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# Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: Impact on marital relationships

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Running Head: Acculturation Stress

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## Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: Impact on marital relationships

### Abstract

A qualitative approach was used to explore the impact of acculturation stress on the marital relationships of South Sudanese refugees settled in Brisbane, Australia. Thirteen refugees, who were currently or previously married, participated in three gender specific focus groups. The perceived causes and possible solutions of conflict were thoroughly explored. Hypothetical scenarios were used to facilitate group discussion. Major issues causing conflict between couples were identified as: the management of finances and lack of family and social support. Several other areas of acculturation stress also emerged as factors associated with marital stress. There was a dissonance regarding the adherence to cultural gender roles. Freedom provided to women in Australia caused tension between the couples. Law enforcement officers were perceived as lacking cultural understanding and misinterpreting the couple distress. Finally, limited information provided to refugees pre and post migration was considered to hinder adjustment. The participants suggested a number of practical solutions to these issues which are potentially useful in guiding future refugee settlement programs.

Key words: Sudanese, refugees, acculturation & marital relationships

## Acculturation stress in South Sudanese refugees: Impact on marital relationships

### 1. Introduction

South Sudan has been described as one of the world's worst humanitarian crisis, claiming the lives of over 2,000,000 people over the last decade. Even though the conflict between the north and the south has now lead to the creation of South Sudan, the civil war that spanned over more than 20 years in this region resulted in more than 5,000,000 people being displaced internally, or living as refugees. Subsequently South Sudan has become the second largest originator of refugees in the world (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], 2008). South Sudanese immigrants form one of the largest groups of humanitarian entrants into Australia with a population of more than 20,000. They have been described as "Australia's fastest growing newly emerging community" with 1.1 refugees for every 1000 Australians in 2007 (UNHCR). Even though the South Sudanese refugee community in Australia has been portrayed as an extremely resilient group of people (Hillier, 2002), settlement and acculturation in a new country is always a challenge (Lueck & Wilson, 2011). Studies are now being conducted to examine the difficulties and the acculturation process of the South Sudanese refugees relocated to Australia (Milner & Khawaja, 2010). There are distinct gaps in the literature regarding the acculturation stress of this population and how it impacts manifests in marital relationships.

#### *1.1. Settlement Difficulties*

There is substantial evidence that many South Sudanese refugees have been exposed to traumatic events including torture, threats to themselves and their families lives, rape or sexual abuse, food shortages and destruction of homes and villages (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel & Lacharaz, 2006). In many instances these psychological distresses are compounded by their aversive transit experiences (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade, 2008). Moving to a new country, which is very different culturally, can cause psychological stress for the newly arrived. Countries

worldwide vary in their cultural composition (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). Although Australia is a multicultural society, which promotes ethnic diversity with integrated cultures, the mainstream culture is generally of an individualistic nature, where an individual is seen as autonomous, independent of others. There is a gender balance and power is mostly equally distributed. This is in contrast to Sudanese culture, which is collectivistic in nature where individuals are interdependent, with strong links and respect for family and community members. Their society is hierarchical, authoritarian and patriarchal with very specific gender roles (Hebbani, Obijiofor, & Bristed, 2009). Additionally, South Sudanese from rural and / or refugee camps lack experience of modern urban lifestyle. They may not be familiar with modern utilities, income support systems and public services and can lack an understanding of the sense of freedom in Australia (Department of Immigration & Citizenship, 2007). Relocation can lead to a loss of support, social networks, roles and traditional values (Akhtar-Danesh & Landeen, 2007).

Subsequently, a host country with very different culture, norms and value systems can create a sense of isolation, confusion, frustration and disempowerment (Department of Immigration & Citizenship, 2007). A government survey conducted in 2006 revealed that 70% of South Sudanese refugees had received no information about Australia before arriving here, which resulted in considerable difficulty with settlement (Jackson, 2007). Apart from this there are other factors that contribute to the difficulties of this ethnic community integrating into Australia society. It is important to note that low levels of literacy and English language skills are the main factors that cause problems within the education sector; with securing employment and understanding the Australian law; interacting with the community and accessing health, welfare and housing services (Department of Immigration & Citizenship, 2007; Roberts, 2007). Difference between the Australian and South Sudanese everyday life and social set up places a pressure on the refugees to gain mastery over the environment, by learning the social norms of a new culture as well as the

skills required for an effective functioning. This challenging process can be the cause of further psychological distress (Schweitzer, Greenslade & Kagee, 2007; Sonderegger & Barrett, 2004).

