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Blocked opportunity and threatened identity: Understanding experiences of disrespect in South Sudanese Australians¹

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Abstract

Lack of respect is a recurring theme in the literature exploring the settlement of South Sudanese Australians with refugee experiences. Qualitative interviews with nine South Sudanese Australians confirmed the strong sense of disrespect in the community brought about by blocked employment opportunities and a sense of threat to their cultural identity and traditions impelled by the intervention of regulating authorities. Self-identity and motivational posturing theories were used to unpack and explore why the intervention from family law enforcement authorities responding to reports of family violence and neglect were often met with defiance and calls for respect and respectful treatment from the community. In addition to providing a theoretical framework for understanding the sense of disrespect in the Sudanese community, this article proposes more effective approaches for Australian authorities and the Sudanese community to communicate with and attract respect from each other and the rest of the community.

Introduction

Respect and the lack of it is a recurring theme in the literature exploring the settlement experiences of refugees, particularly those from Africa.² There have been repeated calls from community leaders for more respect

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge Professor Valerie Braithwaite and colleagues at the Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet) for their generous support, encouragement, feedback and assistance with the paper. I also wish to thank the anonymous referees for helpful comments and suggestions. My gratitude is also extended to research participants and contacts who have so generously shared their insights and experiences with me.

² See for example: Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, *Settling in Australia: The Social Inclusion of Refugees* (Murdoch University: Centre for Social and Community Research, 2007a); Jo Flanagan, *Dropped from the Moon: The Settlement Experiences of Refugee Communities in Tasmania*. (Tasmania: Social Action and Research Centre, Anglicare, 2007); Eileen Pittaway and Chrisanta, Muli, "We Have a Voice – Hear us." *The settlement experiences of refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa* (Sydney: Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales, 2009); David Sang and Angela Fielding, "Community Formation and Collective Resilience in Refugee Communities" in Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, eds. *Settling in Australia: The Social Inclusion of Refugees*, (Perth: Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University, 2007): 77-96.

and respectful treatment of African refugees by the wider community. Social and human rights groups have endorsed these appeals.³ However, despite this empirical evidence on the importance of respect to refugees, no attempt has been made to further explore it. Recent qualitative interviews with nine South Sudanese Australians with refugee experiences confirm the strong sense of disrespect felt by Sudanese Australians. The two main reasons behind their sense of disrespect are blocked employment opportunities, and a sense of threat to their cultural identity and traditions impelled by the intervention of regulating authorities. This article has two objectives. Firstly, using interview data, it will clarify the meaning of respect for Sudanese Australians and explore the extent to which it can be mapped onto the Western dimensions of respect. Secondly, self-identity theories will be used to understand why regulatory interventions, such as interventions by child protection and domestic violence services, are met with strong objection, if not rejection, from the South Sudanese community.

Theories of respect

Calls for respect are all around us. It is in our everyday conversations, politics, movies, music or sport. With its general ambiguity and positive-sounding nature, it tends to float, somewhat conveniently, between several potential meanings and agents.⁴ But what is ‘respect’? While the notion of respect seems at once obvious to people, it is without a singular meaning in the literature. Rather, it is used in multiple ways across different disciplines, including social psychology,⁵ sociology and political science,⁶ philosophy,⁷ and justice.⁸ However, there are some common

³ Australian Human Rights Commission, *In our Own Words – African Australians: A Review of Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues*, (Sydney: AHRC, 2010).

⁴ Peter Balint, “Respect Relationships in Diverse Societies,” *Res Publica* 12:1 (2006): 35–57.

⁵ Richard Buttny and Princess L. Williams, “Demanding Respect: The Uses of Reported Speech in Discursive Constructions of Interracial Contact,” *Discourse and Society* 11:1 (2000): 109–133; Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and Amelie Werther, “The Social Psychology of Respect: Implications for Delegitimization and Reconciliation”, in Arie Nadler, Thomas Malloy and Jeffrey D. Fisher, eds. *The Social Psychology of Inter-Group Reconciliation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Dale T. Miller, “Disrespect and the Experience of Injustice,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 527–53.

⁶ Faith Armitage, “Respect and Types of Injustice,” *Res Publica* 12:1 (2006): 9–34; Balint; David Middleton, “Introduction.” *Res Publica* 12:1 (2006):1–7; Richard Sennett, *Respect in a World of Inequality* (New York: Norton, 2003); Iris M. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: University Press, 2000).

⁷ Robert S. Downie and Elizabeth Telfer, *Respect for Persons* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969); William K. Frankena, “The Ethics of Respect for Persons,”

elements across the disciplines. First, it is generally recognised as a basic principle of human interaction and connection. Second, the same three dimensions of respect (achieved, status, and human) occur repeatedly across the disciplines.

