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Intercultural Communication Challenges Confronting
Female Sudanese Former Refugees in Australia

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Abstract
Since 2001, Australia has accepted a significant number of refugees and humanitarian entrants from Sudan, displaced as a result of two decades of continuous civil war in their homeland. This exploratory qualitative study contributes to a better understanding of female Sudanese former refugees living in Southeast Queensland, Australia, by examining the intercultural communication challenges that confront them as part of resettlement. Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 28 female Sudanese former refugees. The study investigated the challenges that confronted these women in Australia with regard to cross-cultural adaptation. Several complex, intercultural themes emerged in the interviews such as parenting challenges, marital problems, low English language competency, employment issues, and successfully settling in the host community. Their narratives are understood through the lens of various intercultural communication theories.

Background
Over the past decade, approximately 23,500 Sudanese migrants have arrived in Australia under the Federal Government's Humanitarian Program.[1] These migrants were displaced as a result of two decades of continuous civil war in their homeland and have subsequently arrived in Australia with either refugee or special humanitarian entrant status. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as, "someone outside his or her own country and unable to return as a result of well-founded fear of persecution on grounds of race, religion, nationality, public opinion or membership of a social group."[2] With the movement of such a large number of refugees in recent years, little is known about what happens to these people who have lived in, and

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[1] Department of Immigration and Citizenship, "Settler Arrivals 2008 2009," (Canberra: DIAC, 2009a) http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/settler-arrivals/settler_arrivals0809.pdf (accessed 27 January 2010); and DIAC. "Fact Sheet 60 - Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program." (Canberra: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009b) http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee.htm#d (27 January 2010).
[2] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "The State of the World's Refugees: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action," (Oxford: UNHCR, 2000): 2.

identified with one culture and then find themselves having to re-establish their life in a different host culture.

This exploratory study contributes to a better understanding of female Sudanese former[3] refugees now living in Southeast Queensland, Australia, by examining the intercultural communication challenges that confront them as part of the resettlement process. The study identifies and reports on some of the adaptation challenges that female Sudanese former refugees face as a result of cross-cultural migration.

Review of literature
Refugees face significant challenges during the resettlement process due to verbal and nonverbal communication differences between the original and host culture. These differences impact on communication not only within the existing family unit, but also with "others" in the host community. To explain such differences, we lean on the theoretical frameworks of individualism and collectivism[4], culture shock, and acculturation.[5] In some collectivistic African cultures, explicit verbal messages are not emphasized; instead, contextual cues such as time and place convey important information. Additionally, maintaining harmony through avoiding confrontation is highly valued and as a result saying "no" directly is often avoided.[6] On the other hand, members of low context cultures like Australia[7] are more likely to use direct expression rather than emphasizing the situational context. Moreover, in low context cultures, important information is conveyed in explicit verbal messages and people are able to directly express their opinions, which is not evident in high context cultures.

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[3] Although a significant number of Sudanese migrants come to Australia as refugees or humanitarian entrants, many participants in this study were granted Australian citizenship and no longer consider themselves to be refugees. Hence, in this paper, we refer to our participants as former refugees.

[4] Geert Hofstede, "Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work Related Values," (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980); and Harry Triandis, "The many dimensions of culture," *Academy of Management Executive,* 18:1 (2004): 88-93.

[5] John Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation," *Applied Psychology: An International Review,* 46:1 (1997): 5-68.

[6] Edward T. Hall, "Beyond Culture." (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976).

[7] Wendi L. Adair, "Integrative Sequences and Negotiation Outcome in Same- and Mixed-Culture Negotiations," *International Journal of Conflict Management,* 14:3/4 (2003): 273-97.

Relocation to a different culture such as that experienced by refugees, can sometimes result in culture shock,[8] wherein a sense of loss arises as a result of being uprooted from one's familiar surroundings to an unfamiliar environment. Pedersen described culture shock as a five-stage process: (a) honeymoon phase, (b) disintegration phase, (c) reintegration phase, (d) gradual adjustment phase, and (e) the interdependence phase, wherein "the individual has moved from alienation to a new identity that is equally comfortable, settled, accepted, and fluent in both the old and new cultures."[9] This final phase aims at achieving a bicultural identity, by adapting aspects of the host culture while keeping some of their own culture, and creating a unique blend of both cultures. Berry offered four categories of acculturation namely assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization.[10] However, research by Hebbani, Obijiofor and Bristed found that female Sudanese former refugees leant towards separation while their children leant towards assimilation.[11]

Cultural distance between Sudan and Australia: As mentioned earlier, there are differences between Sudanese and Australian cultures. Sudanese refugees moving to Australia come from a traditionally collectivistic culture with strict gender roles, and settle into a culture that is individualistic with comparatively fluid gender roles. As a result of such difference, the primary adaptation challenges faced by female Sudanese former refugees are in the areas of negotiating various gender roles, domestic violence, language barriers, and employment issues, each briefly reviewed below.

