

‘Walking the Line’: Southern Sudanese Narratives and Responding to Trauma

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	IV
GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS	VI
DECLARATION	VII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VIII
READING GUIDE	IX
CHAPTER 1	
ON BECOMING INVOLVED: SUDANESE NATIONALS RESETTLING IN AUSTRALIA	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY.....	4
<i>A brief historical overview – Sudan 1956 to present</i>	7
<i>The ‘Lost Boys’</i>	9
<i>Resettlement – coming to Australia</i>	11
CONCEPTUALISING THE STUDY: REFUGEES AND TRAUMA.....	12
<i>Refugee status and well-founded fears</i>	12
<i>Locating the ‘refugee experience’</i>	13
<i>Recognising trauma and sensitising concepts</i>	14
<i>Differentiating ordinary and extra-ordinary stories</i>	16
<i>Using a narrative informed approach</i>	17
OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS	19
SUMMARY	22
CHAPTER 2	
RESEARCH DESIGN AND ACCESSING THE COMMUNITY	23
INTRODUCTION.....	23
PART ONE: RESEARCH DESIGN.....	23
<i>Epistemological perspective</i>	24
<i>Theoretical perspective – symbolic interactionism</i>	25
<i>Methodology – constructivist grounded theory</i>	26
<i>Method – ethnographic fieldwork and conducting interviews</i>	29
PART TWO: ACCESSING THE COMMUNITY AND FIELDWORK.....	30
<i>Gaining entry to the community – accessing ‘authentic’ knowledge</i>	31
<i>Sharing stories</i>	32
<i>Participant recruitment</i>	33
<i>Setting the scene and establishing rapport</i>	34
<i>Establishing safety and implications of going deeply</i>	35
<i>Differentiating being and doing – incorporating reciprocity</i>	37
PART THREE: CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEWS	40
<i>Conducting the interviews</i>	40
<i>Double storied testimony</i>	41
<i>Transcription</i>	45
<i>Refining understandings of the initial interview</i>	47
SUMMARY	48
CHAPTER 3	
DATA ANALYSIS AND LOCATING THE RESEARCH	49
INTRODUCTION.....	49
PART ONE: ANALYSING THE DATA.....	49
<i>Initial coding process – line by line and capturing actions</i>	50
<i>Writing memos</i>	51
<i>Computer assisted software and NVivo</i>	51

<i>Focused coding</i>	53
<i>Theoretical sampling</i>	54
<i>Ongoing memo writing and creating categories</i>	55
<i>Elevating categories to concepts and theory generation</i>	57
PART TWO: CONSIDERATIONS OF THE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS.....	57
<i>Participant demographics and representation</i>	58
<i>Saturation</i>	60
<i>Establishing rigour – fit and relevance</i>	61
<i>Questions of ‘authentic’ knowledge</i>	63
<i>Inter-rater reliability and other considerations</i>	65
<i>Locating oneself in the research – a personal reflection</i>	66
SUMMARY.....	68
CHAPTER 4	
THE ‘REFUGEE EXPERIENCE’ AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF TRAUMA	69
INTRODUCTION.....	69
PART ONE: THE RISE OF TRAUMA RESEARCH AND DEBATE IN FORCED MIGRATION STUDIES.....	70
<i>Provisionally engaging trauma</i>	72
<i>Negative effects associated with forced migration and trauma</i>	73
<i>Another perspective – resilience, recovery and growth</i>	75
PART TWO: CRITIQUING TRAUMA FOCUSED INQUIRY.....	76
<i>The domain of individual psychology and pathologised understandings</i>	77
<i>Failure to appropriately recognise the structural forces and powerful institutions that directly influence people’s daily lives</i>	79
<i>Inadequate acknowledgement of local, indigenous and traditional forms of healing, and idioms of distress</i>	82
PART THREE: TOWARDS HEALING AND ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES.....	86
<i>The contexts of recovery</i>	88
<i>Testimony</i>	89
SUMMARY.....	91
CHAPTER 5	
CONCEPTUALISING TRAUMA	93
INTRODUCTION.....	93
PART ONE: DELINEATING EXPRESSIONS OF TRAUMA.....	95
<i>Establishing most difficult and ongoing effects</i>	95
<i>Differentiating traumatic events and traumatised people</i>	97
PART TWO: EXPRESSIONS RELATING TO FORCED MIGRATION.....	101
<i>SOCIAL DOMAIN: The ‘Separation’</i>	101
<i>SITUATIONAL DOMAIN: Work, Education and Exclusion</i>	103
PART THREE: EXPRESSIONS RELATING TO RESETTLEMENT.....	107
<i>SOCIAL DOMAINS: The Separation and the Transnational Gaze</i>	108
<i>SITUATIONAL DOMAINS: Adapting to New Contexts</i>	112
SUMMARY.....	117
CHAPTER 6	
RESPONDING TO TRAUMA	120
INTRODUCTION.....	120
PART ONE: RESPONDING TO TRAUMA AND LOCATING HOPE.....	121
<i>SOCIAL DOMAIN: Two Hands Clap Together, One Hand Cannot</i>	122
<i>SPIRITUAL DOMAIN: A Spirit Working in the Air</i>	127
<i>AGENTIAL DOMAIN: Commitment and Struggle</i>	131
PART TWO: PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND ENGAGING TRAUMA.....	136
<i>Building and bridging relationships</i>	137
<i>Talking about trauma – ‘going slowly slowly’</i>	138
<i>Speaking as HELPFUL – notions of catharsis</i>	139
<i>Speaking as UNHELPFUL – the ‘culture of counsellors’</i>	141
<i>Psychological and practical outcomes</i>	142
SUMMARY.....	146

