnamese gain non-labouring jobs.

Stevens (1998) writes that newly arrived migrants who also have a low level of English language skills perform poorly in the labour market, although there is a variation in the unemployment rates depending on the category of migrant, the worst figures being attributed to the refugee category. This is true in the early years of settlement, but after ten years their unemployment rates appear to be no different to those of other classes of migrants, although the findings are not conclusive (Stevens 1998: 42). Other research indicates that the Vietnamese, irrespective of the length of time in Australia, continue to experience extremely high unemployment rates compared to other migrants or native Australians. According to Phat (1996: 27), the Vietnamese have the highest rate of unemployment out of all country of birth groups - 7.7% of Australian-born unemployed people compared to 31.9% Vietnamese-born people. The restructuring and relocation of manufacturing industries in the Western suburbs of Melbourne are responsible for the loss of jobs in the area - an area the Vietnamese have traditionally relied on for employment (ibid.).

From about the time Australia abandoned its White Australia Policy, there have been those who, for good reasons and bad, voiced their disapproval over any further immigration. With the arrival of Indochinese refugees at the end of the Vietnam War, the numbers of those objecting to any further immigration rose considerably, and there is today a section of the community who continue to hold such views. Unfortunately, a number of these people are not so much anti-immigration as anti-Asian immigration. While there has been those who have never seen the wisdom in abolishing the White Australia Policy - people such as Professor Blainey, Bruce Ruxton, and more recently Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party, there are a number of academics who are now expressing the view that Australia is losing its identity through its multicultural policies.

If there is going to be a serious debate on immigration then it will need to be a debate in which real issues are addressed. Katherine Betts (1999), labels those who are comfortable with the current multicultural policies as the 'new class', elitist intellectuals who ignore public opinion. She describes these new class intellectuals as "... simply people who have learned to use language in a certain way. They are not necessarily cleverer, wiser, or even better read, than other people" (ibid: 79). As Henderson (1999) points out, political labeling has been around for a long time, but that it was usually the left who tended to do the labeling. Now it is the critics of the left who are prone to political labeling, and as Henderson writes "She [Katherine Betts] uses the term 'new class' to first identify and then criticise her opponents" (Henderson 1999: 13). Betts appears deeply concerned about 'foreigners' in our midst, and the access they have to the law:

In Australia the role of the courts in affecting immigration decisions has grown more important over the past twenty years. This is partly because there are more foreigners onshore who can access the courts, partly because the laws have changed in ways that make it easier for foreigners to do this, and partly because the values of the judiciary themselves have changed. Judges and lawyers, along with other members of the new class, are now more favourably disposed to the needs of foreigners anxious to claim residence in Australia than they were in the 1960s and early 1970s (Betts 1999: 8-9).

Betts continues with a theory of conspiracy, suggesting that the Australian growth lobby, consisting principally of the housing and construction industry, and all those industries that depend on them, and the ethnic leaders wanting to maintain and/or increase their numbers in the community. Also there are the church leaders and other groups who advocate for a higher intake of refugees. According to Betts (1999) the Catholic Church in America has sacralised immigration, and is fearful that something similar could happen in Australia.

Further perceived negative aspects of immigration appear in Miriam Dixson's book, *The Imaginary Australian*, although many of the issues discussed by the writer are issues which need to be confronted and debated. Dixson (1999) argues that Australia needs to protect its Anglo-Celtic core culture to function for what she describes as a 'holding' center for the emerging and newly diverse Australia,

I strongly agree that a revitalised Australian civic identity, with its citizenship protocols, its institutional practices and rhetoric, is indeed essential. But civic identity must be deeply rooted in the core culture. Crucial for ongoing cohesion, this implicit, informal dimension of citizenship, while virtually ignored in the liberal theory prevailing in Australia, underpins the viability of

civil society. For the latter the core culture provides a prime source of endurance and of feeling (Dixson 1999: 8).

There appears to be something implicit in this statement that undermines those migrants who have made Australia their new home. Perhaps her assumptions need to be challenged and debated. Dixson seems to be uncomfortable with Australia's geography, and the notion that Australia is part of Asia provokes her to make strange comparisons with other countries. Both theories put forward would appear to be a regurgitation of earlier anti-immigration theories. For example, Blainey (1984a) stated;

...the danger to democracy, however, does not necessarily come from the Asian immigrants themselves. It comes more from the tensions imposed on free institutions if the community becomes too divided over cultural and racial questions. Above all, the danger to democracy comes from the fact that the new migrants, if unwanted, remain second-rate citizens with an inadequate share of freedom and opportunities (*cited* in Hassan and Tan 1986: 31).

And from Hay (1979):

... Asian refugees are the new Aborigines. They neither look like the dominant White Australian population nor subscribe for most part to the same religious, social or political goals (*cited* in Hassan and Tan 1986:30).

Although there are conflicts raging around the world, waged under the banner of ethnicity and nationalism, there is no hard evidence to indicate that Australian society is fragmenting. When Australia abolished its White Australia Policy and opened the way for people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to migrate here, it was a positive move that has delivered many benefits to the country. The multicultural make-up of the society is proving to be one of Australia's great achievements and strengths;

The introduction of people of varied national and cultural backgrounds has brought an increased awareness of social conditions in other countries. New ideas and tastes have contributed to a breaking down of traditional, often somewhat provincial, Australian attitudes. Migrants have introduced new or superior products to the benefit of the existing population. The successful growth of Australia's wine industry has owed much to immigration, and migrants have been responsible for setting up many good and generally unpretentious restaurants, which offer a wide variety of national cuisines. (Smith 1972: 95).