### *1.2. Acculturation and Acculturation Stress*

Literature indicates that those who resettle in a new country go through an acculturation process (Sam & Berry, 2010; Ward, 2001). It is process of cultural and psychological change as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005). The newly arrived adapt to a new culture, by negotiating with their new environment, acquiring the cultural characteristics of the new country (Poppit & Frey, 2007; Hwang & Ting, 2008). Changes take place in the migrants and refugees original ideas, beliefs, values and daily behaviors as they start to incorporate the social and cultural norms of the dominant group (Berry, 2008). A newly arrived refugee can use a range of acculturation strategies. He or she can reject his or her original culture and assimilate with the host society; integrate in the host society by retaining original culture and adopting the new culture; separate from the host society by rejecting the new culture and preserving the original culture or can become marginalized by rejecting both cultures (Berry, 2005).

Acculturation is affected by a number of factors, such as the characteristics of the acculturating community, host society, and the demographics and psychosocial factors of an individual (Ward & Masgoret, 2006). Acculturation is a multidimensional process that may occur differently across domains (Chirkov, 2009). Due to the complex nature of acculturation, the changes do not occur uniformly among cultural groups, family members or spouses. It is a highly subjective experience and the individual's degree of acculturation varies (Berry, 2003). Further, it is neither easy to incorporate new values or behaviors nor to modify or dismiss ones original culture. Migrants and refugees can experience resistances and stress as a consequence of these changes. The psychological impact of this process is referred to as acculturation stress and it can affect the mental

health and wellbeing of a person (Berry, 2008). It can manifest in the form adjustment issues, emotional reactions and strained relationships (Berry, 2008).

Studies focusing on the post migration experiences of South Sudanese refugees have identified elements of acculturation stress (Poppitt & Frey, 2007), which is aggravated by issues of marginalization and/ or loss of social support (Hebbani & McNamara, 2010). Family members or couples often do not acculturate at a similar pace, or can have mismatched acculturation style (Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGrath, 2004). Subsequently, disruptions in family dynamics are reported in the form of intergenerational and role conflicts (Hebbani, Obijiofor & Bristed, 2010; Puoch, 2006; Tempany, 2008). South Sudanese refugees who are married are experiencing an adaptation that occurs both within the marriage and the individual (Attaca & Berry, 2002).

Even though, there are limited studies on the South Sudan refugees settled in the West, previous investigations with other migrant groups have highlighted the impact of acculturation on the marital relationship. There is evidence that gender differences in acculturation impacts on the level of acculturation stress experienced by couples as men and women report differences in their experiences and attitudes after resettlement (Darvishpour, 2002; Morrison & James, 2009; Nilsson, Brown, Russell, & Khamphakdy-Brown, 2008; Renner & Salem, 2009). Men from traditionally patriarchal societies frequently find their dominant role is challenged following a move to a more egalitarian culture (Darvishpour, 2002; In-Soo, 1997; Nilsson et al., 2008). Iranian men who were refugees in Sweden stated that Swedish lifestyle caused conflict in the family as women had more freedom socially. Both women and children in the family rejected attempts by the men to control the family and the men reported being misunderstood by authorities, who they perceived as supporting the women (Darvishpour, 2002). However, the Iranian women reported a different experience of immigration, as following resettlement their situation and opportunities in Sweden were significantly improved, particularly due to their increased economic independence (Darvishpour,

2002). Similarly, Ethiopian immigrants in Toronto reported post migration marital conflict as a result of low level of support, financial strains, work overload, increased autonomy of women and men's difficulty to renegotiate gender roles and responsibilities. (Hyman, Guruge & Mason, 2008). Therefore, there is evidence that following migration conflict occurs between couples due to a change in roles and a shift of power in the relationship, with women attempting to change and shift the power balance (Lovell, Tran & Nguyen, 1987; Flores, Tschann, VanOss, & Pantoja, 2004). Further, studies have also shown incidents of domestic violence as a result of the evolving family power dynamics that occur after relocation (Nilsson et al. 2008; Yakushko, Watson & Thompson, 2008). A study on Somali refugees in U.S. revealed that women, who were independent and proficient with English language encountered a higher level of psychological abuse and physical aggression from their husbands (Nilsson et al, 2008). The impact of acculturation stress on marital relationships depends largely on the influence of family dynamics and the strategies each partner utilizes which can potentially lead to conflict (Morrison & James, 2009).