CHAPTER 7	
WALKING THE LINE: NEGOTIATING A WORKABLE SYNTHESIS BETWEEN ONE'S PAST AND PRESENT	148
INTRODUCTION.....	148
PART ONE: LOCATING LANDSCAPES AND SUDANESE RESETTLEMENT	150
<i>Liquid societies</i>	152
<i>Agonistic horizons – cautions of monolithic concepts</i>	153
PART TWO: HYBRIDITY AND LINKING ONE'S PAST WITH THE PRESENT.....	157
<i>Negotiating masculinity and gender relations</i>	160
<i>Youth relations and raising children</i>	163
PART THREE: INTEGRATION AND BUILDING SOLIDARITY.....	166
<i>Social cohesion and 'orientations' of acculturation</i>	167
<i>Integration and social capital – the 'bridgers' and the 'bonders'</i>	169
SUMMARY	172
CHAPTER 8	
WALKING THE LINE: UNDERSTANDINGS OF PROFESSIONAL AND REFUGEE LIVES	174
INTRODUCTION.....	174
PART ONE: THEORISING WHAT IS AT STAKE	175
<i>Recognition theory</i>	175
<i>Recognising the misrecognisers</i>	180
PART TWO: THE SOCIAL JUSTICE LINE AND BUILDING CAPACITIES.....	184
<i>A civilised, decent or just society?</i>	185
<i>Civilised society: addressing interpersonal practice</i>	186
<i>Decent society: addressing practice in broader realms</i>	190
SUMMARY	198
CHAPTER 9	
CONCLUSION AND THE MOSAIC OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE.....	201
INTRODUCTION.....	201
WEAVING THE THREADS TOGETHER	201
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: LOCATING THE POINTY END OF THE LINE	203
<i>Operationalising the domains together</i>	206
<i>Final reflection and a return to the beginning</i>	207
CONCLUSION.....	208
APPENDICES	211
WORKS CITED.....	220
ATTACHMENT: MARLOWE'S PEER REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS	246

List of Tables

TABLE 7.1: THE FOUR ORIENTATIONS OF ACCULTURATION, ADAPTED FROM BERRY (1980)	168
TABLE 8.1: MEDIAN INCOME BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH, ADAPTED FROM DIAC (2009B) DATA	177

Abstract

This study reports an ethnographic engagement with a relatively small group of Southern Sudanese men and their communities living in Adelaide, South Australia. It develops a grounded substantive theory about how Southern Sudanese men both conceptualise and respond to trauma in forced migration and Australian resettlement contexts.

Using a constructivist grounded theory design allowed the study to be informed by two sets of experiences. Data were gathered from seventy in-depth interviews with twenty-four Southern Sudanese male participants, all of whom speak English and are often leaders within the Adelaide Sudanese community. The study is also informed through the researcher's broader engagement with this community in the form of attending celebrations, mourning ceremonies and special events. These interactions provide important understandings for deconstructing powerful discourses on trauma, resettlement and healing.

A key argument behind the study is that through media-based representations, political commentary and a significant part of the academic literature, the dominant understanding of the Sudanese community is often generated through a trauma focused lens. The associated stories of the 'refugee experience' and isolated accounts of violence in resettlement contexts can construct the community as traumatised and their actions as the outcomes of war trauma. Whilst there is little argument that refugees often experience very difficult and traumatic events, it does not necessarily follow that they are indelibly damaged people. Critical engagement with participants' stories and the broader Sudanese community provides a justification for using a framework that not only documents the impact of trauma in people's lives but also how they respond to such experiences.

The word 'trauma' is highly familiar to the study participants. It is something they identify as having helped them to gain entry into refugee camps, acquire refugee status and access services in Australia. In many respects, trauma represents a powerful currency that helps refugees lay their claims for recognition as just that - refugees. However, this recognition, while granting some benefits and resources, also limits opportunities to participate as peers in civil society due to 'othering' dynamics.

The extended engagement with these Sudanese men highlights that they have many tools and knowledges with which to respond to profound difficulties and locate appropriate social, spiritual and agential pathways to healing. It is argued, however, that the exclusionary experiences of poverty, unemployment and racism can limit their ability to access such resources. The frequently used participant expression of ‘walking the line’ provides a metaphor for theorising how Sudanese participants negotiate a workable synthesis between their past and present in resettlement contexts where they must adapt to a new social reality. ‘Walking the line’ highlights the complexity of navigating between two different social worlds and the associated challenges of transnational movement and social transformation.