Samuel (1972) writes that immigrants contribute to a faster economic growth and greater productivity because they have, in most cases, fewer dependents to support than the average Australian. Samuel also suggests that "...immigrants are by nature likely to be more innovative, imaginative, ambitious, creative and flexible people than stay at homes" (Samuel 1972: 88).

Describing migrants rather negatively as foreigners, or suggesting that they have the potential to destroy Australian society, is very unfair and does nothing for the argument against migrant intake. The most visible migrants in Australia's society are the Asians, principally the Vietnamese, and these are the ones who suffer most when migrants are described in a negative manner. What is not discussed by Betts or Dixson is the desire by the Vietnamese migrants to become Australian citizens. According to Davidson (1997a) these migrants have the highest citizenship acceptance rate next to the British migrants (*cited in* Roberts 1998: 8). The majority of these citizenships are taken out as soon as the migrant is eligible to apply, so their total commitment to Australia could not be more obvious.

Throughout this research project the high calibre of the Vietnamese people has been most evident. Despite the hardships they have suffered in their homeland, their generosity, optimism, loyalty, and the ability to get on with their lives is quite inspirational.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

This thesis has the specific intention of gaining information about the working conditions of the Vietnamese-Australian workers, in particular those who lack confidence in their English language skills. There was a need to identify the reasons that contribute to their acceptance of conditions that are less than the minimum approved standards. The method employed to gain this information was through qualitative research, incorporating direct interviewing. As discussed by Holloway (1997), there are a number of different types of qualitative research which have common characteristics. While using similar procedures, differences in data collection and analysis do exist. Holloway lists a number of elements that are recognised as qualitative;

- Research focuses on the everyday life of people in natural settings.
- The data have primacy; the theoretical framework is not predetermined but derives directly from the data.
- Qualitative research is context-bound. This means that the researchers have to be sensitive to the context of the research and immerse themselves in the setting and situation.
- Qualitative researchers focus on the *emic* perspective, the views of the people involved in the research and their perceptions, meanings and interpretations.
- Qualitative researchers describe in detail; they analyse and interpret; they use ‘thick description’.

- The relationship between the researcher and the researched is close and based on a position of equality as human beings.
- Data collection and data analysis generally proceed together and interact (Holloway 1997: 5).

These elements were present throughout the research for this thesis, and it was apparent throughout the interviews that the interviewees were comfortable with the procedures. They told their stories with an honesty and openness that indicated a confidence in the project.

Holloway further states that to understand the participant's interpretations, it is important to become familiar with their world, and has an important message for those seeking knowledge about other groups or cultures;

The culture does not just consist of the physical environment but also of particular ideologies, values and ways of thinking of its members. Researchers need sensitivity to interpret what they observe and hear. Human beings are influenced by their experiences; therefore qualitative methods encompass the exploration processes and changes over time in the culture or subculture under study (ibid: 7).

Most interviewees were obtained through initial introduction by friends, after which that subject would introduce another friend willing to be interviewed – a snowball effect. Some individual subjects and organisations were contacted directly by the researcher. It must be stated here that the author of this dissertation is completely inexperienced in the art of interviewing, and this may well be evident to the experienced researcher.

This research is conducted systematically through the collection of information and explanations about each case. “Research is fundamentally about understanding and

explaining – about knowing” (Wadsworth 1997: 6). The research conducted for this thesis will provide evidence that there are serious problems faced by the Vietnamese community in the workplace. The results of this research should prove very valuable to the Vietnamese community and their various associations in their attempts to achieve equal footing with the rest of the community, particularly in the area of employment.

“... if you want to know what people are doing, and why, start by talking to them” (ibid. 10). This principle was applied throughout the research for this thesis, where the main source of information was gained through a series of interviews. These interviews were conducted with workers themselves, as well as with leading individuals in the Vietnamese community, a number of organisations, including the Australian-Vietnamese Women’s Welfare Association. Discussions, of both formal and informal natures, were also held with Vietnamese-Australian students from Victoria University.

Kahn and Cannell (1975), when discussing language difficulties, state that; “It has been estimated that the average individual knows less than 10 per cent of the more than half a million words in the English language” (ibid: 10). When dealing with migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds, there are bound to be even more difficulties. This is not to say that language is the most, or the only, criteria to a positive research outcome, for as W.H. Geddes (1989) notes; “Knowing the language of another person is simply not enough if one is to begin to appreciate the nuances of their view of the world” (ibid: 121).

Because of the personal nature of the research, a number of potential subjects were reluctant to give an interview. This was quite understandable when considering the politics of the country they had come from, a country where the sight of a tape recorder coupled with a request for an interview could be very frightening. Despite assurances about confidentiality, some were fearful that the information given could be later used against them. Those who volunteered to be interviewed were given assurances of confidentiality (see appendix 1).

The interviews were basically face to face meetings in which the conversation flowed, and questions were asked and answers given by both the interviewer and the interviewee. "This reciprocity not only can't be avoided but is actually necessary to any human interaction" (ibid: 39). Reciprocity, it is noted, also includes shared values and purposes, and is essential in gaining the trust of the interviewee. The person needs to know that the interview will not bring harm to them, and that the whole exercise will be worthwhile.