Achieved respect, is based on one's achievements, success and abilities, such as establishing a good career. It is owed to people on the basis of their displaying the characteristics that warrant it, to the degree that they warrant it. Hence, it is unlikely to be given equally as people's achievements differ.⁹ The second dimension, status respect, is based on one's position in society. Like merit respect, status respect accords with a view that people should have what is their due.¹⁰ In contrast to both achieved and status respect, human respect is the right of all humans because of their intrinsic worth. Unlike achieved respect, which is offered differentially and in degrees, human respect is something individuals owe to each other in equal measure.¹¹

It is evident that just within Western cultures respect cannot, and should not, be thought of as having a single meaning. It means different things in different social settings. In the view of Richard Sennett the breakdown of respect is the consequence of those who are well-off not understanding the poor, and so there are breaches in the communication of respect from one group to the other.¹² This implies that in order to treat someone with respect we need to understand them. But how much do we understand about those from other cultures, in this instance those from South Sudan? To what extent do we understand the meaning of respect for them? And without finding out and clarifying the meaning of respect to them, to what

Philosophical Topics 14: 2 (1986): 149–167; Thomas E. Jr. Hill, "Respect for persons", in Edward Craig, ed. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁸ Tom R. Tyler, "The Psychology of Legitimacy: A Relational Perspective on Voluntary Deference to Authorities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 1:4 (1997): 323–345; Tom R. Tyler and Steven L. Blader. "The Group Engagement Model: Procedural Justice, Social Identity, and Cooperative Behavior," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 7:4 (2003): 349–361.

⁹ Susanne Gibson, "Respect as Esteem: The Case of Counselling," *Res Publica* 12:1 (2006): 77–95; James Kellenberg, *Relationship Morality* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Gibson; Kellenberg; Roger Trigg, *Morality Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Stuart White, "Dignity, Self-Ownership and the Redistributive State." (M. Phil. diss., Oxford University. 1991).

¹¹ Gibson; Kellenberg; White.

¹² Sennett.

extent can we respond appropriately? Unless we know what respect means for Sudanese Australians our responses will be misguided and will fail to meet expectations.

One of the most obvious places to start unpacking the idea of respect in other cultures is to consider achievement, status and human respect in a much broader context. If we move past what we do or the qualities we display to others in Western contexts to elicit respect, and turn instead to the psychological dynamics that lead us to look for respect from others, we may have the skeleton for an intellectual framework that is more useful in non-western cultural settings. This framework is given to us by self-identity theorists and researchers.

Theories of identity and responses to threats to one's identity

Self-identity theories

Self-identity and the need to protect and affirm an overall self-concept of worth has been long recognised in psychological literature by self-theorists such as William James,¹³ Gordon Allport¹⁴ or Seymour Epstein.¹⁵ Claude Steele proposed that all ego-protective systems have the same function—to sustain self-concepts that facilitate effective behaviour. This self-affirmation system is activated whenever the perceived integrity of the self is threatened and pressured for behavioural or cognitive adaptation. He proposed that what motivates behaviour and cognitive change is threat to the integrity of the self.¹⁶ Integrity in this framework is the sense that one is a good and appropriate person; that is, one's behaviour is fitting given the cultural norms and the salient demands on people within his/her culture.¹⁷ For the people of South Sudan, many of whom came to Australia recently, and still maintain a close connection with their community in Australia, Africa and other parts of the world, a sense of integrity is tied to and informed by the cultural norms and values of their own community. What integrity means within an Australian cultural and value mindset is not only of less interest psychologically but also probably less clear to those from other cultures.

¹³ William James, *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (New York: Holt, 1915).

¹⁴ Gordon Allport, "The Ego in Contemporary Psychology," *Psychological Review* 50:5 (1943): 451–78.

¹⁵ Seymour Epstein, "The Self-concept Revisited: or a Theory of a Theory," *American Psychologist* 28:5 (1973): 404–16.

¹⁶ Claude Steele, "The Psychology of Self-affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 21 (1988): 261–302. Steele also recognised the threat to one's welfare as a motivator for adaptive behaviour, however, the focus of this research is the threat to one's self-regard.

¹⁷ Steele.

The most influential model of identity management in a new cultural environment¹⁸ is that of John Berry on acculturation strategies.¹⁹ As individuals come in contact with new cultural groups, they may simultaneously retain their heritage cultural identity, while developing the mainstream cultural identity—*integrate*; accommodate their identity to the mainstream culture—*assimilate*; reject the mainstream cultural identity in favour of their heritage cultural identity—*separate*; or reject both mainstream and heritage cultural identifications—*marginalise*. When the two cultures are seen as largely compatible, integration is by far the most preferred mode of acculturation.²⁰ Integration however is not always easy to attain. Research with African refugees in Quebec (Canada)²¹ found that only 31 per cent of participants found integration an achievable strategy. The majority of respondents, 45 per cent, found separation to be a more viable strategy. They found it easy to retain their original cultural identity but difficult to relate to the Quebecois. Another conceivable reason for separation is the perception that integration is a threat to traditional values and way of life.

Critics of Berry's acculturation theory, such as Peter Weinreich,²² point out that the model depends on a number of unquestioned assumptions, one of which is that acceptance of cultural norms of the mainstream culture does not contravene the cultural norms of the heritage culture. However, important elements of the two cultures may conflict with one another. In such circumstances, to suggest that each be equally respected is to deny the person's moral compass. Weinreich suggests that more attention should be given to the "intricacies of identity processes in multi-

¹⁸ Most research on acculturation is drawn from studies of immigrants rather than refugees. Although refugees encounter many of the same challenges and pressures as other acculturating groups, such as immigrants, their traumatic pre-immigration experiences and the involuntary *push* into the new environment distinguishes from them.

