

Africa: Moving the Boundaries

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South Sudanese youth acculturation and intergenerational challenges

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Abstract

Although several studies have been carried out about refugee resettlement or settlement challenges, little has been done either academically or practically to understand their parenting experiences and challenges after settling in Australia. This paper explores the impact of South Sudanese youth experiences of the settlement challenges resulting from acculturation and intergenerational conflicts. It explores their perspectives on the difficulties they encounter while adjusting to their new environment and parents' expectations on them to hold onto their original cultures. Youth also attribute their challenges to a lack of appropriate support services, including the absence of strong local community leadership. The combination of these challenges results in many young people becoming more susceptible to mental health issues, antisocial behaviour and difficulties in acculturating as they struggle to balance their cultures of origin and the new environment. This paper was informed by a PhD study, which involved in-depth interactive engagement with sixty South Sudanese participants (parents and youth) through individual interviews and focus group meetings, mainly on their transition, parenting practices and experiences since settling in Australia.

Introduction

South Sudanese have suffered traumatic experiences resulting from forced migration and young people, in particular, seem to have been more susceptible to these harrowing experiences than were adults who might have developed some coping strategies or resilience. According to Kohli and Mather (2003), young people's vulnerability arises through coming face-to-face with traumatic events, particularly for those who become refugees; the effects of war or natural disasters are punishing them in various ways. Upon arriving in their new country, those experiences are often aggravated by difficulties adjusting to their new setting as they try to balance between the new and original cultures (Milner & Khawaja, 2010; Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006). Earnest (2007) stipulated that refugee children's native culture influences various aspects of their psychosocial well-being, and a cultural explanation may be quite disparate to Western understanding. Adolescent refugees are subject to the effects of their migration experiences, and this includes their new environment's demands as they struggle to forge a new identity and dual cultural membership (Earnest, Housen, & Gillieatt, 2007). However, research on resilience has also indicated that not all adolescent refugees who experienced traumatic events become traumatised, this is mainly because some have developed resilience out of these experiences (Grossman, 2014; Kohli & Mather, 2003). In addition to the acculturation and intergenerational challenges, young South Sudanese and other young Africans are being portrayed negatively by the media in their new environment, and these have added extra pressures on them. For instance, South

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Sudanese youth challenges and antisocial behaviours are widely reported and often linked to a media-unified name “Apex Gang.” The name “Apex” surfaced strongly after the youth riots at Melbourne Moomba Festival over the long weekend in March 2016 (NEMBC, 2016). Those "riots" were grossly exaggerated by the media, politicians and anti-migrant lobbyists who claimed they were "out of control." According to the Ethnic Broadcaster (2016: 2), the word “Apex Gang” has become a generic terminology used by journalists, commentators and even politicians to link series of criminal acts involving burglary, assaults, carjacking and home invasion into a particular narrative, often with little evidence, and in some cases clear contradictory evidence that incidents are related to each other or to the Apex Gang at all. So, why is this happening? This paper only presents young South Sudanese who spoke in the larger study, which involved many parents as well. It provides them with a platform to discuss how they have been, and still are, adjusting and negotiating acculturation and intergenerational changes.

Acculturation and intergenerational conflict

Acculturation is defined as a process whereby individuals or groups from different cultures engage in and experience alterations to their original culture as well as behavioural and psychological changes that occur when different cultures meet, affecting individual behaviour, ethnic identity, attitudes and values, and which often cause stress arising from adjustment to a new environment (Bemak, Chung, & Pedersen 2003; Berry 1997; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder 2006; Deng & Marlowe 2013). It also relates to health and other factors that may be affected by the degree to which people subscribe to and keep their own cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values. Acculturation is the process whereby the characters and attitudes of people from one culture are modified due to the presence or impact of another culture. It is seen as a continuum ranging from exclusive involvement in a person’s original culture and beliefs to exclusive involvement in the dominant or host culture (Berry, 2003). Such changes sometimes result in acculturative stresses as individuals try to understand the characteristics of the new culture, or try to give up their original culture partially or entirely (Berry, 1997; Berry et al., 2006; Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Affected individuals may require comprehensive coping strategies and/or support to mitigate stress, which can include awareness or psycho-education about the impact of stress, particularly on families and youth in the new environment (Poppitt & Frey, 2007).