Negotiating various gender roles: As with many parents living outside of their familiar native culture, some Sudanese parents are also likely to want to raise their children as they themselves were raised with Sudanese customs and values. In their role as guardian, they may be particularly concerned about their children losing touch with Sudanese culture and traditions, and wholly adopting Australian culture, as it is their role to ensure that Sudanese norms, values, language and culture are not

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[8] William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim, "Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication," (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 1997).
[9] Paul Pedersen, "The Five Stages of Culture Shock: Critical Incidents Around the World," (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995: 245).
[10] Berry 1997.
[11] Aparna Hebbani, Levi Obijiofor and Helen Bristed, "Generational Differences Faced by Sudanese Refugee Women Settling in Australia," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 18:1 (2009): 66-82.

forgotten.[12]   However, against the backdrop of living outside of their original cultural context, these parents are faced with many challenges and opportunities relating to resettlement in a new country and culture, as they and their children struggle to adapt to different cultural practices, language, traditions, and ways of being.

In many African cultures, raising children is a collective responsibility, and the extended family and general community play a strong role in child care.[13] In most cases, children are expected to obey their parents and it is considered disrespectful for children to question parents and elders, and disciplinary practices which include physical punishment such as smacking can be applied.[14]   Sudanese and Australian disciplinary practices vary, as verbal commands and physical punishment (such as smacking the child) are deemed appropriate in Sudanese culture but inappropriate in Australia.   Addressing disciplinary practices in Australian and Sudanese cultures, Puoch explains that, "in the past [disciplining] might involve beating (caning), smacking, and skin pinching (practiced by women only in most [severe] occasions. These are acceptable and regarded as part of the child caring [rearing] process."[15]

According to The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (TVFST), "Among African cultures, discipline is strongly associated with the authority of and respect towards parents and elders"[16] and it is considered disrespectful for children to ask questions of parents or elders. In comparison, Australian culture encourages children to ask questions and to express their thoughts, as this is considered to be a part of a child's learning.

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[12] Department of Immigration and Citizenship, "Sudanese Community Profile," (Canberra: DIAC, 2007) http://immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-planning/_pdf/community-profile-sudan.pdf (accessed 23 January 2009); Nigar Khawaja, Katherine White, Robert Schweitzer and Jaimi Greenslade, "Difficulties and Coping Strategies of Sudanese Refugees: A Qualitative Approach," *Transcultural Psychiatry,* 45:3 (2008): 489-512; Gatwech Puoch, "Intergenerational Conflict, Changes and Resolutions Within the Sudanese Community: Parents vs. Young People," (Paper presented at the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 2006).
[13] The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, "Raising Children in Australia: A Resource Kit for Early Childhood Services Working with Parents from African Backgrounds," (TVFST, Brunswick, Vic: Australian Government, 2007).
[14] The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007.
[15] Puoch, (2006): 2.
[16] The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, (2007): 43.

Domestic violence: In Sudan, domestic violence is viewed as a family issue wherein women are expected to be disciplined by their husbands and women most often accept this cultural norm.[17] Generally, women will try to stay in the marriage for the sake of the children and because that is what is expected. If the situation becomes overly violent, divorce is seen as a last resort. However, this is not likely to happen until after other family members and senior relatives within the community have intervened. In comparison, Australian culture is less tolerant of domestic violence in any form (although it is prevalent in Australian society) and there are serious legal consequences for the perpetrator.[18] A victim of domestic violence in Australia is often advised to leave the marital home as their physical safety is considered paramount while the matter is dealt with by the legal system.[19]

Language barriers: According to TVFST, even though Sudan's official language is Arabic, a version known as Sudanese Arabic is more common.[20] In Southern Sudan, approximately 100 different languages are spoken; some major languages are Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Shilluk, Zande, Acholi and Madi. Many Southern Sudanese are multilingual, using Arabic as a second language and prefer to speak in their tribal language; an educated minority speak English.[21]

Hence, to support English language learning for refugees, the Australian Government has set up the Adult Migration English Program [AMEP] which offers up to 510 hours of free English language tuition to eligible adult permanent migrants and humanitarian entrants.[22] Past research has shown that language contributes significantly to acculturation and identity

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[17] Nyawaragak Dei Wal, "Southern Sudanese Culture." http://www.miceastmelb.com.au/documents/SouthernSudaneseCrossCulturalTrainingReport.pdf (accessed 5 January 2009).

[18] Queensland Government, "Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Legislation," 2009a, http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/violenceprevention/legislation/index.html (accessed 15 July 2009).

[19] Queensland Government, "Dealing with Domestic and Family Violence," 2009b, http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/violenceprevention/dealing_with/dealingwith.html (accessed 15 July 2009).

[20] The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, "Education and Refugee Students from Southern Sudan," (TVFST, Brunswick, Victoria: Australian Government, 2005).

[21] The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2005.

[22] Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007; and Department of Immigration and Citizenship, "Living in Australia: Adult Migrant English Program." (Canberra: DIAC, 2009c) http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/help-with-english/amep/ (accessed 7 September 2009).

reconstruction processes.[23] In support, Santisteban and Mitrani's research found that "in most immigrant families, children become fluent in English well before their parents."[24] Berry's [25] viewpoint that acculturation, including the learning of a new language, is easier when one is young compared to learning in later life (for example, when parents migrate), is supported by Santisteban and Mitrani's[26] research that showed that children fluent in English had less difficulty in adapting to the norms.