¹⁹ John W. Berry, "A psychology of Immigration," *Journal of Social Issues* 57:3 (2001): 615–31.

²⁰ Giorgia Dona and John W. Berry, "Acculturation Attitudes and Acculturative Stress of Central American Refugees," *International Journal of Psychology*, 29:1 (1994): 57-70.

²¹ Sylvie Dompierre and Marguerite Lavallée, "Degré de Contact et Stress Acculturatif Dans le Processus D'adaptation des Réfugiés Africains," *International Journal of Psychology* 25:2 (1990): 417–37.

²² Peter Weinreich, "'Enculturation', not 'Acculturation': Conceptualising and Assessing Identity Processes in Migrant Communities," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 33:2 (2009): 124-39.

cultural contexts in order to better comprehend processes of continuing enculturation in such context”.²³

Self-identity and cultural values

The extent to which identity is responsive to culture has been explored at length by social identity theorists who argue that as we move from one group that is significant to us to another group of significance our salient identity changes.²⁴ Two provisos need to be considered however. First, social identity will not grow in response to exposure to a new culture that is difficult to understand or identify with. Second, if the new culture threatens the old, capacity and motivation to learn about the new will be dramatically reduced.²⁵ Given that identity provides the individual with a framework for understanding the world and our place within it, failure to adopt a new identity becomes a persistent problem for those trying to fit into a new cultural setting. Identifying the obstacles to adopting a new identity therefore becomes a high priority.

Another way of expressing these ideas is that individuals hold normative values consistent with their identity and that place them at some social distance from other identities based on other values. As suggested by Harris, the implication of this is reciprocity between values and identity. That is, “having certain values is essential to having a particular identity.”²⁶ Hence, an attack on these cultural norms and values is experienced as an attack on one’s self-identity. This link was also

²³ Peter Weinreich, 124.

²⁴ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict”, in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds. *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979); Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior”, in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds. *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986); Michael A. Hogg and John C. Turner “Social Identity and Conformity: A Theory of Referent Information Influence”, in Willem Doise, and Serge Moscovici, eds. *Current Issues in European Social Psychology*, vol. 2, (Cambridge: University Press, 1987).

²⁵ Valerie Braithwaite, *Defiance in Taxation and Governance: Resisting and Dismissing Authority in a Democracy*. (Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, USA: Edward Elgar, 2009); John Ogbu, “Cultural Problems in Minority Education: Their Interpretations and Consequences-Part One: Theoretical Background,” *The Urban Review* 27:3 (1995a); John Ogbu, “Cultural Problems in Minority Education: Their Interpretations and Consequences-Part Two: Case Studies,” *The Urban Review* 27:3 (1995b).

²⁶ Nathan Harris, “Shame, Ethical Identity and Justice Interventions: Lessons from Research on the Psychology of Influence”, in Susanne Karstedt, Ian Loader and Heather Strang, eds. *Emotions, Crime and Justice*, (Oxford: Hart, 2011), 198.

identified by Allport. He postulated that when continuance of customary frames of reference is under threat, customary frames become personally relevant and behave like egocentric frames.²⁷

Thus the relationship between identity and cultural values is not unique to the tribes of the South Sudan. What is unique is the strength of the link between their sense of identity and continuity of culture and traditional values.²⁸ The cultures of the tribes of South Sudan, while different, share a “common holistic system which centres on the notion of linkage with the past through the lineage”.²⁹ Customs and traditions are also very influential in guiding behaviour within the family. As described by a South Sudanese father now living in Canada “Our customary law gives us...they tell us the way that we proceed with our marriage and how we need to live with your wife and kids and in the way you treat them at home”.³⁰ In essence, for people from South Sudan the continuity of their culture confers their sense of identity as individuals and their position in their family and community.

Responses to threats to self-identity

How do people protect themselves from perceived and real attacks to their identity? Steele proposed that people respond more fluidly than is typically recognised. He suggested the existence of a “larger, ego-protective self-system not geared to resolving specific self-concept threats, but geared towards maintaining an overall conception of self-integrity”.³¹ Based on experimental research Steele found that when individuals’ self-concept come under attack from external information or inconsistencies, instead of making changes directed toward the threat itself, people make changes to affirm central, valued aspects of the self.

Braithwaite draws on this work to explain the effect that governments can have inadvertently on those whose experiences are outside the

²⁷ Allport.

²⁸ Francis M. Deng, *The Dinka of the Sudan* (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1972); Francis M. Deng, *African of Two Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

²⁹ Francis M. Deng, “War Strikes at the ‘Very Soul’ of Sudan” in *Crimes of War Project*, 2002, <http://www.crimesofwar.org/sudan-mag/sudan-deng.html>, (accessed 2 January 2011).