Berry *et al's* (2006) work examined how immigrant youth adapts and acculturates, with results similar to the above categories of acculturation. It identified four distinct acculturation profiles: integration (oriented towards both original heritage and new national culture); ethnic (oriented toward original culture only); national (oriented toward new national culture only), and; diffuse (orientation is ambivalent or marginalised). These categories were evaluated against psychological and socio-cultural adaptation and Berry suggested that migrants who adopt an integration strategy have the best psychological and socio-cultural outcomes. Those with diffuse profiles have the worst outcomes while those with ethnic and national profiles fall in between. Their research stressed the significance of encouraging youth to maintain a sense of their heritage and cultural identity, while establishing close ties with the wider society.

Furthermore, Poppit and Frey (2007) studied South Sudanese adolescents in Brisbane, Australia, and confirmed that health and behaviours of immigrants are often affected by

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acculturation. Acculturative pressures within a family arise when young immigrants go to school as they experience more rapid acculturation than their parents, mainly to carry out their daily classroom activities and from other social interactions with their peers (Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Poppitt & Frey, 2007). During these acculturation processes, most young people are faced with conflicting beliefs and attitudes that generate disparities between their original and new cultures, putting them at odds with their parents. Research has indicated that many refugee families are not properly supported or prepared to deal with their new daily challenges, which many host cultures are familiar with and sufficiently well-resourced to overcome (Deng & Marlowe 2013; Dunlavy 2010; Renzaho, McCabe, & Sainsbury 2011). This indicates that successful resettlement must include proper support to be able to adapt to unfamiliar systems, customs and becoming active participants in the social, economic and cultural affairs of the new environment (Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Tribe, 1999).

In addition, changes within the family and differences in language skills can create substantial intergenerational gaps as children acquire the new language and knowledge about their environment more quickly than their parents (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). The stalemate created when children start embracing some of the values of the dominant culture that contrast with their parents' beliefs can lead to tension and conflict. The children may find themselves caught in the middle as they attempt to accommodate both their parents and the new culture (Deng & Pienaar, 2011; Khawaja & Milner, 2012). This can generate a profound identity crisis because of uncertainties about conflicting perspectives, loyalties and expectations (Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Khawaja & Milner, 2012). These arguments may be about freedom, household chores, selection of appropriate friends and homework (Deng, 2016; McMichael, Gifford, & Correa-Velez, 2011; Milner & Khawaja, 2010). The difficulties stemming from these tensions normally highlight the fracture and breakdown of the family as an entity. This underscores the need to understand the impact of the challenges faced by new settler families.

Methodological Framework

A qualitative study involved interpersonal and interactive engagement with South Sudanese through individual interviews and focus group meetings. Given the complexities of refugee experiences in various settings and contexts, it was imperative to use a variety of techniques to explore and understand post-migration challenges for South Sudanese in Australia. The debate on how best to approach refugee studies has been ongoing (Bakewell, 2011; McMichael, Nunn, Gifford, & Correa-Velez, 2015; Riggs et al., 2015; Schweitzer & Steel, 2008). As Bakewell pointed out, there is a consensus that refugee studies should be multidisciplinary, but there is less agreement on how different disciplines can be combined to redefine problems outside existing methodologies. This study employed an interdisciplinary approach that integrates perspectives from sociology, psychology, refugee and migration studies, and family studies. It combines narrative and constructivist approaches, which are strongly interlinked and so help to understand and construct the complex experiences of South Sudanese-Australians. Narrative methodology has been employed by many researchers in exploring individuals, groups and cultures as a primary method for making sense of people's experiences (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Polkinghorne 2007; Riessman 2008). Narrative research, according to Lieblich *et al* (1998) refers to any study that generates or analyses narrative materials. People are often storytellers by nature, and the stories

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they narrate provide coherence and continuity to their experiences, and also play a central role in communication with one another (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber 1998; Polkinghorne 2007). This approach enables the development of a nuanced understanding of experiences of being parented in South Sudan and how that differs to their parenting practices in Australia.