Keeping in view that the South Sudanese refugees are settling in Western countries, there is now an increase of research in Australia and other Western countries on the acculturation issues of refugees in general and South Sudanese refugees in particular. This change is a consequence of acculturation and adjustment issues identified by mental and allied health professionals and the government authorities (Coffey, 2004; Dei Wal, 2004; Schweitzer et al, 2006). However, to the authors' knowledge no previous studies have specifically examined the affect acculturation stress has had on intimate relationships of Sudanese refugees. The present study aims to investigate how acculturation stress manifests and affects marriages within the South Sudanese community settled in Brisbane. It is expected that the findings would not only assist the mental, health and allied health professional in understanding the issues of this emerging community, but would also throw light on



how the government authorities as well as helping professionals can enhance the well-being and adjustment of the South Sudanese community resettled in the West.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 *Setting*

Between 2001 and 2005, 30% of the new arrivals into the state of Queensland were refugees. Currently more than 3,000 Sudanese refugees reside in the city of Brisbane, which makes up over 70% of all refugees in the region (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). At the time of conducting the study, most of them were unemployed, lived in government houses and were in the process of learning English language at facilities established by the government. Most of them have fairly large families and having eight children is not uncommon. Further, the bulk of this population was on a government allowance. In Australia refugees are able to access financial assistance through Commonwealth government funded social support monitored by a national agency, Centrelink. Families and individuals are able to apply for a variety of allowances, which are based on a person's marital status, the level of income being earned by one or both partners, and the number of children under the age of 18 in a family. Therefore, refugees are able to manage financially prior to obtaining employment and following employment depending on their income and family size. These payments are made jointly to a couple or individually following consultation with Centrelink. Discussions with community elders and non-government organizations (NGO) drew attention to the fact that there was a high level of domestic violence and marital conflicts and separation within this community. Hence, this study was designed to obtain information and insight about the emotional and pragmatic experiences of these people. Marital stress was thoroughly explored to understand the factors that were causing this stress, as well as how it was managed or could be managed more effectively.

### 2.2. *Design*

A qualitative research design using focus groups was employed to explore female and male manifestations of acculturation stress within marital relationships. The decision to use a qualitative approach was based largely on the fact that quantitative measures which have been developed based on Western values, assumptions and norms for use on Westerners, potentially cause issues around mistranslation when used with refugees, and may threaten the validity and appropriateness of cross cultural research (Ahearn 2000b, as cited in Tempany, 2008). Qualitative research is holistic and provides rich descriptions from an individual's perspective. In recent years there has been some acknowledgement that focusing on the causal relationships between variables is not the only means by which research can be conducted. In contrast qualitative research is a subjective construction derived from an interaction between the researcher, the context and the experiences of the human mind. The focus is on the process through which people derive meaning from their experience with the researcher being the instrument of the analysis (Marchel & Owens, 2007). The use of focus groups to elicit these perspectives provides a self contained means of obtaining in-depth information about a concept or issue, and is an effective method for learning about people's experiences, that may not otherwise be accessible without group interaction (Morgan, 1996). The social context that arises from focus groups encourages participants to reveal more of their own lived experiences (O'Neil & Cowman, 2008), and the flexibility of the process allows the participants to provide insights whilst expressing themselves in their own words about a predetermined subject (Krueger, 2000).

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject, and in order to be culturally sensitive, gender specific focus groups were used to collect data from members of the local South Sudanese community, who were currently or had recently been in relationships. In this study three focus groups were held in total, two comprising only of female participants and one comprising only of male participants, which allowed for overall observations, as well as comparing experience between

genders, and enabling contrasting opinions to emerge (Kreuger, 2000). Participants were openly recruited, with the assistance of a community elder, from within the local Brisbane Sudanese community, to ensure homogeneity and familiarity amongst participants, which was expected to assist in a smooth and fruitful interaction. (Whitley, Harris, Fallot & Berley, 2008). Further, assessment tools such as questionnaires may pose difficulties with refugees, particularly when there are literacy problems (Ahearn 2000b, as cited in Tempany, 2008), thus hypothetical scenarios which were designed specifically for this study were used as the most appropriate method to facilitate discussion in order to explore this topic.