This study concludes that practitioners, researchers and policy makers also need to ‘walk the line’ through rethinking familiar perspectives on refugees, resettlement and trauma. The value of trauma focused inquiry is not questioned, but its primacy must be engaged critically and reflectively. This means validating and dignifying the impact of trauma in people’s lives while considering their pathways to healing and agency. Such a focus requires considering both past and present realities, and thinking about the associated role of social work from interpersonal to broader systemic levels. This study reinforces how professionals working with resettling communities need to conceptualise practice beyond dichotomous perspectives and embrace complexity at the ‘pointy’ end of ‘the line’.

Glossary of Acronyms

ABC - Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS - Australian Bureau of Statistics
AMEP- Adult Migration English Program
CALD - Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CPA - Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Sudan)
DIAC - Department of Immigration and Citizenship (Australia)
DSM IV - Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
GTM - Grounded Theory Methodology
ICC - International Crimes Court (currently under The Hague)
IHSS - Integrated Humanitarian Services Strategy
IDP - Internally Displaced Person
NGO - Non Governmental Agency
NHMRC - National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia)
NIF - National Islamic Front
OAU - Organisation of African Unity
PTSD - Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
SAIL - Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning program incorporated
SBS - Special Broadcasting Service (Australia)
SGP - Settlement Grants Program
SORA - Sudanese Online Research Association
SPLA/M - Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army/ Movement
STSA - Sudanese Tertiary Student's Association
TFPE - Trauma Focused Psychiatric Epidemiology
UN - United Nations
UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCR - United States Committee for Refugees

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.¹

Jay Marlowe

Date

¹ There have been four peer reviewed publications arising directly from this study (Marlowe, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010). These publications are not explicitly referenced in the main text; three are attached at the end of this study and the 2010 publication is still in press.

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I would also like to thank my primary supervisor Dr Lorna Hallahan who provided direction when it was needed, a sustained critical engagement and the distance to wrestle with tough questions that necessitated time and deeper consideration. One of your greatest strengths is the ability to bring out the best in people, and I hope that this thesis reflects your time and commitment to my work. Thanks also to my secondary supervisor Associate Professor Carol Irizarry who has now provided more than five years of mentorship. You have modelled the importance of building castles in the sky and then ensuring that solid foundations are placed under them.

To my family – Dad, Mom, Britt and Michelle, I wish to thank you for your consistent support throughout my entire education. You have provided the role modelling to make this work what it is in many respects.

I would like to thank the staff at the Refugee Studies Centre and Professor Roger Zetter as my academic supervisor for accepting me as a visiting study fellow and engaging with the final analysis and writing of this study. This opportunity has provided a deeper engagement with my thinking on many levels.

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Reading Guide

This research was initially intended to focus on forced migration, but continually and without exception the community interactions and participant interviews shifted the focus onto resettlement issues. This shift represents the reason why the Sudanese men chose to participate, as their interests and concerns, often at a community-based level, relate to present- and future-based sentiments. Therefore, most participant quotes are prefaced and written in the present tense. Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 in particular, which discuss participants' comments, are written predominantly in the present tense. The past tense is used in sections outlining Sudanese history, to explicate the process of conducting the research and in discussion. This writing approach, fluctuating between present and past tenses to emphasise the importance of present-based inquiry and reflection, locates the multiple contextual timeframes situated within the study.

Due to the study's constructivist orientation and the researcher's ethnographic engagement with the Sudanese community in Adelaide, several sections are written in the first person. This decision reflects the need to make myself, as the researcher, more visible, and to further illustrate the interpersonal relationships built with the community over several years.

Throughout the thesis, the term 'the Sudanese community' refers to the Southern Sudanese community in Adelaide that participated in the study. It is not used to designate the Sudanese community in general as this study cannot, nor does it endeavour to, make representative claims about the Southern Sudanese people as a whole. Similarly, where I refer to 'the men', this designates the Southern Sudanese men who participated in the study. Participant comments are indented and formatted in *italics* to make them identifiable from my writing and that of other authors. Numbers are used to designate participants' commentary (e.g. *Participant 13*) to make it more apparent that this study draws on multiple interviewee comments rather than on one particularly profound interview. Almost all participants stated that their real names could be used. I have declined to do so due to obligations related to ethics approval for conducting the research. This decision also relates to what Bourdieu (1999: 1) writes about documenting people's stories of social suffering:

How can we not feel anxious about making *private* worlds *public*, revealing

confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals? True, everyone we talked to agreed to let us use their statements as we saw fit. But no contract carries as many unspoken conditions as one based on trust. (original emphasis)

Recognising the relationships developed over the period of several years and the unknown ramifications of research, participants are de-identified. It is with respect that I endeavour to elevate their voices where possible while remaining mindful of research's unanticipated impacts and the need to de-identify their narratives.