In understanding South Sudanese experiences, I linked this perspective to a constructivist approach, which stresses that meanings are constructed through the experiences and understandings of individual participants. The constructivist perspective, which draws from symbolic interactionism, was first developed by Blumer (1969) and has become a prominent interpretive stance that examines society and individual actions and behaviours. As part of social psychology, this framework grew from the desire to understand the social and cultural influences that play a vital role in human behaviour (Blumer 1969; Crotty 1998). As Eastmond (2007) emphasised, using constructivism in conjunction with narrative methodology ensures that culture is central to lived experiences, not only in the making of a meaningful story by a particular subject, but also in ways that others understand and retell that story. The aim was to understand South Sudanese stories or interpretations of realities that derive from their social interaction with their new environment and interpersonal relationships, and then analyse and interpret these stories to build from their concepts and theories about cultural transitions in parenting. As a qualitative method, the constructivist approach is the reverse of traditional social research, which begins with a hypothesis and then seeks to confirm, deny or modify the initial hypothesis (Glaser & Strauss 1967). By contrast, constructivist methodology, and particularly the grounded theory technique, begins with the collection of data which is used to generate thematic or other codes that are then grouped into concepts to make them more practical or workable: for instance, from concepts where categories are found, into forming and creating a theory (Bryant & Charmaz 2007). This technique helps to identify patterns within the data through grouping segments of participants' texts into themes, using four stages of analysis (codes, concepts, categories and theory). Codes help identify anchors of reference and meaning and allow the main points to be gathered. Concepts are collections of similar codes that help make sense of higher-order insights and meanings through data interpretation, while categories are a broad group of similar concepts used to generate hypotheses, leading to theory generated from the collection and explanations in the previous stages (Braun and Clarke 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Participants and Analysis

Participants in this study were recruited from the South Sudanese community in Victoria, Australia. The study involved semi-structured interviews with 20 participants (parents and young adults) aged from 18 to 50. Individual interviews were held with parents and young adults with roughly equal gender representation. The focus groups involved four separate meetings: one each with women and men; a third had a mixed group of men and women (27 parents), and; the fourth meeting was with young people (7 participants). The interviews and meetings were conducted at times and places convenient to the participants. Each individual interview took approximately one hour while focus groups were between 1.5-2.5 hours. All interviews and meetings were audio-recorded with the participants' consents in accordance with the National Human Research Ethics Standards relating to participant recruitment and research procedures. Ethics approval was also

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granted by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee.

The data were translated, transcribed and then analysed using thematic analysis. The analytical process started with translating and transcribing the interviews and focus group meetings. Although some interviews and focus meetings were conducted in English, most were in Dinka and Sudanese Arabic, especially with parents who do not speak English. Even though the researcher's ability to speak these three languages was advantageous in translating interviews and recordings of the focus group meetings, the process was lengthy and excruciating. It normally took many hours simply to translate and transcribe one interview or focus group, as it was crucial to record the participants' comments as accurately as possible. As the initial transcription and analysis of data are essential in narrative and grounded approach, after each interview and focus group, the researcher listened to the audio-recordings, transcribed the discussion, went through the notes taken during each interview and focus group, and noted emergent themes. If interviews were conducted in Dinka or Sudanese Arabic, data were usually translated and transcribed into English line by line. This data formed the first step of the initial coding. After completing line by line coding, the initial codes were collated and compared in line with the comparative analysis process. As Bazeley and Jackson (2013) stated, early work with text and concepts is about laying the foundation for identification of key themes in the data. These initial coding processes were conducted occurrence by occurrence, given the large amount of data, and this helped in the process of initial conceptualisation of ideas.