The questions are extremely important. They must be answerable and should be structured in such a way as to allow for a meaningful response. If they are unclear or ambiguous then the interviewee may feel uncomfortable and become reluctant to continue the interview in the right spirit. The questions asked in this research were consistent in nature for each group (see Appendix 2), and were asked in the same manner so that true comparisons could be made. Van Maanen (1979) suggests that qualitative methods are similar interpretations people make in their daily lives; "The data we collect and act upon in everyday life are of the same sort of qualitative researcher explicitly attempts to gather and record" (ibid: 10). Because of time limitations and an absence of funding, the research was conducted by one person. One

of the benefits of this was that it was easy to coordinate interview dates and times. Although the sample group was quite small, it was nevertheless fruitful. Mintzberg (1979: 107) makes a strong case for small sampling sizes when he notes;

... Too many of the results have been significant only in the statistical sense of the word. In our work, we have always found that simpler, more direct methodologies have yielded more useful results. Like sitting down in a manager's office and watching what he does. Or tracing the flow of decisions in an organisation. What, for example, is wrong with samples of one? Why should researchers have to apologise for them? (ibid.)

While collecting information is a high priority, the analysis and interpretation determine the value of such information, as pointed out by Fielding, N.G and Fielding, J.L. (1986);

While there are numerous textbooks on the methodology of both quantitative and qualitative research designs, they focus chiefly on data collection rather than data analysis. This is particularly true of those concerned with qualitative methods. The texts that do tackle the analysis of qualitative data concentrate on mechanical procedures rather than on the logic of interpretation (ibid: 9).

The information collected through the research for this thesis will be helpful to those involved in organisations operating within the Vietnamese community, as well as to academic and social researchers.

“TALKING TO PEOPLE...”

The interviewees consisted of people from vastly different walks of life, and this provided information on how these groups viewed the circumstances of their community. The groups consisted of:

1. Vietnamese-Australian workers who are employed at low pay rates – five to six dollars per hour and no entitlements. (1-5)
2. Vietnamese-Australian workers who refuse to work for such low rates. (6-7)
3. Officials from organisations that are involved in the welfare of the Vietnamese-Australian community.(8-9)
4. Vietnamese-Australians who give their time and talents to help less fortunate members of their community. (10-11)

Evident throughout the interviews was the common knowledge that Vietnamese and/or Chinese employers generally pay workers five or six dollars per hour, a cash in hand payment, with no other entitlements included. Two of the interviewees were most adamant that they would never work for either of those employers because of the pay rates and also the pressure that these employers place on the workers. In obtaining this information I adopted Wadsworth's (1997: 10) principle of talking to people in order to find out what is going on.

Interviewee No.1 works in a bakery each weekend for a total of 15 hours and receives six dollars per hour. She is employed as a counter salesperson, and duties include the making of sandwiches and the selling of a variety of foodstuffs. If the shop is quiet, she has been informed that she must wash the walls and the floors. One incident occurred which gives an indication of the expectations the Vietnamese/Chinese

employers have of their employees. On one occasion the baker had to leave early, and when he placed the last trolley of bread in the oven he asked No.1 to turn off the oven out when the bell rang. When the bell rang, the shop was very busy and No.1 was on her own in the shop. She turned off the bell and continued serving the customers, and when everyone was served she took the trolley out of the oven. Unfortunately by this time the bread was over-cooked and could not be sold as normal, and the owner was furious with her. To settle the matter No.1 forfeited her days pay for something that was not her responsibility. The owners want this young woman to give up her studies and work for them full-time, up to seven days a week, and although tempted, she has so far resisted. She requested an increase in pay to work full-time but was told that the same pay rates of six dollars per hour would apply and would include no other entitlements.

Previous jobs held by No.1 were in the clothing industry, and the pay rate varied between five and six dollars. One of the more interesting incidents was when she and a friend were employed as trimmers at a piece rate of ten cents per pair of trousers. They completed 800 pairs on the first day and were reasonably pleased with what they believed they had earned. The next day produced a big surprise for the girls, for the trousers they had trimmed had been steam cleaned, and they were required to trim them again, and this operation was included in the original price of ten cents. They wound up earning \$75 between them for two days work. On top of this there proved to be a major problem in getting paid, and it took several weeks of constant ringing and pleading before they received their earnings. No.1 believes they only received their money because she asked a friend to intercede with the owner on their behalf.

When asked if she had been subjected to any overt forms of racism or discrimination, No.1 said that in the time she has been in Australia, there has been only one incident where she was subject to discrimination. The event took place about eight months ago, when herself and a friend boarded a bus and requested a 'short trip' ticket. The driver refused to give them the ticket they requested, and insisted that they purchase a 'two hour' ticket. When the two young women talked to each other in Vietnamese, the driver became incensed and told them they were not allowed to speak Vietnamese on his bus. No.1 said that they eventually complied with the driver's instruction, in the interest of peace. She described the driver as "looking like Pauline Hanson" and stated that he was not a very nice man. However, she said that this was a one off incident and she found most Australians very nice and generally very helpful.

What is amazing in this interview is that despite being paid such a low wage, No.1 holds the owner and family in great esteem and speaks of them in the kindest of terms. Fully aware of the legal minimum rates of pay, she believes that she is getting more money than she could get in Vietnam and is quite happy with the way her employer treats her. Her employers are Vietnamese-Australians. Because of her poor English skills, she has no confidence in her ability to get through an interview with an Anglo-Australian company. However, she is aware of the importance of being able to converse comfortably in English with prospective employers, and is still studying to improve her English and eventually get a job that pays award wages.

Interviewee No.2 is a young female migrant from Vietnam, who has been in Australia for almost 12 months. Under the Federal Government's latest laws, this young lady is not entitled to any assistance from the government for two years. She is currently

employed in a sewing factory which manufactures tablecloths and tea towels, and she is responsible for the ironing of same. She works ten hours each day, six days a week, and works regular overtime in the evenings and on Sundays. When 'requested' to work overtime she dare not say no, as it would lead to dismissal. Her pay rate is fixed at six dollars per hour, with no penalty rates for overtime or Sunday work. She receives none of her legal entitlements such as sick pay, holiday pay, superannuation or Work Cover.