³⁰ David C. Este and Admasu Tachble, “Fatherhood in the Canadian Context: Perceptions and Experiences of Sudanese Refugee Men,” *Sex Roles* 60:7-8 (2009): 456–466.

³¹ Steele, 267.

mainstream. Authorities threaten everyone by virtue of their power.³² Braithwaite has structured the research literature on this topic around the aspect of one's self-identity that comes under threat in regulatory encounters. She has identified three selves that may come under attack and which may come forward to defend against a regulatory regime.³³ Firstly, the regulatory demands of authorities threaten our moral self—the sense of ourselves as people who do the right thing by our own initiative and not through coercion.³⁴ Regulatory demands may also threaten our democratic collective self—the sense of ourselves as equally valued members of the community where the voices of individuals are listened to with respect and acknowledged.³⁵ Finally, regulatory demands may threaten our status seeking self by blocking pathways to successfully achieving personal goals.³⁶ In response to these threats, individuals may withdraw or resist authority. Through placing social distance between self and authority, they affirm their central, valued self.

How does this relate to the strong sense of disrespect felt by the Sudanese community, brought on by the involvement of Australian authorities to resolve family disputes? This article presents the proposition that interventions from child protection and domestic violence services threaten not only the welfare of family members involved, through such actions as the removal of one's children, but also threaten the self-identity and dignity of many Sudanese. In other words, the central thesis of this article is that the strong sense of disrespect among members of the Sudanese community and their call for more respect and respectful treatment is a response to the recurring threat to their identity.

The theory of motivational posturing

These threats from authorities are central to the motivational posturing process proposed by Braithwaite. Motivational posture is a composite of attitudes, beliefs and preferences on how an individual might position the self in relation to authority. Through their postures individuals send social

³² Braithwaite, 2009.

³³ Valerie Braithwaite, "Resistant and Dismissive Defiance toward Tax Authorities", in Adam Crawford and Anthea Hucklesby, eds. *Legitimacy and Compliance in Criminal Justice*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

³⁴ Braithwaite, 2009; Harris; Lawrence W. Sherman, "Defiance, Deterrence, and Irrelevance: A Theory of the Criminal Sanction," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30:4 (1993): 445–473.

³⁵ Tom R. Tyler, "The Psychology of Procedural Justice: A Test of the Group-value Model," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57:5 (1989): 830–838; Tyler, 1997; Young.

³⁶ White.

signals or messages to the self, others and authorities about how that authority is regarded. The significance of the term *motivational* is the reason for the posturing – to defend the self from regulatory attack.³⁷

Five motivational postures were identified through empirical analysis:³⁸ *commitment, capitulation, resistance, dismissiveness, and game playing*. The first two postures reflect accommodation to the demands of the authority, while the last three signal defiance—an unwillingness to follow the authority's prescribed path. Motivational postures are not static, and different contexts bring to the fore different postures, which in turn bring on different responses.³⁹

The postures with the most relevance to this article are *resistance* and *dismissiveness*. *Resistance* is an expression of dislike for or hostility towards an authority while accepting that the authority has legitimate power that may be used to coerce cooperation. The source of discontent is not the existence of the system, but how the system operates, such as poor decision making and inappropriate use of power. The core of this posture is grievance and insistence that authorities fix the problems. *Dismissiveness*, on the other hand, questions the authority and the soundness of the system. It reflects lack of deference for, and disillusionment with, the authority; it wants freedom from it. Disengagement towards authorities is a form of *dismissive* defiance expressed through retreat and withdrawal.⁴⁰

Methodology of study

This article draws on the stories and experiences of nine South Sudanese Australians with refugee experience, now living in Canberra or Sydney. Before the commencement of the fieldwork in 2010, approval was sought and given by the Human Research Ethics Committee, Australian National University. Participants were approached with the assistance and approval of community organisations, one in each city. After briefing representatives of the community organisations a letter of invitation to participate in an interview was passed-on to all adult members of the organisation. Some participants approached the researcher directly while others indicated their interest to participate through their community

³⁷ Braithwaite, 2011.

³⁸ Factor analysis of inventories measuring attitudes to authority and to regulatory systems and qualitative analysis of the accounts that people provide for their interactions with authority.

³⁹ Braithwaite, 2009.

⁴⁰ Braithwaite, 2009; Braithwaite, 2011.

leader. Informed consent and permission to record the interview was sought from all participants, and as a gesture of appreciation all participants were offered a \$30 supermarket gift voucher.

The participants, six men and three women, have been in Australia between three to eight years. Their ages ranged from early-twenties to mid-forties. Over two-thirds of the participants were in paid employment or were full time tertiary students. Although English was the second or third language for all participants, they spoke English either fluently or adequately. Younger male participants were single, while their older counterparts were married. All female participants were married, but they did not share a household with their husband. Backgrounds of participants were diverse, from the tribes of Dinka, Nuer, Schilluk and Madi.