Although the quality of this process is enhanced by memo writing from early codes as well as by informed discussions of significant and frequent themes, which highlight areas for further investigation, the researcher also constantly challenged his first ideas by drawing comparisons through sampling various cases (Bazeley & Jackson 2013). As Riessman (1993) described, researchers ought to start by getting the whole interview's words and selected non-verbal features such as crying, laughter and long pauses correctly noted on paper. This allows the portions of the transcription to be selected for analysis to emerge or to change as a result of the researchers' close attention to the entire transcript, which exemplifies the nature of narrative interviews as dialogues (Riessman, 1993). As this process first involves initial hand coding of the transcripts, it also requires further revision and clarifications for accuracy. The final transcripts were coded manually by categorising common themes. These common themes or categories were elevated into concepts to build a framework to generate grounded theory. Although these subsequent analytic processes were presented in a linear manner, it is important to note that the process was, in fact, concurrent with engaging the South Sudanese, data collection and analysis. This approach allowed the researcher to constantly revisit each step of the data collection and analysis. It also helps in identify patterns within the data and thus assists the analysis by grouping segments of the participants' texts into themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Grounded theory is primarily about developing hypotheses grounded in the data, where it is important to constantly compare the hypotheses formed with the original data, in order to support or refute the theory derived. This process is significant in developing a broader concept by grouping most of the codes into categories under the larger concepts. The process augmented the abstract interpretive understanding of relationships grounded within the data (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, the techniques of grounded theory led to a major concept, which was fundamental in understanding South Sudanese parenting practices

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and transitional experiences within their families and community.

Results: Youth identity and experiences of their new environment

South Sudanese youth shared their perspectives ranging from parenting and being parented in Australia as well as identity issues, experiences and perspectives of growing up in different cultures. Most grew up in war-torn Sudan and in transit countries of refuge (sometimes also in conflict), and they spoke of having witnessed bombardments, violent death and other forms of atrocities through their refugee journeys.

What I saw is different; I was born in the war, and life was difficult in South Sudan because people used to run for safety most of the time; those who managed to study were very few. The civil war has impacted greatly on young generations, particularly those who were born in the wartime. Some of us have seen people killed and many other bad things in our presence. These are still in our memories despite the fact that some of us are now grown-up adults (Youth Focus Group - 3, male).

As with many other groups, culture and identity form an important part of South Sudanese upbringing; it commonly constitutes intergenerational connections and cultural transmission (Yenika-Agbaw & Mhando, 2014). Young participants in this study identified themselves as either South Sudanese or South Sudanese-Australian, and all identified with an integrative profile as they believed they are integrating their traditional and new cultures. They believe they are South Sudanese in origin but also Australian by citizenship, and that they are adapting to their new Australian culture alongside that of their origin. All the youth participants were either born in Sudan or in the transit countries of refuge before coming to Australia with their parents, relatives or caregivers. They were aged between 18 and 24 years and have been in Australia for over eight years, which means that most would have come to Australia between the ages of 9 and 11. These young people were asked to discuss the differences they see between South Sudanese and Australian traditions and cultures. Most identified many observed differences, especially around cultural values such as respect and freedom. Some have mixed feelings when it comes to their experiences of the new freedoms. Some still identify strongly with South Sudanese culture as they continue to engage in the activities of that community, but others reported losing their culture and native tongues altogether.

I identified myself more with South Sudanese culture. I still do things according to my culture because I don't want to forget it (Youth Focus Group - 5, Female).

To be honest, I think mine is half: mostly I still follow my cultural values, but I have forgotten my language, which is the only problem I have (Youth Focus Group - 4, Female).

Identity is an important part of South Sudanese culture. For them, it is what identifies an individual and their origin. According to F. Deng (1995), identity is the way others define individuals based on race, ethnicity, religion, language, culture and other determining factors. Identity is a concept that gives a deeply-rooted psychological and social meaning to the individual in the context of group dynamics. South Sudanese identities are affected by their forced migration as well as by their changes and challenges in the new environment as they struggle to balance between their new and traditional cultures (Attias-Donfut 2012; Marlowe, Harris, & Lyons 2014).

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Youth perspectives on differing cultures

South Sudanese youth were asked to discuss how they navigate between differing cultures, what stresses arise from this and what their strategies are for coping. Although some spoke of doing what their parents, as their guardians tell them to do, others acknowledged the challenges of growing up caught between differing cultures in which conflicting values often sparked tensions and struggles between them and their parents. Some believe they need to uphold their home traditions as it is important for them to pass them onto their children and subsequent generations. One participant explained the comparative differences he observed in Australia.

Our African culture is always about togetherness and support for one another. For instance, when you wake up, the first thing you do in the morning is to check how your relatives, friends or neighbours are doing or even visit them. People eat together and stay together in bad and good times. When practicing these parts of our culture here, some people who started to know about such cultural values always give us some positive feedback. For instance, someone told me that if we supported one another like this in Australia, then we would avoid all of these problems due to isolation, which is causing a lot of problems within the wider Australian community (Youth Focus Group - 3, Male).