Employment challenges: The Sudanese refugee community now settled in Australia has struggled with several issues in regard to finding satisfying employment. For example, approximately 26% of Sudanese migrants have higher education qualifications,[27] but these qualifications are rarely recognized leading to professional workers employed in menial or labour oriented jobs, Additional issues include accepting temporary or casual employment as full-time or permanent jobs are unavailable, discrimination due to visible difference, and lack of work experience.[28] The Australian federal and state governments have several policies and programs (e.g. settlement grants program) in place (e.g. via Refugee

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[23] Young Yun Kim, "Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation," (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001); Val Colic-Peisker and Ian Walker, "Human Capital, Acculturation and Social Identity: Bosnian Refugees in Australia," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology,* 13:5 (2003): 337-60.

[24] Daniel Santisteban and Victoria Mitrani, "The Influence of Acculturation Processes on the Family," in K. Chun, P. Organista and G. Marin (eds), *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research,* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003): 128.

[25] Berry, 1997.

[26] Santisteban and Mitrani, 2003.

[27] Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, "Refugees and Employment: The Effect of Visible Difference on Discrimination," (Perth, WA: Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University, 2007b).

[28] Anonymous, "Refugees' Opportunities and Barriers to Employment and Training," *Labour Market Trends* 111:2 (2003): 57: Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, "'Active' and 'Passive' Resettlement: The Influence of Support Services and Refugees' Own Resources on Resettlement Style," *International Migration,* 41:5 (2007a): 61-91; Ignacio Correa-Velez and Gerald Onsando, "Educational and Occupational Outcomes Amongst African Men from Refugee Backgrounds Living in Urban and Regional Southeast Queensland," *The Australasian Review of African Studies,* 30:2 (2009): 114-127; Annabel Masquefa, "The Occupational Mobility of Skilled Sudanese Refugee Entrants in Melbourne: A Cross Sectional Study," (Unpublished Master's Thesis: University of Melbourne, 2003) http://sora.akm.net.au/publish.php (accessed 10 March 2009).

Council of Australia or ACCES Inc.) to assist migrants and refugees with gaining employment, however these issues persist.

Research on the Sudanese refugees in Australia – Identifying a Research Gap: According to Puoch, Sudanese parents (in Australia) try to maintain Sudanese knowledge and values but "are struggling to transmit this culture to the next generation":[29] Conflict of cultures occurs between young people and their parents or elderly people within the community, who with unreserved persistence are trying hard to impose the values and norms of their country of origin [Sudan]. The confrontation leads to antagonism and rejection from young people and community elders view this as a rebellion that then creates intergenerational conflict.[30]

Some research investigating issues faced by Sudanese refugees has been conducted in Australia within the disciplines of psychology, health, trauma, sociology, employment, and education.[31] The intercultural communication discipline in the US has also given some attention to examining cross-cultural experiences of Sudanese refugees.[32] However,

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[29] Puoch (2006): 2.

[30] Puoch (2006): 6

[31] See Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007b; Correa-Velez and Onsando, 2009; and Surjeet Dhanji, "Welcome or Unwelcome? Integration Issues and the Resettlement of Former Refugees from the Horn of Africa and Sudan in Metropolitan Melbourne" *The Australasian Review of African Studies,* 30:2 (2009): 152-78: Marjory Ann Ebbeck and Carmencita Dela Cerna, "A Study of Child Rearing Practices Amongst Selected Sudanese Families in South Australia," *Early Childhood Journal,* 35:4 (2006): 307-14; Edith H. Grotberg, "Resilience and Culture: Ethnicity Examples fromm Sudan, Namibia and Armenia," (Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Council of Psychologists, Padua, Italy, 1996); Khawaja, White, Schweitzer and Greenslade, 2008; Masquef, 2003; Gillian Poppitt and Ron Frey, "Sudanese Adolescent Refugees: Acculturation and Acculturative Stress," *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling,* 17:2 (2007): 160-81; Robert Schweitzer, Fritha Melville, Zachary Steel and Philippe Lacherez, "Trauma, Post-Migration Living Difficulties, and Social Support as Predictors of Psychological Adjustments in Resettled Sudanese Refugees," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry,* 40:2 (2006): 179-87; Peter Westoby, "The Sociality of Healing: Engaging Southern Sudanese Refugees Resettling in an Australian Context - A Model of Social Healing," (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Queensland, St.Lucia, Queensland, 2006).

[32] See Sara L. McKinnon, "Unsettling Resettlement: Problematizing "Lost Boys of Sudan" Resettlement and Identity," *Western Journal of Communication,* 72:4 (2008): 397-414; Julie Semlak, Judy Pearson, Najla Amundson and Anna Kudak, "Navigating Dialectic Contradictions Experienced by Female African Refugees During Cross-

there is a gap in the research literature within the intercultural communication discipline in Australia.