### 2.3. *Participants*

Participants consisted of 13 (4 men and 9 women) Sudanese refugees currently residing in Brisbane Queensland. The age of participants ranged from 22 to 44 years ( $M = 34.2$ ). All participants had come to Australia as humanitarian entrants and identified both Egypt and Kenya as their country of transit. They were all members of the Dinka tribe. The length of residency in Australia ranged from 2 – 10 years. Eight participants were living with their spouses, whereas 5 were separated, divorced or widowed. Of the women participants two were employed, one in the profession for which she was trained; the other 7 reported they were funded by government benefits. All the male participants reported being unemployed and dependant on government benefits at the time the data was collected. The level of education amongst the participants ranged from no official schooling to university degrees obtained in Sudan. Two of the male participants reported they had completed high school and the other two had obtained university degrees. The majority (6) of the female participants had received a primary school education, with 2 participants having completed high school and one then obtaining a professional qualification. All 4 of the male participants reported a good level of English.

Two of the female participants reported having difficulty understanding and speaking English; two reported a satisfactory level of English proficiency, whereas the other female participants (5) reported a good ability to communicate in English.

#### *2.4. Instrument*

Keeping in view that the study focused on marital stress, a sensitive area for Sudanese refugees, direct questions related to the topic were avoided as they would have been perceived confronting and insensitive. Two hypothetical scenarios (see Appendix ) were developed, after consultation with community elders, and were used to facilitate discussion in the focus groups. Two areas of discussion, money and lack of family support, were intentionally chosen for the study, after these had been identified by the elders in the community and representatives of NGO's as issues which were central to the community in terms of acculturation stress experienced by couples.

The first scenario described a hypothetical situation focused on money and financial management in an effort to encourage conversation that would reflect participants' experiences and identify factors directly related to money that were causing stress within relationships. The characters of Deng (the male) and Abuk (the female) are described as being in receipt of government assistance, as they have no other income, and there is some disagreement between them about who manages the family finances and how the money is being spent. According to the community elders and the NGO's this particular issue was a prevalent area of marital conflict among Sudanese refugees.

The second scenario presented to the groups was designed to elicit conversation associated with the stress related to expected roles within the household setting, where there was now an absence of social support previously available in South Sudan. Once again the characters of Deng and Abuk were used to briefly describe typical life in South Sudan with each partner having their distinct roles in the home and within the extended family. The scenario went on to describe life in

Australia where one of the couple may be required to participate in activities outside of the home, yet household duties and children still required attention, and with no assistance from family members and strict adherence to gender roles, caused discontent and disagreements.

The hypothetical scenarios were narrated one at a time to facilitate discussion with the use of predetermined questions. The possible causes of the contention related to the scenario were explored. Subsequently the participants were encouraged to discuss possible solutions to these areas of stress and conflict.

### *2.5. Procedure*

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university human research ethics committee. Elders of the Brisbane South Sudanese community, through the word of mouth, informed the community about this study and its goals to explore and understand the issues that caused marital problems in the South Sudanese community in Queensland. The elders suggested a few potential participants, and snowballing was used to recruit more participants. The focus groups were held in a clinic room on a university campus in close proximity to the participant's homes. The female participants formed the focus group 1 and 2 and attended the session on Saturday mornings and the male participants formed the focus group 3 and attended the session on a weekday evening. The female participants were transported to the clinic by a fellow participant, who had a vehicle, and further assistance was provided by the researcher. The male participants reached the clinic in their own vehicles. Assistance with child care was provided on the premises by a registered teacher. This service was provided to facilitate participation, particularly for the female participants who had no other means of obtaining childcare.

Both groups of female participants were run with the assistance of a bilingual interpreter. However, men did not require an interpreter. Both authors were multilingual migrants with extensive experience of working with diverse cultures. The focus groups were facilitated by the

second author, who was able to speak several African languages; however, this did not include Dinka, the main language spoken by the participants. She was born in East Africa and resided in several other African countries, including Kenya which several of the participants reported had been their country of transit. This author facilitated all three groups although the assistance of a male colleague was sought for the focus group with men. This decision was made out of respect for cultural attitudes, and in light of the knowledge that the Sudanese men may not have been comfortable to discuss issues of a personal nature with a woman.