A qualitative research method was adopted to ensure that the collective experiences confronting the Sudanese community was understood from their own perspective. The interviews, conducted by the author, were part of a current PhD research project. Participants were asked to describe their re-settlement experiences in Australia, followed by questions on the meaning of respect to them. Participants were asked of different forms of respect in their culture as well as specific behaviours signalling respect or disrespect. In the second part of the interview participants were asked about their own and their community's experiences of respect and disrespect in Australia. The semi-structured interviews averaged one hour.

In general, the interviewer adopted a listening role as study participants articulated the concepts and experiences that were important to them, interrupting only for purposes of clarification or in order to steer discussion back to the topic of respect. Interviews and analysis were founded in the principle that the meaning people give to their experience and its interpretation are essential and constitutive to what the experience is.⁴¹ Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the author. Data was analysed using a thematic analytic approach focusing on identifiable themes and patterns in the text.

Limitations of the study

A considerable limitation of the study is the small sample size and representativeness of the study. For example, respondents had relatively

⁴¹ MacDonald E. Ighodaro, *Living the Experience: Migration, Exclusion, and Anti-Racist Practice* (Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood Publishing, 2006).

high educational attainment and English proficiency compared to the larger Sudanese community. Therefore, caution is warranted when drawing conclusions and generalisations. Nevertheless, it might be argued that those who are relatively well educated and fluent in English might be the most resourced to ease any tensions between respect as understood from a Sudanese perspective and respect as understood from an Australian perspective. Differences or tensions identified among these least likely cases are likely to be magnified among those who are less well resourced.

Main findings - *Universal dimensions of respect*

Data from the interviews confirmed the presence of all three main universal dimensions of respect. The different forms of respect (or the lack thereof) are discussed under sub-headings for each type of respect with reference to the participant's narratives. Furthermore, similarly to the western conceptualisation of respect, human respect was held as being the right of all humans, while status respect and achieved respect were seen as proportional and given according to one's position and achievements.

The big respect, which is the super respect is based sometimes on the number of children you have, the number of family you have, the wealth you have, but ordinary respect is for everyone.

(Male participant from Canberra)

In the above quote, examples of status and achieved respects, referred to as super respect by the participant, are given according to one's position and achievements, such as the size of one's family of orientation and the number of children and wealth one has.

- *Human disrespect*

In terms of experiences of disrespect, human disrespect was the least identified dimension, though it was still identified by some of the participants.

I got called like black and other racist things, but I have heard much worse things when I was in Egypt. I experienced much harder things, so I just ignore it.

(Male participant from Canberra)

The relatively low importance participants attributed to this form of disrespect is somewhat surprising given the amount of documented

evidence of discrimination and marginalisation of refugees.⁴² While some of the respondents reported incidents of explicit racist remarks, especially on their arrival when they did not speak much English, they chose not to get too upset about it. They thought these incidents were less frequent and severe than those they have experienced in camps and transit countries prior to coming to Australia. The high level of exposure to frequent and sometimes brutal racism and violations of human rights during their time of displacement and migration may have, to an extent, desensitised them to human disrespect.

- *Achieved respect*

Achieved respect was identified by at least half of those interviewed. It was approached from two different perspectives. One respondent, who summarised her experiences of respect and disrespect as “not all your fingers are the same”, was a middle aged woman, working full time while looking after her large immediate and distant family. She thought that the way to get respect from your own as well as from the Australian community was by earning it, through hard work, perseverance, ignoring prejudiced behaviour and maintaining your loyalty and contribution to your family and community.

Other interviewees emphasised that while hard work, learning and studying were important, earning respect was difficult.

We need the government to really recruit our graduates, because our graduates loitering now, they are working in the cleaning industry and they got degrees from here. We need working agencies to start recruiting us even with our language barrier. Or else, there is no way we can survive. But when we work, we can support this country in many ways, we'll pay tax and that tax also benefits others. So there is no point of us being neglected and that's why we are saying there is no respect.

(Young male participant from Canberra).

Opportunities and access to situations in which they could apply and prove themselves, particularly employment, were restricted due to a lack of language and cultural competencies. Respondents were genuinely

⁴² Flanagan; Farida Fozdar and Silvia Torezani, “Discrimination and Well-being: Perceptions of Refugees in Western Australia” *The International Migration Review*, 42:1 (2008): 30–63; Refugee Council of Australia, *Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program, Community Views on Current Challenges and Future Directions* (Refugee Council of Australia, 2009), <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/resources/Intake%20Sub%202010-11.pdf>; Pittaway and Muli.

confused over not being given opportunities, through specialised employment schemes, to contribute to, and to feel part of, society. They felt that their hard work at Australian and overseas universities was unrecognised which led to sentiments of disrespect.

- *Status respect*

The dimension that consistently emerged from all interviews is what appears to be status respect. All respondents felt very strongly about the need to respect their values of family unity and the role of men, women and children in the family.

In South Sudanese cultures men are the head of the family with responsibility to care and discipline their wives and children. Women usually have to ask their husband's permission to do most things, although there are some variations depending on their husband's tribe. Disputes between husband and wife are often resolved within the circle of the family, members of whom may intervene to offer support and advice. However, disputes are not always resolved, and domestic violence against women continues in Sudan, in some tribes more than in others.⁴³

In Australia, Sudanese traditional modes of discipline are not allowed by law and men can be removed from their home when there is abuse. All male respondents thought that Australian Domestic Violence laws undermined the role of husbands in their community and were a threat to their family and culture. They felt very strongly about this even when their own family relationships were working well and they had no direct experience with Australian authorities.