We can draw upon similar research by Colic-Peisker and Walker into Bosnian refugees in Australia which found that 'forced migrants have thrust upon them an administrative or bureaucratic identity of 'refugee' which is almost always seen as undesirable and as an 'identity' to be shed as quickly as possible'.[33] McMichael and Manderson in their study of Somali women in Australia found that an "identity of 'refugee' was used by the receiving society to 'justify exclusion'.[34] These two studies highlight the notion that identity reconstruction for refugees relies not only on the characteristics and resources of the refugees themselves, but also on the institutional and informal interactions between the refugees themselves and the wider community.

However, according to Berry,[35] successful integration is only possible when, "the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity. Thus, mutual accommodation is required for integration to be attained," which involves acceptance by both groups of the right to live as culturally different peoples, and clarifies that this strategy can only be pursued in societies that are explicitly multicultural, in which certain psychological pre-conditions are established,[36] such as a presence of a positive "multicultural ideology," relatively low levels of ethnocentrism, racism, and discrimination, no specific intergroup hatreds), and a sense of attachment to, or identification with, the larger society by all groups. Therefore, this exploratory study attempts to fill a gap in Sudanese refugee research within Australia from an intercultural communication perspective. We examine the challenges that confront female Sudanese former refugee parents as they navigate through resettlement into a different host culture through their lived experiences.

Cultural Adaptation," *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 37:1 (2008): 43-64.

[33] Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003).

[34] Celia McMichael and Lenore Manderson, "Somali Women and Well-Being: Social Networks and Social Capital Among Immigrant Women in Australia," *Human Organization*, 63:1 (2004): 95.

[35] Berry, 1997.

[36] John Berry and Rudolf Kalin, "Multicultural and Ethnic Attitudes in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science,* 27 (1995): 301-20.

Methods
The data for this qualitative research study was collected in September and November 2008.[37] Focus group participants were female Sudanese former refugees living in Southeast Queensland. They included 12 women who were attending English language classes at a local campus of a tertiary institution - Technical and Further Education [TAFE], and 16 women who congregated weekly as part of a Sudanese women's group at a local Southeast Queensland Catholic school.[38] The women were selected through a snowball sampling process, which was conducted prior to the interviews.[39] Building upon the existing relationships with the Sudanese community has been an important aspect of this study, as research shows that establishing a sense of trust between researchers and respondents is an integral part of data collection relating to refugee experiences.[40]

Focus group procedures: Focus group interviews were employed to "talk" with these women who came from a traditionally oral culture.[41] It was considered more appropriate to conduct focus group interviews rather than individual interviews as the conversational and participatory nature of this technique was more likely to generate topics for discussion that were of concern to the participants. As this study is exploratory in nature, the ability to elicit issues of concern to these particular women was considered more important than the researchers constraining the "talk" by asking questions thought to be relevant to the research subjects; the interviews were more of a conversation.

The researchers also applied prior knowledge of, and experience with, Sudanese values and norms to counter any cultural factors that might impact the fieldwork process. For instance, focus group methods were adapted to fit Sudanese norms where time is polychronic,[42] and therefore,

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[37] Other findings from this study have been published previously, see Hebbani, Obijiofor and Bristed, 2009.
[38] Participants were recruited through the support and cooperation of local Sudanese community leaders with whom the researchers already had established a collaborative academic relationship, the local TAFE, and the Catholic education community.
[39] Alice Bloch, "Carrying Out a Survey of Refugees: Some Methodological Considerations and Guidelines," *Journal of Refugee Studies,* 12:4 (1999): 367-383.
[40] Karen Jacobsen, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A Livelihoods Perspective," *Journal of Refugee Studies.* 19:3 (2006): 273-286.
[41] Thomas Kindermann and Jaan Valsinner, "Research Strategies in Culture-Inclusive Developmental Psychology," in Jaan Valsiner (ed), *Child Development in Cultural Context,* (Toronto, Canada: Hogrefe and Huber, 1989).
[42] Hall, 1997.

the sessions were informally structured; they started later than the scheduled time, with women joining the session as and when they walked in. The researchers also displayed cultural sensitivity by matching interviewers and interviewees by gender (for example, the male researcher did not actively participate in interviewing the females, and instead the two female researchers played the role of primary interviewers).

The focus group interviews[43] were conducted by the researchers with the help of Aaron, a male Dinka interpreter, a trusted and known member of the local community whom the participants felt comfortable with. We also engaged the services of a professional interpreter (Susan) for the Sudanese Arabic language. The women were separated into either the Dinka or the Sudanese Arabic language groups, and semi-structured, open-ended questions were used to guide the discussion of the participants' experiences of living in Australia. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we wanted to identify emerging themes rather than to confirm established hypotheses; hence no primary research questions were formulated, but instead open-ended questions were adapted from Poppit and Frey's acculturation study to suit the aims of this enquiry.[44] We decided to conduct focus groups in the participants' native languages rather than English, as participants' English competence was low. This decision is supported by Semlak, Pearson, Amundson, and Kudak, who conducted their study with female Sudanese refugees in the US in English, which some participants found difficult given that they had to speak in a non-native language.[45] The interviews were audio taped for translation into English. The English transcripts were then cross-checked by the interpreters for accuracy.