She recalled an incident that demonstrates the callowness of her employer, and the danger in not complying with legal practices. One evening when operating the ironing machine with the manager, she had an accident which was caused by the manager's inattentiveness, and she received a very serious burn to her arm. She was offered no form of assistance from her employer, had to finish her overtime and then go home alone by tram. She attended work the next two days, until the pain forced her to see a doctor. The doctor was horrified when he saw her arm and, believing that she may have required plastic surgery, sent her to get treatment at a hospital.

The hospital treated her wound and, understanding that it was an industrial accident, charged her the fee, told her to take the receipt to work, and she would be reimbursed by Work Cover. This young lady had no idea what Work Cover was but took the receipts to work, gave them to her employer, who took them and said that they would sort it all out. The fact that there was no Work Cover did not seem to bother them, and no attempt was made to reimburse the young lady for her expenses on a work related injury that was caused by the manager. Her employers are Chinese-Australians. This young woman is not very happy with the conditions of employment, and would like to have another job. She would like to go to school to learn more

English but because of the hours worked each week, she would not be able to attend class. She says that it is also difficult to find time to look for another job.

Interviewee No.3 is a Vietnamese-Australian young woman in her mid twenties who has a four-year-old son. Abandoned by her husband while pregnant, this young woman has worked in a number of occupations in her efforts to build a decent life for herself and her child. Because her English is very poor, she is restricted in the number and type of jobs she can apply for, and invariably accepts jobs with Vietnamese employers who pay five or six dollars per hour.

She is currently working in a restaurant preparing the vegetables for cooking, and works a total of 20 hours over the weekend, ten hours each on Saturday and Sunday. Her pay is six dollars per hour and, like the other interviewees, receives no entitlements. She would not ask her employer for a raise for fear of dismissal. Her employers are Vietnamese-Australians. During the week this young woman is attempting to become more proficient in English by attending AMES Language College, in the hope that it will enable her to eventually get a job that pays full entitlements, and to help her son with his schoolwork later on. At present she believes that she is lucky to have the job and that, although underpaid, her employers treat her quite well.

In the past No.3 has worked in different jobs, and because she has no relatives in Australia, had to take her son to her workplace. This placed enormous strain on her, as there were no child minding facilities at these places. One such job was on a farm picking fruit and vegetables. The pay rate was five dollars per hour, but she felt more

comfortable taking her son there rather than to a factory. She has never worked for more than six dollars per hour, and has never received any of her legal entitlements.

Interviewee No.4 is a Vietnamese-Australian young woman who is married and has a six-month-old daughter, and who has successfully completed a university degree in Australia. Despite this she has little confidence in her English speaking ability, and is reluctant to apply for jobs with Australian companies. Her most recent job, before the baby was born, was in a bread shop, and her pay was six dollars per hour. Like the other interviewees she did not receive any entitlements from her employer, and had not asked her employer for a raise as such a request usually ended up in dismissal. Her employers were Vietnamese-Australians. This young woman is fully aware of the importance of being competent in the use of the English language if she wants to develop a career. She intends to return to study in order that she may become proficient enough to apply for a decent paying job, and be able to assist her daughter as and when she progresses through school.

Interviewee No.5 is a young Vietnamese-Australian woman who has lived in Australia for five years, and is currently working in a gift shop. Her duties include unwrapping goods for display as well as being a sales assistant and dealing with the public. She works 28 hours per week, seven hours a day for four days, and her rate of pay is six dollars per hour. She receives none of her legal entitlements, and dares not ask for a raise for fear of being dismissed. Her employers are Chinese-Australians.

This young woman realises the importance of education and will be attending university next year to gain an engineering degree, which is what her parents want for

her. She hopes later on get a degree or diploma in accounting, as she has a strong desire to work in that area of business. She is happy to have her job at present and believes that she is being treated well by her employers.

These stories appear to be typical of the employment young Vietnamese-Australians find themselves accepting. The reason given is invariably the lack of confidence in applying for an award paying job because of their perceived poor English. It would appear that there are many Australian-Vietnamese employers who are prepared to exploit the most vulnerable members of their own community.

Interviewee No.6 is a young Vietnamese-Australian whose story contrasts starkly with the previous accounts. This young woman has successfully completed a university degree, and although unemployed for over 12 months after completing her degree, she refused to work for Vietnamese-Australians employers. She states that she never has and never would work for the six dollar per hour that these people pay.

She now works for an Australian company, is earning \$11.25 per hour and receives all her legal entitlements. The job entails her speaking English every day, and she is really happy with this as she believes her English is improving daily. Although the position is not related to her degree major, she sees this job as a stepping stone to eventually getting the job she really wants. She believes that in this job her employers treat her very well and she enjoys working for them. Her employer is a European-Australian, and job applicants are judged solely on their ability, and not ethnicity.

Interviewee No.7 is a young Vietnamese-Australian woman who is married and has been in Australia for three years, and like interviewee No.6, refuses to work for

Vietnamese-Australian employers. Despite her limited English language skills, she only applies for jobs that pay award wages, and has been successful in continually getting such jobs.

At present she is working in a sewing factory that manufactures a range of clothing. She works full-time, 38 hours per week and earns \$11 per hour. She also receives all her legal entitlements, and the facilities in the workplace are very good. It is a union factory and the union representative is very active there. Meetings are held with the staff every couple of months to discuss work conditions, and any problems that may have arisen since the last meeting.