In our culture the woman must respect the man. Like if a woman makes a mistake and I'm talking to her, never, never she talks before me, just remain silent. Even not look at me when I'm talking, she just puts her head down and she's just silent. But in Australia it is different. She will call the police.

(Young male participant from Canberra).

⁴³ Deng, 1972; Este and Tachble; Ndungi Wa. Mungai, and Bob Pease, "Rethinking Masculinities in the African Diaspora", in Mike Donaldson et al., eds. *Migrant Men, Critical Studies of Masculinities and the Migration Experience*, (New York: Routledge, 2009); Refugee Council, *A Guide to Sudanese Cultural and Social Norms*, (London: Resettlement Inter-Agency Team, Refugee Council, 2005) <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/OneStopCMS/Core/CrawlerResourceServer.aspx?resource=2C077294-18C9-49B8-9ECF-C31DB222B0C0&mode=link>, (accessed 2 June 2011).

Data collected to date through this research project from Sudanese women fail to provide sufficient information to report with confidence on how they experience intervention from Australian authorities when there is domestic violence. But as we can see from the quote below, the changed familial and community structures in settlement contexts may mean that Sudanese women need more support and more effective approaches to deal with conflict with their spouses.

In Sudan if you are not happy you talk to your family and they talk to his family and they make him do the right thing. In Australia, the woman has to tell the husband if unhappy or to do something and then he feel very disrespected and get very angry and shouts and hits her. (Female participant from Sydney).

Another commonly echoed experience is a loss of authority of parents over children. Children are a shared responsibility within Sudanese communities, and extended family members may play a prominent role in childcare and disciplining. Use of corporal punishment is seen as an acceptable part of child-rearing, and adolescents and young adults remain under strong family authority. Many of these values and practices are incompatible with Australian laws and values, leading to major family conflicts and fractures.

We bring children here, we have a bad life in our country, have the civil war, fighting, the bombs, we may eat one times a day, but when we come to Australia no bomb, no fight, a lot of food, a lot of good things, but for our children the freedom is very difficult for them. (Female participant from Sydney).

In your culture if you talk to your children and hit him, the police can take him away, but they cannot look after him. They destroy us, our families. (Female participant from Sydney).

All participants, including young adults, were genuinely concerned that giving too much freedom to children and youth in their community had harmful consequences because young people had not learnt how to exercise such freedom. It was a shared belief among respondents that Australian child protection laws undermined the role of parents, and made it difficult, if not impossible, for parents and communities to look after their families.

Responses to intervention from authorities

Participants, even those who had no direct experience with family law authorities, were distrustful of them. They were confused by the

conflicting approaches of these authorities of offering help and enforcing compliance at the same time. Refugees and support workers were told to call the police or child protection when they had family problems and needed help, but when they did so, they were faced with the potential removal of children and family members. They questioned if such removal was in the best interest of families.

We want the agencies to stop supporting the kids in running away from home and disciplining. It's not integration when you like the kid to not to listen to their parent, when you like the kid not to go ahead with their education that's not discipline, that's not integration. (Young male participant from Canberra).

Some respondents questioned the legitimacy of Australian family laws and agencies interfering in what is seen by the community as a family matter. In Sudan parents have ultimate authority over their children, and interference with this power and authority is unthinkable. Arguments between husband and wife are mediated by the extended family or the local court overseen by elders. Involvement of State authorities, such as the Police, in these matters is inconceivable. In Australia intervention from authorities to resolve disputes was seen by participants as damaging and an attack on parents' and husbands' rights. The legitimacy of these agencies and their interference with what is seen as a family matter was objected to by some of the participants, signaling a *dismissive* motivational posture.

Our internal family affairs are being taken out by Australian authorities.... Give us a chance to solve our family problem and that's the respect we want. Give us a chance to discipline our kids, so that they can learn, get education, because this way there is no education they are loitering in the street.... (Young male participant from Canberra).

The legal system here in Australia is clearly damaged our families. For instance, the law enforcement agents, they have no right to come into our families; parents have the right to bring their kids up the way they want them to. (Male participant from Canberra).

What you call domestics violence laws they cause all the divorces and are destroying our families. Our community has many divorces in here. (Male participant from Canberra).

The level of alienation and withdrawal by one of the participant was quite evident. When asked what would make law enforcement agencies more effective when engaging with Sudanese families he responded with some weariness in his voice.

The problem is not how the system can engage better with our community. That's not the issue. The issue is the system. The system here is wrong. (Male participant from Canberra).

But others, particularly more prominent members of the community acknowledged and accepted the legitimacy of Australian family laws, authorities and institutions, even though they questioned their effectiveness, signalling a *resistant*, instead of a *dismissive* motivational posture.

For me the Department of Community Services comes to help the family. But in the end it is not helpful for us. (Female participant from Sydney).