These comments underscore the significance of cultural exchange and the benefits to be gained from comparing and discussing diverse cultural values. Meanwhile, this participant listed some other challenges facing South Sudanese youth as they transition from adolescence into adulthood in an Australian environment.

Turning 18 years is a tough age for many young Sudanese. For example, we have different cultures between South Sudanese and Australian. Most Sudanese boys, when they turn 18, try to move out of home; they can even fight with their mums, particularly when their mums ask them to do certain things. According to Sudanese (culture), even when you reach 18 or 24 years old, you still live with your parents until you get married and do the right things, but here, the culture has changed and that is affecting young Sudanese and the community (Youth – Participant 13, Male).

Although South Sudanese youth are trying to adjust to their new environment and culture, they are also expected by their parents to follow their traditions and customs. As discussed earlier, acculturation is a leading source of stress for new settlers as they struggle to adjust to their new country (Berry 1997). This is because children are learning their new culture at schools, and through interaction with the Australian culture elsewhere, but when they return home, their parents expect them to observe their original cultural values. This situation becomes contentious when parents continue to embrace their ancestral cultures, with a strong emphasis on not allowing their children to depart from their original culture and identity (Deng & Marlowe 2013; Fisher 2007). This is what creates intergenerational conflict and like many other immigrant adolescents, South Sudanese struggle to negotiate a workable synthesis between their original and new cultures in their new environment (Deng & Marlowe 2013; Deng & Pienaar 2011).

Parental expectations and control versus youth's independence

Youth were asked to share their perspectives on parenting and being parented in Australia. South Sudanese youth participants gave examples of parental control as

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clashing with their independence, and the differences between the Australian and South Sudanese approach based on their different cultural understandings.

The rules are different here compared to South Sudan. Here, young people are allowed by law to do whatever they like while in South Sudan, young people are not (Youth Focus Group - 5, Female).

The issue of parental control versus youth autonomy often leads to struggles in many new settler families. As Mansouri *et al* (2015) stated, these intergenerational tensions arise from competing understandings about the rights and responsibilities of young people and the level of autonomy and freedom they should be entitled to. However, some young participants also emphasised the significance of parental guidance since greater freedom can be a distraction for some.

South Sudanese are stricter in their parenting styles. Children must follow what they say; if not, you get disciplined. But in Australia, there are some kinds of freedom for the kids... There are laws that can take parents to court and accuse them of child abuse. It is actually a problem because you are growing up, and you don't know what is right and wrong... Parents are already grown, and they have been through things, so they know what is bad and good for you. Therefore, having too much freedom is bad for some young people (Youth - Participant 12, Male).

Even though many South Sudanese parents believed that being strict is a necessary part of their children's upbringing, strictness does not work in controlling their children as they are already aware of their rights and freedoms in their new environment. This has posed a great challenge to parental authority. This study has revealed parents' expectations on their children to hold onto aspects of the original culture, but these expectations and the influence of acculturative stress are linked to adaptation changes, which create intergenerational gaps and conflicts. At the same time, children's faster integration or assimilation into their new culture and environment are of major concern to many South Sudanese parents, while the children see their parents' expectations as over-controlling and an infringement of their rights and independence. Such a division continues to widen the gaps between them.

My parents expected me to hold onto our traditional culture and language as well as integrating into the Australian culture (Youth - Participant 4, Female).

Parental expectations on youth to hold onto the original cultural values are welcomed by some youth.

My parents expected me not to smoke or drink. It's all about making sure that I grow up in a good way and be a good person (Youth - Participant 13, Male).

Nevertheless, these expectations create an impasse for some when choosing between their parents' demands and conforming to peer pressures; for instance, to smoke and drink as their friends do and making the right choices can be difficult. Young men and women are encouraged to learn and socialise with their older siblings and relatives. As part of learning about their culture, young South Sudanese are required to spend time with their uncles/aunts and other male/female role models in the community to help them

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learn about manhood and womanhood.

My parent expected me to know my people and about how they live and how they get through things; this is what they want me to hold onto... That is why I came to my uncle's house to learn more about my culture (Youth - Participant 14, Male).