Data analysis: In analyzing the narratives of the participants, we employed open coding, and did not allocate any predetermined categories to the data.[46] While we were keen to retain the participants' 'voices' in the text, we made minor grammatical corrections to some direct quotations to ensure that meaning was not lost during the transcription

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[43] The focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes.
[44] Poppitt and Frey, 2007.
[45] Semlak, Pearson, Amundson and Kudak, 2008.
[46] Matthew Miles and A.M. Huberman, "Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods," 2nd Edition, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1994).

process.[47] Finally, in reporting our findings, we used pseudonyms for participant in quotes to maintain confidentiality.

Findings

Several complex, intercultural issues were raised during the focus group interviews with regard to their cross-cultural adaptation experiences. Participants in this study mentioned that they felt divided living between two cultures (i.e., Sudanese culture and Australian culture) and they were doing their best to balance the pressures of drawing on their own customs and traditions, while watching their children rapidly acculturate and assimilate into the Australian culture. Many recurring themes emerged in the interviews such as parenting challenges, marital problems, low language competency, employment issues, and settling in the host community.[48] Each theme is presented below to facilitate understanding and coherence.

Parent-child relationships: Participants generally felt that issues of primary concern were expectations in relation to appropriate family roles and notions of proper behaviour within the family.[49] Many of the women said they experienced conflict as a result of their children rejecting traditional Sudanese norms of appropriate behaviour. Interestingly, while participants were not directly asked to talk about matters relating to methods used to discipline their children in Australia, many of the women raised the topic themselves as they were concerned about the differences in child-rearing practices between Sudan and Australia, as well as the respective legal systems. Even though Sudanese and Australian disciplinary practices vary, and verbal commands and physical punishment are deemed appropriate in Sudanese culture,[50] conflict arose within the family unit because the children were aware that such physical punishment was not acceptable in Australian culture, and they then expected (and sometimes demanded) that their Sudanese parents adopt Australian methods of disciplining children. Dabora explains:

> It is really a shock to the parent who recently came from Sudan to find it is really very, very, very hard to touch your own child, your biological child. So they are happy [for] anyway to learn from Australian society [how to discipline children] and is really

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[47] This method was employed by previous researchers; see Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003: and Ebbeck and Dela Cerna, 2006.

[48] We acknowledge that concepts such as culture, parenting styles and societal norms are not static but fluid. Themes that are presented here emerged from the participants' narratives and shared experiences.

[49] See Khawaja, White, Schweitzer and Greenslade, 2008.

[50] The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007.

very hard sometimes to change this drastically, it takes time. So it is something that they were brought up in, so they don't see the reason why you don't [physically] punish your own child.[51]

Given that physical punishment was deemed appropriate in Sudanese culture,[52] Aaliyah viewed slapping as an acceptable form of disciplining children in Sudanese culture. She was surprised to learn that such practice was unacceptable in Australia with serious consequences:

But in Australia, it's child abuse. And sometime, when child maybe 9-year-old or 11 years or 10 years, he or she can phone the police and become a problem. It happened that many children might be removed from the parent, because of such a discipline. They don't allow that one in Australia, they consider it to be punishment, but in our culture, it's normal. You can discipline your child, you can cane your child, you can slap or, yeah, that one is normal, but here in Australia, [it] is a big problem.[53]

As discipline was strongly associated with the authority of and respect for parents and elders, the participants considered it disrespectful when children questioned parents or elders as it appeared that the children were also questioning the traditional authority and status within the family unit when compared to what was practiced back home in Sudan in regard to obedience, respect, and control.[54] This view is supported by Puoch[55] who found that young [Sudanese] people misinterpret freedom by being involved in parents' decision making and talking back to their parents as equals.

Freedom and independence: Some women felt that their children had too much freedom and independence and that this contributed to their lack of respect for elders compared to what was practiced in Sudan, particularly in regard to obedience, respect, and control. Gabrielle explained how the young ones try to use the Australian legal system to their advantage:

So it seems that our kids are really longing for independence. Not because to benefit from [it], but because to do whatever they like. That's why some of them normally they go to police and say that

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[51] Focus group interview with Dabora, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008.
[52] Puoch, 2006.
[53] Focus group interview with Aaliyah, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008
[54] The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2007.
[55] Puoch, 2006.

he's being mistreated at home. They want police to intervene and isolate them so that they behave the way they want.[56]

Evidence from our data shows that both generational and cross-cultural tensions appeared to be quite commonplace. Not only are there issues in relation to the testing of boundaries, freedom and independence, there is also no such thing as privacy[57] which is common practice in Australian culture. Several participants agreed with Helena's comments about the problems this caused when dealing with children as they struggled with the concept of privacy:

> I have two children. I have a son who's nine and I have a daughter who's twelve. And, she [daughter] comes and tells me, 'Mummy you cannot tell me anything. I can shut my door, I want privacy and I don't have to listen to you, otherwise I'll go tell police.'[58]

Overall, participants' narratives in our study, revolved around physical punishment as a primary form of disciplining children. It was also evident that they experienced difficulties in trying to resolve this issue in respect to the two parties taking on two divergent positions. This, along with the fear associated with the potential interference by police authorities, seems to make the task of disciplining children even harder and more worrisome for the parents.