Although a number of respondents showed *dismissive* motivational postures, there was evidence of *resistant* postures too. Braithwaite suggests that motivational postures are not fixed, static, or mutually exclusive orientations, but rather they are options that come to the fore as the situation allows⁴⁴. The range of social distancing described by participants in this study shows that the orientation of the Sudanese community towards Australian authorities and law are not fixed or uniform, indicating that there is a diversity of strategies employed within the community.

Discussion

The current research confirms the strong sense of disrespect felt by Sudanese Australians. While participants were never questioned about experiences with domestic violence or child protection authorities, all participants identified their own or somebody else's experience from their community with these authorities as a major source of perceived disrespect. Another source of disrespect mentioned predominantly by male participants was blocked opportunities to achieve settlement through employment. The issues raised by those interviewed reflected the importance of status and achieved respect, both of which gave rise to greater distress and disappointment than the more commonly recognised form of human disrespect that comes about through prejudice.

⁴⁴ Braithwaite, 2009.

Stable employment is an important pathway to inclusion and settlement of refugees. It provides an income and sense of security, and enables the development of social networks and cultural skills, vital for integration. In fact, stable employment and income is at the top of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees list of essential indicators of successful resettlement.⁴⁵ Yet refugees in Australia have much higher rates of unemployment than either the resident population or non-refugee immigrants. Further, when employed, they are often underemployed and/or clustered in low occupational status immigrant employment niches. It is well documented⁴⁶ that unemployment and downward mobility have an adverse effect on refugees' integration, social inclusion and belonging, family life and their general well-being. Poor employment outcomes also represent a loss of human capital for Australia. Participants who discussed blocked employment opportunities have related their personal experiences to many of the above issues. In addition, they felt that the lack of recognition of their skills by their new country was disrespectful.

The second main source of disrespect raised by all participants is the intervention of law enforcing authorities responding to incidents of family violence in the Sudanese community. Feeling disrespected, confused and threatened when dealing with family law enforcement authorities is not unique to Sudanese Australians. A qualitative study of forty-five Australian Indigenous parents and carers who had experiences with child protection authorities found a general feeling of confusion and disrespect from authorities.⁴⁷ A common theme was confusion from parents as to the role of child protection authorities who, while providing help to families, also has a role of law enforcement, including removal of children. Further, workers from the child protection authority were seen as lacking appreciation of Aboriginal culture and different norms for raising children. In the study, disrespect was communicated in such a way as to rob parents of status respect both as carers and conveyors of culture.

⁴⁵ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Resettlement Handbook*. (Geneva: Department of International Protection, Geneva, 2004).

⁴⁶ Val Colic-Pisker and Farida Tilbury, "Integration into the Australian Labour Market: The Experience of the Three "Visibly Different" Groups of Recently Arrived Refugees." *International Migration* 45:1 (2007): 59-85; Val Colic-Pisker and Farida Tilbury, "Employment Niches for Recent Refugees: Segmented Labour Market in 21st-century Australia." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19:2 (2006): 203-29.

⁴⁷ Mary Ivec, Valerie Braithwaite and Nathan Harris, '*Resetting the Relationship*' in *Indigenous Child Protection: Public Hope and Private Reality* (Canberra: Regulatory Institutions Network Occasional Paper 14, Australian National University, 2009), http://demgov.anu.edu.au/regnet/ivec_op14.pdf, (accessed 2 June 2011).

As discussed earlier, regulatory authorities commonly threaten self-identity as they use their power to change the flow of events.⁴⁸ In fact, when we proffer the three aspects of identity, categorised by Braithwaite,⁴⁹ which may come under attack from authorities, Sudanese families dealing with family law enforcement agencies are likely to experience an attack on all three selves. First, their moral self—a sense of doing the right thing is seriously challenged by authorities that consider that Sudanese families are breaking the law and are morally in the wrong when they use traditional disciplining practices. Second, their democratic collective self—a sense of being heard and listened to, both individually and collectively, is being ignored. A recurring grievance is that child protection authorities make decisions to take away children without talking to parents and hearing their account of the issues, and without acknowledging the risks of family breakdown within these communities. Finally, their status seeking self is under attack when pathways and practices aimed at holding families together, which are incompatible with Australian law and values, are blocked by authorities.

So what is unique about the experiences of the South Sudanese community while dealing with authorities and adjusting to new values, norms and laws? Australia has always been a recipient of a range of diasporas, lately from a broad range of cultural backgrounds with markedly different values and norms. Adjustment to new laws and cultural norms was not simple and straightforward. People did what they needed to do to fit in, to the extent they saw it desirable, including changes to their social identity. After all, social identity is not static. It is an evolving quality that changes in response to new external influences, such as moving to a new cultural environment. This change, and subsequent identity adjustment, can be relatively small, such as moving from the country to the city, or it can be enormous, such as moving from Sudan to Australia.