Parents not only expect them to learn from their uncles and aunts here in Australia, but they encourage them to go to South Sudan as part of learning and preserving their culture.

They (parents) always tell us to follow our South Sudanese cultures you know - they always tell us to go back home and see how things are done at home, and they always tell us to keep South Sudanese cultural values, not to lose faith in what our culture is and do not fall off the track (Youth - Participant 15, Male).

South Sudanese parents have high expectations on their children to preserve their cultural values and their native languages. Some youth agreed with their parents about the need to uphold these values as part of their identity. While trying to make sense of these differing cultural differences, racism toward South Sudanese (young and old) has a large negative impact on them. Both parents and youth spoke of often feeling unsafe because of their racial visibility and refugee status. Like previous studies, this study has documented youth's poor relationships with the Australian police and their lack of trust and confidence in responsiveness and understanding from the police, even when they feel their safety is threatened (Grossman & Sharples 2010; Losoncz 2011). However, South Sudanese youth do not attribute all their difficulties on racism and police, since they too can contribute to improve their situation, and advised their peers to stay out of trouble and either go to school or work.

Discussion

South Sudanese youth narrated many challenges ranging from parents' continuation to hold onto their strict South Sudanese parenting practices to finding themselves being racially picked on by the media and police. South Sudanese youth are trying to adjust their culture of origin to their new environment. They may choose their new Australian culture over that of their origin, but such changes create tension within families, particularly when parents do not wish them to leave their original culture. The acculturative stress, which refers to a unique stress involving adjustment to a new environment, requires coping strategies to cope with the associated emotional and physiological reactions (Bemak *et al*, 2003; Poppitt & Frey 2007). The acculturative stress South Sudanese youth face involves acculturation-specific factors, such as ethnic identity, dissonant cultural values and second-language competencies (Poppitt & Frey 2007). A significant source of acculturation stress is the parental involvement and control which some young people see as a contravention of their rights, based on their understanding of their new environment. Their cultural identity is sometimes associated with their level of self-esteem, which plays the role of a mediator in the two-culture concept. The same applies to their social group identity, which involves the feeling of belonging to both native and ethnic cultures. The unilinear model of acculturation implies that an individual loses connection with his or her original culture as he or she adapts and integrates into the second culture as part of his or her daily activities (Miller

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& Kerlow-Myers 2009). The underlying theory of the unilinear model is that alterations in cultural attachment happen one step at a time, with the original culture on one side and the new culture on the other. In contrast, the bilinear model of acculturation suggests a probability that individuals can acquire and become competent in a new culture while continuing attachments and competence in their original culture (Miller & Kerlow-Myers 2009).

This study indicated needs for holistic support to address young people's issues in education and employment, and particularly to deal with the challenges resulting from acculturation and the feeling of alienation from their parents and the new environment. Such holistic support must aim to manage and influence them for a better future. This study has shown there is a lack of appropriate support for South Sudanese families even though the current global political goal concerning refugees is to improve their ability to become self-sufficient in their new country (Bemak *et al*, 2003). It is important to address the key deficiencies in policies concerning refugees' resettlement/settlement, which neglect the long-term support required for new settlers. All participants, both parents and young people, highlighted the lack of support as contributing factors to their parenting challenges and youth challenges. McMichael *et al* (2011) argued that settlement-related services that focus on young immigrants must unequivocally connect with family-linked contexts to aid the families to resettle successfully.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted that identity, as in many other cultures, is an important part of South Sudanese culture and children's upbringing. Some young people are strongly attached to their culture of origin but also see themselves as South Sudanese-Australian, a cultural hybrid, in which they have gained new forms of citizenship. However, their new environment's experiences often impact on their ability to adapt to their new environment, particularly by the changes they face, including the expectations of their parents and the South Sudanese community to hold onto their original culture. The intergenerational conflict and the difficulties for youth navigating between the two cultures relate to the rapidity with which they become familiar with their new culture and embrace some values that may be opposite to those of their parents. Parental demands that their children preserve their cultural values while they are trying to adjust to their new environment often trigger tensions between them: these are also fuelled by the external influences that young people encounter at school and other places of intercultural contact.

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