While this young woman really likes the job and the conditions, she has a problem with a campaign of very overt discrimination. Her immediate supervisor, a migrant herself, openly discriminates against Vietnamese-Australians working in the factory, but particularly against herself. She states that this supervisor gives the Vietnamese-Australian worker the really difficult sewing jobs, purely because she does not like Vietnamese. The supervisor is a Greek-Australian.

Each Saturday No.7 works in a private hospital for the aged, and earns \$100 for six hours work. Her duties include taking the elderly patients out for a walk or a drive, and cooking lunch for them. It is a job she really likes. A number of other jobs held by this young woman have paid around \$12 per hour. She is also studying English part time a couple of evenings a week at the Footscray TAFE. When her English improves she intends to get a really good job.

These two young ladies, despite their poor English language skills, display a confidence in their method of communication with Anglo-Australians. As Kalantzis writes: "Whilst acknowledging that, obviously, English proficiency in the workforce

is vital, we must not overstate this to the detriment of other communication realities”
(Kalantzis 1994: 85)

Four other interviews were with Vietnamese-Australian individuals who are very heavily involved with the Vietnamese-Australian community. They are aware of the problems that beset their community, and have proposed various solutions to solve or ease these problems. They all agree that there is a great deal of discrimination being waged against the Vietnamese-Australian community, both intentionally and unintentionally. The new migration laws affecting the length of time migrants must be in Australia before they are entitled to assistance are seen as most discriminatory. The interviewees believe that it is in the early period of resettlement that these migrants need substantial assistance, yet they are left to fend for themselves in what they perceive is a hostile environment. The new migrants need to take English classes to allow them to compete on an equal footing with the rest of society.

Interviewee No.8 is a young Vietnamese-Australian man who works full-time as a social worker, dealing specifically with young Vietnamese-Australians who have drug related problems. He sees the many problems that these young people are facing in their daily lives, and how they are coping with family and community pressures.

He believes that the ability to speak and understand English is fundamental to securing a reasonable future for these young people. Without this ability there is a distinct lack of confidence when attending interviews, and this lack of confidence makes it very difficult to get a job. The people he deals with indicate to him that they get depressed because of continual non-acceptance by employers. He believes that in

many cases the employer stereotypes the Vietnamese people, and these young people are not given the chance to demonstrate their abilities.

He understands that many Vietnamese-Australians accept jobs for \$5 or \$6 because they want to help their families in Vietnam by sending home some money. This makes it difficult for them to study English, as the employers only want people who are willing to work whatever hours are required, including the working of overtime at a moments notice. Failure to comply with overtime requests inevitably end with dismissal.

He feels certain that the government should do much more to help the young people to get experience in the areas they want to work in. A typical example of the current work-for-the-dole scheme has people learning to drive forklift trucks, even though they have no intention or desire to earn a living that way. He suggests that they should be given the training necessary to get employment in areas where they want to work. Despite the unemployment figures and the lack of Vietnamese-Australians in the various professions, he is confident that because of their ability to overcome adversity, the Vietnamese will create a prosperous future for themselves in Australia.

Interviewee No.9 is a woman who holds a senior position in a Vietnamese-Australian association that concerns itself with the welfare of the Vietnamese-Australian community. I contacted the association and was successful in my request for an interview. The association performs a multitude of tasks that benefit the community in very positive ways, and these include job placements, English language classes, bilingual publications, all of which are aimed at keeping the community informed of events that impact on their lives.

As this association had an excellent record in finding employment for those in their community, they applied for the position of a 'jobs provider' under the Federal Government's new jobs contract scheme. Despite their record, the application was unsuccessful and resulted in a great deal of disappointment. They have applied for the second round of contracts and are optimistic about their chances. The results should be known by the end of the year.

A more recent enterprise to be undertaken by the association is in the field of research, where they will attempt to analyse a number of issues that create serious problems for many in the community, and include such issues as; domestic violence, problem gamblers, and alcoholism and drug addiction. This is an innovative and new direction for the association and is to be applauded, for this research should provide answers as to why these problems are occurring in the Vietnamese-Australian community, and allow the implementation of corrective action in the early stages of the problems.

Interviewee No.9 indicated that there was little difference in working with a Federal Coalition Government or Labor Government. She did believe that the new two-year period that migrants must wait before accessing welfare assistance is rather harsh, because it is in the early period that new migrants are most likely to need assistance. It was stated that the association had a good working relationship with the State Government and received some funding from them for specific projects.

According to interviewee No.9 the work-for-the-dole scheme has some merits. She believes that it is essential to have good employers who can give the young people confidence and self-esteem. A good employer can develop a good attitude within the young workers, and with the right attitude you can learn a great deal. Apparently the

association has connections some very good employers who give on the job training to young Vietnamese-Australians. The results include a rise in confidence and self worth for the majority of these young people, principally because of the manner in which they are treated by the employer/trainer.

Interviewee No.10 is a retired Vietnamese-Australian Catholic nun who was introduced to me by a mutual friend. This woman, despite her retirement, works as a social worker with the Vietnamese community in Melbourne. She helps refugees and migrants to settle in their new environment, and helps them access various services including health services and welfare.

She believes that the biggest problem migrants face in Australia is their inability to speak and understand English. This is particularly so for those who find themselves hospitalised, and can result in the patient becoming highly traumatised when they cannot understand what the nurses and doctors are saying. She stresses the necessity of learning the language to them, but with little success. Some of these people are extremely poor and come from small villages where they have little access to any education. Because many of them cannot read or write Vietnamese, they have little hope of learning English.

Those who have reasonable education do not have the time to study, as they have to work in order to survive, and also send money home to their families. She believes that unlike European migrants who came to Australia of their own free will, the Vietnamese were escaping a very repressive regime in their homeland, and in most cases the people did not want to leave their homeland but were forced to. This is particularly true for those early refugees, who lost everything in their flight from

Vietnam. No.10 related her family's story of losing everything when they were forced to flee and start a new life with just the clothes on their backs.