Each session consisted of three phases: warm-up, discussion and conclusion. During the initial warm-up phase all participants were informed individually about the goals of the study, confidentiality and the volunteer nature of the study. They were then asked to sign an informed consent form. Demographic information was gathered prior to the commencement of the focus group. Ample time was set aside to establish rapport between the participants and facilitator and for the participants to achieve a level of comfort with each other. Refreshments were served to help the participant relax and feel at ease. The participants were informed about the way a focus group is run and reassured that personal questions would not be asked as a part of the group discussion. Further, it was pointed out that they would be discussing a couple of situations associated with factitious characters created with the assistance of elders. After this warm up phase, the facilitator used a semi structured approach to present the hypothetical scenarios one at a time to facilitate rich discussion. Further, prompts were used to encourage open discussion. In the case of female groups, communication between the facilitator and group members took place through the interpreter. However, men had a direct interaction with the facilitator. During the conclusion, the facilitator, who was also taking notes, summarized and reviewed the discussion points, requesting any final thoughts before the termination of the session. The group sessions ran for approximately 90 minutes, and were taped and video recorded. The video recording allowed the authors an opportunity to

ensure that the participants, who had strong accents, were understood clearly. It also enabled the authors to associate comments accurately with the participants. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the possibility of participants becoming distressed referral procedures were put in place to address their needs. One participant, who was experiencing high levels of distress, was referred to a mental health professional. Following the sessions each participant was provided with a \$20 voucher to a large chain of stores, as a token of appreciation for their participation.

## 2.6. *Analysis*

The data were transcribed and analyzed by the second researcher. The taped sessions were transcribed into a thorough orthographic written transcript in order to retain the information which was true to its original form. This was regarded as a key phase in the thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcriptions were then checked by a principal researcher for accuracy. Sections that were not audible were excluded from the analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with deductive (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; King, 2004) and inductive (Boyatzis, 1998) approach was used. Keeping in view that scenarios were used to facilitate discussion, some predefined codes were used to guide analysis. This approach is recommended, when specific information about something important is explored (King, 2004). Care was taken to avoid suppression of new themes. Rigour was introduced through inductive method, which allowed the exploration of other pertinent issues (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The analysis was conducted manually in two stages. The first stage was theory driven and involved the identification and coding of the a priori themes, namely money and lack of support. The second stage was data-driven and involved the identification and coding of emergent themes. The data was explicated within the two hypothetical scenarios covered by the interviews, that is: stress experienced in relationships due to money, and stress caused in relationships due to a lack of the traditional social support, as common to both genders and as gender specific.

Following the thematic analysis steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), initially, the interview transcriptions were repeatedly read to gain familiarity with the data set and to search meaning and patterns. Ideas based on the a priori themes were noted down and codes were developed. These were identified and data was collated relevant to each code. The rationale regarding the first scenario was that discussion would revolve around money, thus a priori theme was “money”. The rationale regarding the second scenario was that discussion would revolve around support, thus the a priori theme was “support”.

The second stage involved searching across the data set to identify other repeated coherent patterns of meaning. The data were organized according to the links the phrases had to a priori themes. Associations between the emergent themes allowed the clustering into super ordinate themes. Some of these emergent themes were common to both men and women, while others were unique to one gender only. Themes for each scenario were organized separately for the men and women. The authors regularly cross-checked emerging patterns and themes to enhance inter-rater reliability. Lastly, codes and the recurring themes were reviewed by the first author to ensure that the final themes and the selected extracts reflected the essence of the data in the most effective manner.

### 3. Findings

Participants shared some common as well as gender specific notions for the two a priori and new emerging themes. The discussion, which was initially related to the factitious couple, was generalized to issues of the couples in the community. The analysis indicated the participants understanding of the factors that caused tension and stress among the South Sudanese couples residing in Brisbane. Interestingly, men and women had many common suggestions for solutions to both “money” and “support” related difficulties.

#### 3.1. *First scenario*



### 3.1.1. *A priori theme: Money*

Financial issues and money related matters were identified as a significant factor causing relationship stress within the South Sudanese community. Most of the participants were receiving family allowance from the government at the time of the study. This amount was commonly given to one adult member of the family, who on many situations was the husband. A majority of the women considered “money” to be a cause of dispute. There were reports of men not sharing the money at all with their wives, even though they were expected to take care of their wives: *“My husband was working for 2 years and he never gave me anything. I went to Centrelink and they won’t do anything (they say) it is the law because your husband is supposed to support you”*. It was pointed out by the women that in many cases men retained the major share of the money, while very little was handed over to women for the running of the house: *“He will say Centrelink money is my money and your money we will use it for the shopping, for the children, to pay rent, for anything, and my money will be for a couple of things”*. It seemed that men, who perceived themselves as authoritarian, powerful and superior in the household, decided to retain the money for themselves. They also had a poor understanding of the needs of the new environment. The women believed that men have not realized that the expenses and needs in Australia were different from what they were in South Sudan: *“In Africa it’s different. He is working and we’re not renting. Us don’t have bills so we just need money for the food and the clothes but here it’s different we need money for the bills, renting”*. Women also complained that men tend to waste money on their unnecessary items such as cigarettes, instead of household requirements. Subsequently, this inappropriate spending by the men led to financial difficulties for the families. According to the women participants, the ongoing conflicts over the use of money and how it would be spent have escalated to marital separations: *“They used to live in Victoria and they argue about money and he left and came here and leave her alone with the kids”*. Taking into account that polygamy was common in Africa, there was also an

element of suspicion that maybe the husband was sending the money to another wife in Africa, thus creating mistrust and tension: “*Abuk will think that Deng has another wife maybe in Africa and he is sending money to her so no one is happy*”.