It is harder to make such adjustments if the new culture is hard to understand and identify with, and if it is seen as oppositional, rather than additive, to the existing culture. For people from South Sudan, making adjustments through cultivating a new social identity is made difficult because of the strong links between their identity and their customary

⁴⁸ Christine Parker and John Braithwaite, “Regulation”, in Peter Cane and Mark Tushnet, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Legal Studies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Using a range of government mechanism to directly and indirectly steer behaviour, or ‘influence the flow of events’.

⁴⁹ Braithwaite, 2011.

laws and values, and because of the shock of the threat to their identity from Australian authorities. These authorities are doing their job of responding to reports of family violence and neglect and protecting victims of family conflict. However, the narratives of participants in this study tend to indicate, that in a paradoxical way, the intervention of authorities to stamp-out elements of customary practices that are incompatible with the Australian law has further reaffirmed among Sudanese people the necessity of adopting the motivational postures of *resistance* and *dismissiveness*. These postures place individuals at a social distance from authorities, allowing them to block the message of authorities and maintain all customary practices in order to restore their self-identity and dignity. It appears that a sense of threat, confusion and disrespect from authorities directed at Sudanese cultural identity became entrenched in the community. Instead of accommodating the demands of authorities, the community responded with grievance, expressed through repeated calls for respect and respectful treatment and often by defying the demands of family law enforcement authorities.

Two forms of defiance, *resistance* and *dismissiveness*, were evident in the interviews. Some participants felt sufficiently alienated to be dismissive of family law enforcement authorities and what they stood for. But others, particularly more influential and prominent members of the community, acknowledged and accepted the legitimacy of these authorities, even though they saw their interventions as non-productive. Postures of *resistance* or *dismissiveness* are not individual characteristics that are set in stone; they come and go in response to the nature of dealings with authorities. However, once a sense of disrespect, lack of trust of authorities, grievance over processes and disillusionment over purposes are sufficiently embedded, an entrenched form of defiance and rejection of authorities is more likely to take hold.

What does this mean for family law enforcement authorities and for the South Sudanese community? Authorities cannot condone unlawful and harmful practices, and Australian residents, including those from South Sudan, are required to comply with Australian laws. This discussion highlights, however, that compliance is not solely about the decisions and actions of Sudanese Australians; it involves an interactional perspective. Authorities should look for ways to communicate respect to the Sudanese community, even though they may fundamentally disagree on critical aspects of family law. Threat in one respect may be offset by praise and recognition in others. When strengths in communities are acknowledged and applauded, it becomes easier to broach areas where there may be

more fundamental disagreements on how best to achieve goals. There is evidence from the criminal justice field that communicating respect as part of a procedural justice package not only gives authority legitimacy and raise prospects for cooperation, it also leads to shared moral standards, which in turn leads to compliance with the law.⁵⁰ Likewise, praise from a regulatory authority improves prospects of cooperation and compliance.⁵¹ Once some common ground is established, building more common ground becomes possible through greater mutual understanding and joint problem solving.

At the 33rd Annual African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) Conference delegates from the Sudanese community raised a question of what their community can do to improve settlement outcomes, including relationships with authorities. One approach they can take, based on this article's analysis, is to find ways to restore the self-identity and dignity of the South Sudanese community that lie outside the domain of conflict with Australian laws and values. Other aspects of cultural values and practices may attract support and admiration from Australian authorities. These aspects can be used to affirm achieved and status respect, while work is done on finding new practices that are in accord with Australian laws and deliver to Sudanese families the stability, cohesion and mutual respect that is so fundamentally important to them.

Conclusion

The primary reason for this research was to clarify the meaning of respect for Sudanese Australians and uncover sources of the strong sense of disrespect in the community. Accordingly, interviews were guided by the approach of uncovering the meaning people give to their experience and its interpretation. To unpack the idea of respect in a non-Western context the study attempted to move beyond the enquiry of what signals respect in different cultures to explore psychological dynamics that lead us to look for respect from others. The study demonstrated the usefulness of self-identity and motivational posturing theories to explain the strong sense of disrespect and threat to cultural identity. Intervention by regulatory authorities responding to reports of family violence undermined status respect through discrediting Sudanese cultural laws and values, and questioning, within an Australian context, whether these

⁵⁰ Tom R. Tyler, "Psychology and Institutional Design," *Review of Law and Economics* 4:3 (2008): 801–887.

⁵¹ Toni Makkai and John Braithwaite, "Praise, Pride and Corporate Compliance," *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 21:1 (1993): 73–92.

families had a moral self, a democratic collective self and a status seeking self that was worthy of engagement with Australian authorities. Similarly, blocked opportunities for suitable employment served to offend moral, democratic collective and status seeking selves. Sudanese interviewees saw virtue and worth in using employment to advance and improve prospects for self, family and the Australian community. They could not see why their best efforts should be rebuffed and expressed resistance and disengagement toward the government for not affording them status respect, or rather the opportunity to earn status respect in their new country. Although findings from this study are only indicative, it highlights the importance of understanding the cultural aspects of universal construals and the value of using theoretical framework to explore what may lie behind Sudanese understandings of disrespect. These tentative findings, once confirmed, have the potential to inform Australian authorities and the Sudanese community in their efforts to communicate with and attract respect from each other and the rest of the community.

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