She believes that the Vietnamese have lost one generation in the adaptation to a new environment, but is confident that they will soon take their place as equals in all aspects of society. This woman is quite confident that unemployment figures for the next generation of Vietnamese-Australians will be similar to the rest of the community and they will be well represented in all the professions.

Interviewee No.11 is a Vietnamese-Australian man who works as an editor on a Vietnamese community newspaper, and who occasionally teaches Vietnamese language classes at university. Apart from his paid work, No.11 assists those in his community who have problems with English language skills, or other personal problems. He is confident that the next generation of Vietnamese-Australians will benefit from the hard work and sacrifices that their parents have been making since they came to Australia.

He believes that 25 years is not enough time for a complete turn-around in the status of the Vietnamese-Australians. They are very poor and in most cases come to Australia with nothing but the clothes on their backs. He also believes that recently arrived migrants from non-English speaking countries need more assistance from the government in the early stages of their settlement, particularly in the learning of the English language. He states that without English, it is difficult to get a bus or a tram, and virtually impossible to get a decent job. One of the reasons that the Vietnamese are over represented in blue-collar jobs is because qualifications gained in Vietnam are not recognised in Australia.

No.11 is adamant that the government must do more for a community as poor as the Vietnamese-Australians, and introduce education and training programs that will enable them to get decent jobs and allow them to contribute more to society. He believes that the government must take responsibility for the migrants they allow into the country. It is not, in his opinion, the responsibility of the various Vietnamese-Australian associations and organisations to take on the role as sole caretaker of their community and overcome whatever problems they may be experiencing. He further believes that the government has the resources to set up community programs to eliminate problems that invariably occur in migrant communities – problems such as high unemployment, drug addiction, problem gambling, domestic violence, general violence, and robbery.

While the Vietnamese-Australian community is one of the poorest in our society, No.11 believes that this mould will be shattered in the very near future, and the statistics for Vietnamese-Australians will be similar to those for the rest of society.

CHAPTER THREE

ANALYSIS

It is evident from the literature that Vietnamese-Australians are subject to discrimination in many areas, but most particularly in the areas of job seeking, and within the workplace itself. The unemployment rate for these people has changed little over the past two decades, and continues to register at around four times the national average (Viviani 1996:75). When Simon Crean was Minister for Employment, Education and Training, he spoke of his electorate as having one of the largest Vietnamese communities in Australia, and thus enabled him to understand and appreciate their special needs. He spoke of the drop in unemployment over a two year period from 34% in 1992 to 31% in 1994 and how encouraged he was by these figures (Crean 1994: 9). That he should be encouraged by such a miniscule drop in the unemployment rate indicates just how little people care about the serious problem of unemployment in ethnic communities.

What is not discussed in any great detail is the plight of the 'invisible workers'; those Vietnamese-Australians who endure wages and conditions that are truly Dickensian. This labour market is filled by Vietnamese-Australians who have limited English language skills, and who do not have the confidence to apply for and therefore attempt interviews for positions with Australian companies. The latest immigration laws, enforcing a two-year waiting period before new migrants are eligible for assistance, will tend to ensure there will be no shortage of labour for those companies who pay below award wages. The common rate paid by these employers seems to

peak at six dollars per hour for experienced workers and five dollars per hour for inexperienced workers.

The interviewees who are working in this environment believe that they are lucky to have a job. Even if they are unhappy with the conditions of their employment, they are prepared to accept them. Only one of the interviewees, No.2, demonstrated a dislike of her employer and her working conditions. This may have something to do with the injury she sustained and subsequent treatment by her employers. Also, No.2 works a minimum of ten hours each day for six days each week, with occasional Sunday work when the company is busy. This leaves her virtually no time to look for another job, for if she takes time off she is likely to be dismissed. She is utterly frustrated with her situation, and feels that she is trapped in this job with no means of escape.

In contrast, other interviewees, who work for six dollars per hour, are full of praise for their employers. They are very happy to be employed. Even when the employer gets upset with them, they say they understand why and accept it. They say that although the pay is much less than the legal award, it is much better than they could get in Vietnam. All the interviewees seem quite philosophical about their plight. Despite receiving only six dollars per hour, they continue sending money home to their families in Vietnam. In the case of No.2 a percentage of her wage goes to immigration lawyers in the hope that her mother will be allowed to live in Australia.

What is evident from talking to these people is that there are many, many migrants employed by unscrupulous employers. The question that begs answering is what are the authorities doing regarding the blatant breaking of the law by employers. To suggest that they are unaware of such practices is unacceptable, for it is common

knowledge in the Vietnamese-Australian community that these employers avoid paying award payments and conditions.

As mentioned previously, two interviewees stated quite categorically that they would not work for a Vietnamese-Australian or a Chinese-Australian employer, because they do not pay award wages. They are aware that, if they complain about the wages or conditions to their employers, there is every chance they will be dismissed. However, it must be noted that neither of these young women, unlike some of the others, need a job to survive. One is married and her husband has a secure job in the car industry. The other young woman lives with her parents and during periods of unemployment receives assistance from the government. She could afford to wait for a decent job.

In both the interviews with officials from Vietnamese-Australian Associations indicated that they were aware of what is going on in their community. No.8 is involved daily with young unemployed Vietnamese-Australians, many of whom are depressed with what they perceive as discrimination against them by prospective employers. The common complaint from these young people is that they are never given a chance to demonstrate their abilities. They rarely get an opportunity to gain work experience in areas where they need practical experience to get a job. Whereas in the past companies would train new workers, today most jobs that become available require people with experience.