Marital problems of Sudanese couples in Australia: As Sudanese culture viewed domestic violence as a family issue,[59] women were supportive of staying in the marriage to keep the family unit intact unless the situation got out of control. Against the backdrop of living in the Australian culture that: (a) does not tolerate domestic violence and advises victims to leave the relationship if their safety is at risk, and (b) values everyone's (children and adults) access to more "independence" and "freedom," Sabina spoke in favour of keeping the family unit intact:

> In our culture men and women can fight, yeah, you can fight and you stay. But here [in Australia], if the men talk with the lady, and she upset, she can call the police, and the police come and take the kids and the lady. It is very hard. I am not happy with this one at all. This I think they encourage the ladies to do the bad things for

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[56] Focus group interview with Gabrielle, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008
[57] Wal, 2004.
[58] Focus group interview with Helena, Brisbane, Australia, 7 November 2008.
[59] Wal, 2004.

the men and it is not good in our culture. Yeah, because the kids they want mother and dad to be together.[60]

Dabora elaborated on some differences between Sudanese and Australian culture in relation to resolving marital issues:

In our culture, if you are married, you are not allowed to have love outside marriage, maybe a boyfriend or somebody, you don't love somebody outside marriage. You will stick to your husband. And he'll [not] separate you. That one is saying we can't change that one. Even if your husband is maybe hostile to you or that, they have to sit as a family and sort it out what [is] to be done about this, but it is not easy to divorce, because his misbehaviour, because he's financially stable. That one [divorce] is not allowed.[61]

Communicating - Impact of English language proficiency on settlement: We found that differences in levels of English language proficiency within a family affected communication between family members. Additionally, low levels of English language proficiency hampered communication with, and adaptation to, the mainstream Australian society. In most cases, refugee children became more proficient in English faster than their parents. Subsequently, the children helped to bridge the communication gap between their Sudanese parents and members of the wider Australian society. Owing to their poor command of the English language, Sudanese parents depended a great deal on their children to communicate on their behalf. These language barriers affected simple day-to-day activities such as grocery shopping, access to social services, talking with neighbours, as well as more important communication scenarios such as gaining employment or conducting financial transactions. Kadri drew on her own experience to shed light on the language problem by explaining how her children help her to communicate with others:

I have a very good neighbour who is Australian and we try to talk a little bit. Like 'Good morning, how are you?,' 'Where you live? 'Inala.' 'Where you from? 'Eritrea'.[62] I use my daughters as interpreters. I've learned a few things like I can say 'hello',' good morning', 'where are you from?', 'where do you live?' But

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[60] Focus group interview with Sabina, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008.

[61] Interview with Dabora, 2008.

[62] Although this participant was born in Eritrea, she considered herself to be Sudanese as she had lived in Sudan (after infancy) as a refugee for 15 years before arriving in Australia.

most of the time my daughters interpret for me. I got two daughters [aged] 20 and 19. They are still studying - one is in TAFE, three are in high school. It's just the language problem.[63]

Focus group participants broke out in laughter when a woman said, "First problem with children – [when] I speak to them [they say], 'Mum, you're speaking wrong English!'" But I did not experience difficulties with the English language, "We're still very Sudanese at home. We speak Arabic at home, so there has been no change." An example of a successful integration strategy by code switching[64] was given by Kadri:

I've got tri-lingual kids at home; they speak Achouli, they speak Arabic, and they speak English. When I go to my mother, they [the children] speak to their grandmother in their tribal language, to their Aunties in Arabic and English at school.[65]

Many of the women agreed that on arrival in Australia, the English language was difficult to learn. Furthermore, they recognize that it is hard to learn another language as an adult. Sabina's experience highlights the difficulties faced by new refugees on arrival:

When we first arrived here they brought us from the airport and took us home. We were shown where all the services were so we didn't really face any problems. I went to my first shopping experience, got into the shops all the things looked the same, I couldn't speak a word of English. I just want[ed to go] back home with my empty bags. My husband who knew a little bit of English came back to the shops and I was going around in circles. We just picked up the stuff and came back home.[66]

Sabina summed up the need for Sudanese refugees to develop English language proficiency as a way of successfully acculturating into Australian society:

My husband says back in Sudan no petrol, no gasoline for the lights, we were lucky to find a donkey pulling a cart to get to places. Here [Australia], there is petrol, and my daughters are in

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[63] Focus group interview with Kadri, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008.

[64] For more information on 'code switching' see Cindy Gallois and Victor Callan, "Interethnic Accommodation: The Role of Norms," in Howard Giles, Justine Coupland and Nikolas Coupland (eds), *Contexts of Accommodation: Developments in Applied Sociolinguistics*, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 245-69; Howard Giles, Justines Coupland and Nikolas Coupland, *Contexts of Accommodation: Developments in Applied Sociolinguistics*. Eds. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. 1991.

[65] Interview with Kadri, 2008.