Men on the other hand blamed women in their community for mismanaging the money and felt that it was appropriate for men to supervise it: “*She just buy everything without thinking of tomorrow, then she run short of money before the next fortnight*”. They reported that it was not customary for women to manage money in their country of origin as this role was delegated to men only. They thought women were unable to use the money in a sensible manner as they have not had this responsibility before: “*And another thing is lack of financial management: a woman does not know how to manage finance at home*”. They were concerned that money related matters had led to termination of relationships in some cases as women were able to get a separate allowance from the government and were deciding to live independently: “*It is difficult back home for the woman to separate from the husband because his is source of income but here in Australia they have Centrelink*”. Money was believed to be a serious cause of marital conflict and termination by men. Moreover, the Centerlink’s attempt to divide money between the couple was considered as a factor that aggravated the marriage breakdown. They believed that separate allowance empowered the women to reject marriage in order to live independently.

Further analysis of this data revealed several gender specific emerging themes.

### *3.1.2. Emerging theme: Control*

In reference to the first hypothetical scenario, women described South Sudanese men as trying to control women financially and socially: *They want to control everything, kids, money and everything*. One participant explained that men’s behavior and a desire to control the situation was similar to the way they managed matters in South Sudan. While commenting on the scenario, the women participants pointed out that men were resisting change and rigidly following their original

role, in spite of being in a different environment: *“When they came here they had to separate the money and then Deng is not happy because he wants to control the money like he did in Africa”*. They described how the men still perceived themselves as in charge of the household, and wanted to manage finances consistent with the customs in South Sudan. However, the women did not consider this approach practical and appropriate for the Australian setting. It was pointed out that women in the South Sudanese society were not always dependent on money, and could survive on the food available in the form of farm animals or crops. Further, due to the collectivistic nature of their original society, women neglected by their husbands were supported by the other extended family or tribe members. Nevertheless, women could only rely on their husbands in Australia. They believed that men should understand their responsibilities as their wives are financially dependent upon them in Australia: *“It’s not like when our grandfather had wife. Every wife had cows and if he goes and marries another lady you don’t care because you have your own cows. But here it’s different it’s not like Africa”*. Women further elaborated that the financial obligations in Australia were different from those in South Sudan. Money was required for all types of needs and different types of management strategies were required: *“Money and everything, they don’t know how to budget like (in) Africa, he’s responsible for everything so he needs that here also”*.

Several women reported that as the government allowance was being spent by the men without their consent; they were requesting the authorities to split the funds so that they could have their own separate money: *“In Australia they have to have their money separate, this is for the wife and this is for the husband. The reason it’s not working here is, Abuk wants to be responsible for the money too. If Deng control the money he won’t spend the money the right way. To accept that because he wants to be the boss to control everything like in Africa so she will go to Centrelink and they will say you control your money and Deng can control his money”*. However, a number of women participants stated this was not a solution and it made the situation worse, inciting the men

to be more uncooperative: *“Some people will say yes I will control my money, but then their man he will say he is going to stay home with you but he’s not going to use his money he will just use it to spend on himself”*.

Many women participants referred to the inequity of the situation when men were employed but did not share their earnings and women were left with the dilemma of managing the household expenses on the curtailed amount they received from the government: *“... and sometimes Centrelink is not going to pay for you because sometimes the man is working and he controls his money and you have just got to use the money for the kids to pay for everything, and sometimes the kids money is not enough for everything and he doesn’t care”*. One participant’s experience of this situation became even more contentious when she asked her husband to contribute to household bills as she had no money left *“He say: Ok you send money to Africa that’s why there’s not enough. He just makes that up but, it’s not true. Men will make things up and say the women just buy everything like clothes and things”*.