No.8 is opposed to the work-for-the-dole scheme and states that it does not result in jobs at the conclusion of the work period. He believes that these young people are given work experience in jobs that they either have no liking for, or that never result in a job prospect. According to No.8, work-for-the-dole is regarded as a form of cheap labour for those companies and organisations involved in the scheme. People, for

example, are learning to operate forklift trucks, even though they have no inclination or even a prospect of working in an industry where these skills could be utilised. When they apply for positions for which they would be suited, they are regularly rejected on the grounds that they have no experience. The point that No.8 wants to convey is that these young people should be given an opportunity to gain experience in positions that are suitably related to their skills or inclinations. It must be noted that most of the young people that No.8 deals with are those who have been in trouble with the police and are usually on probation. The fact that they have been in trouble with the police should not reflect on their character as studies show that young Vietnamese-Australians are being arrested for crimes that others in the community commit with impunity. Young Vietnamese-Australians are grossly over-represented in the juvenile justice system (Brady1998: 11). For a group that makes up only 1.5% of the community, they make up 25% of those facing the juvenile courts (ibid.)

In contrast, interviewee No.9, from a Vietnamese-Australian association, believes that the work-for-the-dole scheme is a positive move in the training of the young unemployed. She does, however, qualify her remarks by stating that the company offering training to young Vietnamese-Australians involved in her area is exceptional. It instills a very positive attitude in the young people they train. The association to which interviewee No.9 belongs is deeply involved with the Vietnamese-Australian community and is interested in every aspect of the everyday lives of the people. It is not just an organisation that helps people obtain jobs. It offers advice and assistance on a variety of matters –for example, assistance is given to recently arrived Vietnamese migrants with the resettlement process, - advice and assistance is given on legal and family matters. It also conducts English language classes for those who

need, or wish, to improve their language skills. This coming year the association intends to become more involved in research projects, in the hope that it will assist the Vietnamese-Australian community to overcome some of the more serious problems that confront them. This is a very positive step, which will no doubt lead to a greater understanding of the causes of community problems, and assist in developing strategies to combat and overcome these problems.

While aware of the 'invisible workers' being employed at under award payments, No.9 is not sure how this form of exploitation can be stopped. The new migrants have to earn money to live. Without government assistance they have little option but to take whatever work they can get, regardless of conditions. The responsibility to stamp this practice out lies fairly and squarely with the government. The government, however, seems to have turned its back on the Vietnamese-Australian community. It displays little concern at the scandalous rates of unemployment that has plagued these people for the past two decades. Kalantzis (1994) writes:

The issue of unemployment of members of the Vietnamese community in Australia is not only a Vietnamese problem...It is an Australian issue: an issue about how Australia addresses the cultural and linguistic diversity of its people. Considerations about appropriate workplace skills and meeting workplace literary needs cannot be dealt with only at a technical level. These matters implicate much broader issues. They are also matters of rights and of belonging to a body politic. (Kalantzis 1994: 83).

The state and federal governments must involve themselves in developing strategies to bring down the disgraceful unemployment rate of the Vietnamese-Australians.

The most important revelation to come out of the interviews is the shameful treatment of employees who are paid below award payments. In the majority of cases it is the

Vietnamese employers who are exploiting the most vulnerable members of their own community. These employers display a flagrant disregard of the legal conditions of employment, including such items as award wages, sick pay, Work Care, superannuation, holiday pay, overtime pay rates, and in many cases fail to provide a clean and safe working environment.

All interviewees were asked if anyone from a government authority or a union had visited their place of work. With the exception of No.8, who is employed in a union factory where they have regular visits from their union, there was not a single workplace visited by any union or government. The conclusions that can be drawn from such evidence is that the legal authorities and trade unions are unaware of these practices, or as is more likely, they are totally unconcerned with the welfare of these workers. There were several attempts made through the Trades Hall Council to discuss these matters with union representatives and, given the sorry state of the decline in union membership, believed that such a discussion would not be difficult to arrange. Unfortunately, when I mentioned that the topic concerned the perceived exploitation of Vietnamese workers, the union was not very interested. The same response was forthcoming when a union official, who was studying some topics at university, was approached for some clarification on the union position in such instances.

Work Cover spends millions of dollars on advertising for a safer working environment, but there is a distinct lack of inspectors checking and uncovering some of the diabolic working conditions that many migrants are forced to endure. It is the government's duty to ensure that all registered business complies with the legal requirements as stipulated by the various departments.

CONCLUSION

Most of the studies conducted into the Vietnamese community in Australia have focused on the number of unemployed and those who are employed in regular blue-collar jobs. The results produced by these studies bring to light some alarming statistics, not only for the Vietnamese-Australian community but also for the whole of Australia. The fact that the unemployment rate for the Vietnamese-Australians has remained around 30 per cent for over two decades indicates a history of apathy by successive governments, and reflects badly on the image of fairness and egalitarianism that Australian governments project to the world. This study found no evidence that any specific program has been introduced to attempt rectification of this appalling situation.

What this study did uncover was even more disturbing information on the working conditions of those Vietnamese-Australians who experience difficulty in becoming proficient in the English language. It found that a number of employers take advantage of these people and blatantly break the law in regard to employees' wages and entitlements. These employers, found to be mainly Vietnamese-Australians in this study, exploit the most vulnerable members of their own community and do so with impunity. While overt discrimination against the Vietnamese-Australians is evidenced, and documented, by most researchers in this field, little has been written about the covert discrimination that they face in almost every facet of their lives. This same silence is evident regarding those migrants who are working for below award wages and none of the legal entitlements.