[66] Interview with Sabina, 2008.

school, so all I need is to learn English. It is definitely the English.[67]

A number of women reported that having a relative in Australia who was fluent in English was helpful and reduced some of the challenges of settling in. For example, "Because my brother was here, so he took care of me" and "My husband speaks fluent English so he took care of us; we didn't really face much problems." Overall, it was agreed that if someone in the family understood and spoke English, life was easier when they arrived. Addressing the assistance of language services available for new arrivals, Aaliyah commented, "I was also picked up from the airport, there was an Arabic interpreter and people from the settlement services."[68] The provision of an interpreter at the time of arrival temporarily bridged the communication gap for Aaliyah and her family and she expressed the view that it was of great assistance to her as a refugee arriving in a new country.

Concept of Mama: Aaron explained the difference between Australian and Sudanese communication patterns:

> Normally, we don't address like such a woman (referring to other Sudanese women present) by name, in our culture we say 'mama' and it's not [like] that in Australian culture. So I can call her mum although she's not my biological mum. Culturally, I'm supposed to do that. So when you heard me calling her mum, that does not mean that is my biological mum.[69]

Improved life in Australia: When asked about the similarities and differences between life in Sudan and life in Australia, the participants expressed divergent views. For example, Ide did not want to answer this question as she did not want to talk about her past. All she said was, "Australia is fine."[70] But in contrast to this, Doli was much more willing to talk about her experience:

> The biggest difference is, here, I can learn. There are no opportunities there [Sudan] – many more here [in Australia]. Security - I feel more secure here. Adults can get education here which is totally absent in Sudan. Here you have to learn – you are forced to learn. Back home there you want to learn, you don't want to learn – it's up to you. It's good that we are forced to

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[67] Interview with Sabina, 2008.

[68] Interview with Aaliyah, 2008.

[69] Focus group interview with Aaron, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008.

[70] Focus group interview with Ide, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008.

learn. If I wanted to take my kids in Sudan to learn English it costs lots of money – it's good for my children. We also get better medical care. We also have better transport here. When I arrived here, I had to put my finger print instead of my signature, now I can write my name, my father's name, my street address, my kids are at school. I am not very happy because I had to leave my family behind to come here, but this country is really, really good. I'm very happy here.[71]

Following on from this, one participant suggested that, "the community spirit here is the same – people say hello to each other,"[72] but other participants like Aaliyah did not agree with this, and directly contradicted this statement. Having good (friendly) neighbours and coming to a welcoming community was seen as helpful in the settlement process. However, some participants like Doli did not feel they were welcome:

We are used to having a vibrant community life back home – here all you get is a 'yellow' smile, which is not exactly what you expect and neighbours don't get to know each other, they don't visit each other. Often you say hello to your neighbor, they don't answer you, you feel like they're scared of you.[73]

Helena had a similar experience, "I've got a good neighbour on one side, on the other side I've got a neighbour if you say hello he turns around the other side [and] pretends he doesn't see you."[74] Ide's comment reflects the differences in social relationship in Australian and Sudanese societies,

Back home if you get sick you call for your neighbour. Here you have the three zeros [referring to Australia's 000 emergency hotline number]. Your neighbour will never come and ask: 'were you OK'?[75]

In contrast, Aaliyah noted that she had very good neighbours including an elderly woman. In light of these differences, it could be assumed that each participant's worldview was shaped by their own experiences within the host community; some were positive and others were negative.

Employment issues: Some members of this Sudanese former refugee community have struggled to find satisfying long-term employment. This has led to a situation where some of them have to accept menial jobs

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[71] Focus group interview with Doli, Brisbane, Australia, 9 September 2008.
[72] Interview with Sabina, 2008.
[73] Interview with Doli, 2008.
[74] Interview with Helena, 2008.
[75] Interview with Ide, 2008.

regardless of educational and/or professional background.[76]   Rachel experienced high acculturation stress[77] and became very emotional when she talked about the problems her husband faced with gaining employment in Australia:

> I just want to say that to come here and start a new life it's very hard - with everything. Because the culture is different and even you bring your own education or all your papers and everything and here in Australia they can't recognize so you have to start again from the beginning so that's why it's very, very difficult. What I said their papers when they brought it from Sudan they can't recognize in here because like for example, my husband is an accountant, even back home also he was an accountant. When he came here they can't recognize his papers so he has to start again. And he did. But finally when he finished the course, the diploma, he can't get a job. So for three years he was looking for a job and he couldn't find it. See, it's very hard….[78]

Even though the Australian federal and state governments have several policies and programs in place to assist migrants and refugees with gaining employment, she explained, "Yes, they are saying that and we heard that too, but still we didn't find any result from that."[79]

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that for these female Sudanese former refugees, the resettlement experience is problematic in terms of interpersonal and intercultural communication owing to significant cross-cultural differences. For example, Sudanese parents who are brought up in a collectivistic culture where obedience and respect for elders is the expected norm are surprised and/or feel dejected when their children challenge their authority, one of the elements of behaviour common

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[76] For more studies examining employment issues among Sudanese refugees in Australia see Correa-Velez and Onsando, 2009; Dhanji, 2009; and Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007b. The present authors are currently working on a further study into communication issues faced by former refugees when looking for employment. While some Sudanese migrants come to Australia with higher education qualifications, others complete tertiary study after arrival. Past research has found that a significant number of Sudanese former refugees had difficulty finding employment, while others were likely to take up jobs below their level of skill and qualification or outside of their chosen profession.