### 3.1.3. *Emerging theme: Freedom*

While discussing the financial issues associated with the first scenario, the South Sudanese male participants appeared united in their belief that South Sudanese women in Australia had more freedom than in South Sudan. Subsequently, they used the phrase “women’s freedom” repeatedly. They were concerned about the way these women have misinterpreted “freedom” as rights without responsibilities and obligations: *The woman in Africa they don’t have freedom, here they have it. Also the wife she felt that she have rights in this country. Some of the people feel the wife now she has freedom she can do anything. She has rights now she has freedom”*. They felt that South Sudanese women, who had not grown up with the type of freedom enjoyed by the Australian women, were subsequently encountering difficulties. They believed that the most salient difficulty was lack of responsibility with the money that they now had at their disposal. According to them,

unlike the Australian women, South Sudanese women have not learned the responsibilities that accompany privileges: *“The women in Australia they have freedom but they grow up with it, they know how to deal with this freedom different from us because the women they take the freedom from the top. They don’t take it from the ground. It causes a problem the freedom it’s too high for them”*. The men reported that women were misinterpreting freedom as spending money on whatever they liked without consulting their husbands: *“She can buy what she likes without permission from you (the man). But in Africa it is different and here it is different”*. The men participants resented this freedom as it encouraged the women to challenge the established authority of South Sudanese men. They seemed to think that women were taking advantage of the freedom in Australia to retaliate against the men in order to lead independent lives: *“If my wife is going to leave to stay with a friend she must tell me... if you are moving about without consulting each other it will cause a problem”*. Women’s misinterpretation of freedom, as a right to do whatever ones like without considering the needs of others, was regarded by the men participants as a salient cause of marital stress.

#### 3.1.4. Emerging theme: Police

The men, as a part of the discussion around the first hypothetical scenario, explained that there were frequent arguments regarding money and when the men raised their voices at the women they called the police: *“If the discussion escalated into shouting at the woman then maybe she can call the police”*. They reported that the women exaggerate and distort to the police about the severity of the situation and due to Australian domestic violence laws the men were treated as guilty: *“She can lie this man want to kill me and then the police without understanding think this lady is in danger. They think man from Africa is a bad person, they can’t respect the woman, so they are danger and police say Ok go without any reason. The women here they lie they are not telling the truth”*. Men participants had serious apprehensions about the ways police intervened and managed the situation. According to these participants the local authorities failed to understand that

it is common for men in South Sudan to be more vocal and forceful than their female counterparts. They felt misjudged by the police and feared that such interventions further damaged the marital relationship. One participant reported that this type of support by the police encourages the women to feel more independent: *“Some ladies are lying because they think they are too powerful and she thinks she has the right to do whatever”*. There was an overarching concern that in such situations police removed the men from their homes, which was disruptive to the family unit and greatly impacted upon the upbringing of the children: *“We are not against the police, we are afraid of divorce because it causes a lot of damage of community, because then it is difficult to manage the children”*. The men were concerned that these separated or divorced women are setting a negative precedent in the community. Other women have started to think that they can get their share of the government allowance and separate from their husband: *“Because also if some ladies if that family already separate another lady might say also I want to be free like that”*. However, they do not blame the police as they understand they are simply following Australian law: *“It’s not the police fault they say if you call me there is an investigation going to take place if you’re right or not”*.

### 3.2. *Second scenario*

#### 3.2.1. *A priori theme: Support*

The participants discussed the roles and expectations of each gender as far as the child care and domestic chores were concerned. There was an agreement that, consistent with South Sudanese traditional gender roles, women were expected to care for the children, do the cooking, and cleaning, while the men were expected to be the bread winners. Additionally, there was an expectation that men and women lived in their own gender specific worlds. In South Sudan the women were able to seek support from female members of the family, and relied on family to assist with household duties. However, in Australia the women were still expected to take on the same responsibilities around the home in the absence of any support, while they were attending classes to learn English or

were in paid work to supplement the family income, particularly if the husband had been unable to secure employment. On the other hand, the roles expectations of the South Sudanese men in Australia were the same as they were in South Sudan. Subsequently, this caused difficulties for the women who were trying to cope with their normal tasks as well as the extra duties required from them in Australia without any support from husbands. Ultimately, this burden was leading to stress within the relationship.

Women in general regarded the lack of family or social support as a cause of marital stress: *“It’s better in Africa. A lady has relatives and the men have relatives and she has support but here we don’t have anything; in Sudan in my home I have my relative and my husband’s relative to care for me and when we left Sudan to come here all of this changed”*. They reported that an absence of instrumental and practical support in Australia leads to emotional problems: *“We have no one to look after the children; you know sometimes it’s a problem here it’s different because you need help. Here there is no help inside you, you are not happy”*. They commented that their roles and responsibilities have changed and without any assistance it is difficult for them to adjust to the new environment as they do not have the relevant skill or support: *“Here it is different you need cars and you need help to go to shopping centres to buy food and to pick up the kids from school”*.