What is surprising in all this is that these employers operate quite openly and do not seem to fear any legal repercussions from the law. Almost everybody knows about it except those who can put a stop to it. Perhaps there is apathy amongst those who are responsible for the enforcement of the legal rights of workers, and they are not too keen to stop the exploitation. Perhaps they are only stirred to action if it is an Anglo-Australian being exploited. Whatever the reason, it is essential that action be taken against such employers and outlaw the practice of exploiting workers by paying less than the legal award wage and associated conditions.

The government needs to introduce more policing of workplaces, especially by Vietnamese-Australian trained persons. It is necessary that these officials be able to enter workplaces unannounced. They should be empowered to take appropriate action against employers that are breaking the law in regard to conditions of employment, and insist that they must rectify the problem immediately. These 'inspectors' would need to ensure that no workers suffer recriminations at the hands of the employers after their visit.

The trade unions must also be activated to play a role in eliminating this type of employment and exploitation. The rhetoric from the hierarchy in the Trades Hall about a fair go for all, and their role in society is not matched by the efforts on the ground by union officials. International Officer of Trade Unions, Alan Matheson writes in glowing terms about the trade union's virtues. He suggests that they are involved in informing workers about their rights by sending people out "...street by street, factory by factory, locating workers, informing them both of their rights as workers and the role of the union in protecting those rights as well as recruiting them as members"(Matheson 1994: 80). When the situation of the Vietnamese-Australian

workers was explained to one union official, his reaction was to shrug his shoulders and say that it was not his area of responsibility. He had no idea who was responsible for encouraging new members from the Vietnamese-Australian workforce.

As a number of the interviewees suggested, the Vietnamese-Australian workers must be educated regarding their rights and conditions of employment. Videos and brochures should be made in the Vietnamese language detailing exactly what their rights are, and how access to assistance can be obtained to ensure that these rights are delivered. These videos and brochures could be distributed through education institutions and through ethnic associations.

A great deal more research is needed on this issue. There appear a number of reasons encouraging flagrant disregard of legal conditions of employment. They need to be understood far better than at present if this practice is to be eliminated. A publicity campaign in English and in Vietnamese may well frighten or embarrass those involved to cease this practice and at the same time inform the working people that such employment should be avoided.

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APPENDIX I

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH SUBJECTS.

Information to participants:

You are invited to participate in a research project to determine the working conditions that Vietnamese-Australian migrants, with limited English skills, face in the workforce.

Certification by Subject:

I, _____

Of _____

Certify that I am at least 20 years old and that I voluntarily give my consent to be interviewed for the research project entitled:

Working conditions of Vietnamese-Australian people with limited English language skills,

being conducted for an Honours thesis at Victoria University of Technology by Michael O'Halloran.

I certify that the objectives of this research, along with any risks to me associated with the procedures listed hereunder to be carried out in the research, have been fully explained to me by:

Michael O'Halloran

And that I freely consent to participation involving these procedures.

Procedures: To record interviews with Vietnamese-Australian workers about their employment conditions. There will be no pressure placed on the interviewee to answer any question they may be uncomfortable answering.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have questions answered and that I understand that I can withdraw from this experiment at any time and that this withdrawal will not jeopardise me in any way.

I have been informed that the information I provide will be kept confidential.

Signed _____

Witness other than the interviewer

Date _____

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher; Michael O'Halloran, phone no. 9318-5648. If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, University Human Research Committee, Victoria University of Technology, PO Box 14428 MCMC, Melbourne, 8001 (telephone no. 03-9688-4710).

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions to the workers:

- State your name, give details of family situation, your occupation in Vietnam, and describe your English language skills.
- What type of work do you do now?
- Would you regard yourself as an experienced worker?
- How much per hour do you earn?
- How many hours per week do you work?
- How much do the other workers earn per hour?
- How would you describe your working conditions?
- Have you asked your employer recently for a raise?
- Has anybody from a Vietnamese organisation visited you at your place of work?
- Has anybody from the government or a trade union visited you at your place of work?
- Do you think the pay and conditions you receive here are better than you could get in Vietnam?
- Do you intend to study to improve your English, and what type of courses do you intend to take?
- What will a greater proficiency in your English mean to you?

After completion of the set questions the interviewee was given the opportunity to relate any data relevant to the issue at hand. This covered issues concerning previous employment, acts of discrimination, work and injury problems, and the pressures of

keeping a job. This segment of the interview produced some incredibly important information.

Questions to Vietnamese-Australian individuals who are deeply involved in assisting members of their community.

- It is said that the Vietnamese-Australian community, next to the Aboriginal community, is the poorest in the country. Why is this so, and do you perceive this as a serious concern for your community?
- Do you think that one generation has been lost in the resettlement process, and after this period the Vietnamese-Australian will attain equal standing with the rest of society in employment and income?
- What do you believe is the biggest obstacle migrants from Vietnam face when they arrive in Australia?
- Do you think the government is doing enough for migrants, particularly in the early period of their resettlement?
- Do you think the Vietnamese-Australian organisations are doing enough for migrants, particularly in the early period of their resettlement?
- A significant number of Vietnamese-Australians work for five and six dollars an hour. Why do they accept such terrible wage conditions?
- What do you believe are the issues that need to be addressed as a matter of priority to assist the Vietnamese-Australian community?
- In your own words try to describe what are the major achievements of the Vietnamese-Australian community, and what you think the future holds for the community.

Further interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations that are heavily involved with the Vietnamese-Australian community. These interviews were conducted with interviewees No.5 and No.7. There was no set format to the questions, as the interviewees determined issues of importance to the community and these items of discussion were given priority in both interviews.