[77] For a discussion of acculturation distress see Young Yun Kim, "Inquiry in Intercultural and Development Communication," *Journal of Communication*, 55 (2005): 554-77.

[78] Focus group interview with Rachel, Brisbane, Australia, 7 November 2008.

[79] Interview with Rachel, 2008.

among people in individualistic societies.[80] We also found that when some marital relationships were strained, the wife would call the police, and the authorities would intervene and suggest divorce as an option, when traditional Sudanese culture encourages keeping the family unit intact.

In addition, low levels of English competency seemed to play a major role in settlement by impacting interpersonal relationships within the home and intercultural relationships outside the home. Research also suggests that language contributes significantly to the processes of both acculturation and identity reconstruction.[81] For families with a refugee background, roles may have to be renegotiated, and in some cases reversed completely when children become the voice of the family.[82] In this way, the ability to communicate outside the home and therefore become a member of the host society's language community can provide a vehicle for constructing a new, "intercultural identity."[83] Conversely, the reconstruction of identity can be adversely affected when one does not have the capacity to speak outside the home.[84] Moreover, the ability to effectively communicate can also influence the potential for refugees to find employment, which is another important factor in identity reconstruction as well as integration.[85]

It appears that the female Sudanese former refugees in our study felt a sense of cultural loss as a result of moving to an unfamiliar and different culture. These women seemed to be in the separation phase[86] whereas their children were in the assimilation phase.[87] Thus, they perhaps need to arrive at a final phase of achieving a bicultural identity by creating a

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[80] Catherine Caldwell-Harris and Ayse Aycicegi, "When Personality and Culture Clash: The Psychological Distress of Allocentrics in an Individualistic Culture and Idiocentrics in a Collectivist Culture," *Transcultural Psychiatry,* 43:3 (2006): 331-61.

[81] Kim, 2001; and Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003.

[82] Mano Candappa and Itohan Egharevba, "Negotiating Boundaries: Tensions Within Home and School Life for Refugee Children," in R. Edwards, ed., *Children, Home and School: Regulation, Autonomy or Connection*, (London: Routledge, 2002): 155-71.

[83] Kim (2001): 71.

[84] Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003.

[85] Reed Coughlan and Judity Owens-Manley, "Surviving War, Starting Over: Adaptation of Bosnian Refugees in Upstate New York," In P. Waxman and Val Colic-Peisker, eds., *Homeland Wanted: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement in the West,* (New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2005): 127-45; Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003.

[86] Berry, 1997.

[87] These findings are published in Hebbani, Obijiofor and Bristed, 2009.

unique blend of both cultures over time. But as stated earlier in the paper, achieving this level of bicultural identity can only be possible when both societies need to be mutually accommodative with relatively low levels of ethnocentrism and discrimination. As the narratives in our paper illustrate, having good relationships within an immediate Australian community (such as neighbors) helped in settlement, whereas having poor relationships strained settlement.

Limitations and suggestions for future research: There are many issues yet to be explored in relation to the intercultural communication experiences of Sudanese former refugees living in Australia. For instance, with regard to the sample of this study, only women's voices and narratives were gathered. It is important to access the voices of other members of the community in order to enhance our knowledge and understanding of Sudanese people living in Australia. This would also result in a more holistic understanding of parenting issues that confront members of this population. Interviewing children would also provide important perspectives on their experiences while living in a new culture. Additionally, the research was conducted within one geographical area; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all Sudanese former refugees in Queensland or Australia. However, the findings of this study point to a need for further investigation on this topic.

For the purposes of this study, participants were contacted by employing snowball sampling methods. Bloch acknowledges that refugee research often resorts to this method of locating participants as it is difficult to access this community any other way. But she also concedes that this sampling method can be problematic, given that, "there can be the overdependence on one network which means there is a danger of interviewing people with similar experiences."[88] In light of this argument, we suggest further research using other sampling methods, as these may provide access to wider experiences within the Sudanese refugee community. There is also a need to explore in-depth communication issues surrounding marital relationships, employment communication, and conflict resolution strategies, in order to get a holistic understanding of issues faced by this population.

Regardless of the theoretical framework, methodological approach, or limitations, additional research that seeks to develop a clearer, holistic understanding of the Sudanese former refugee experience is needed.

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[88] Bloch (1999): 372.

Ideally, elders, parents, and children need to be considered with a view to positively maximizing their resettlement experience. Further research should provide an inclusive and realistic view of Sudanese life in a cross-cultural context. The research should aim to advance existing knowledge with a view to fostering constructive intergenerational, intercultural, and cross-cultural relationships as these people reshape their lives in a new country.

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by Aparna Hebbani and Helen Bristed

Aaron (interpreter), Dabora, Aaliyah, Gabrielle, Sabina, Kadri, Ide and Doli, all interviewed in Brisbane, Australia.on 9 September 2008.
Helena and Rachel, interviewed in Brisbane, Australia.7 November 2008.