Women participants expressed their frustration at not being helped by the men. One participant pointed out how she was responsible for everything in the house, while her husband did nothing: *“I work sometimes at night I come home from work, have 2 or 3 hours sleep then I wake up prepare the kids take the kids to school then I have to take care of the housework. Tthen 3 o clock will come and I have to pick up the kids so I don’t have enough time to sleep and my husband is there doing nothing. He just care about himself”*. A number of women participants seemed to think that men did not help them as that would reduce their status. They explained that due to gender specific roles in South Sudan, any deviation from one’s traditional role is considered inappropriate

and unacceptable. However, they hoped that the men would change as a result of being exposed to Australians: *“After a while they will see Australians and they will change, they will help”*.

Men also referred to lack of family or social support as a cause of stress. They explained that it is not culturally appropriate for men to participate in domestic chores and child rearing practices : *“Another thing is of course it’s difficult for some men because of culture and background, they think to go into kitchen and cook with his wife it looks like really shame”*. They elaborated their difficulties with adjusting to this new role, which is contrary to their earlier beliefs and values: *“In our culture a woman is responsible for everything in the house and back yard. Also here is became hard for us when the wife asks you to cook because this is something that’s not happened before”*. They agreed that it was a sensitive issue with men, who become defensive when criticized by their wives for being unhelpful. Men acknowledged that the both genders in their community lacked the communication skills to discuss such sensitive issues: *“The problem is how to raise the question to the man. Sometimes the way they raise the question it causes a problem”*. The men then went on to explain that many of the Sudanese men who come to Australia may be willing to assist around the home. However they are not sure how to go about it as they lack the basic skills required for such activities: *“So now some of us are learning that now and there is an understanding between you and your wife that if you tell her OK I’m now ready to cook but I don’t know how to cook”*. Overall, there was an awareness that Sudanese men in Australia need to shift from their original roles in order to help the women: *“Here in Australia things are different and the man needs to support his wife in the home”*. These participants were able to reflect on the negatives of spending time with other men at the cost of damaging their relationship with women, who were under the pressure of managing large families and house hold tasks: *“Those men who have children and leave their children to go and play cards I don’t think they have any responsibility”*.

### 3.2.2. *Emerging theme: Children*



The women participants shared the challenges they were experiencing as a result of taking care of their young and teenaged children. They felt that men, who regarded themselves as not responsible for domestic matters, expected women to be the primary carers of the children. They discussed the difficulties of trying to take proper care of the children in a situation where they have other demands and minimal support from the husbands or the community: *“We have another problem. Also the children is a problem; also teenagers. You know in Africa if I have a children I will have a role on me I am responsible for the kids. They still do the same thing here now”*. The women were finding it difficult to manage the children in such a different society and this was leading to conflicts between the couples. They further explained that teenagers, influenced by the new culture and norms, were behaving in a rebellious manner that was unacceptable in South Sudanese culture. The women reported being burdened by the responsibility of rectifying the teenagers’ behaviors on their own. According to them their community blamed them for the conflicts with the youngsters: *“Children have freedom here we ourselves we don’t like our daughter to go in the street, we don’t agree but the law here you know the police are there and everything but if you daughter run away you can’t do anything, then the man blame the lady and say you didn’t look after the children well and you are the problem”*.

### 3.3. Solutions

The participants suggested solutions for the issues that were causing stress within the couple relationships. They pointed out deficits in a number of skills. Members of South Sudanese emerged as lacking essential day to day skills required for living successfully in the new environment. With reference to money related problems (scenario one), both men and women expressed a need to budget their money responsibly: *“Budgeting is very important; when they get money from Centrelink they have to put money away for food and rent and everything”*. It was important for them to learn to manage money as a couple, in order to address their needs adequately.

Keeping in view that conflict over money led to heated arguments, accusations and attacks from both sides, many participants pointed out the significance of couples communicating clearly and reaching an agreement about how the money would be spent. There was a general agreement that they lacked the skills to solve problems in their new adopted country. They also felt a need to refine their communication skills. In their country of origin men enjoyed a dominant position and had all of the decision making powers. Now in Australia, due to their changed roles, women were more active and wanted to be involved in the discussions and decision making. Both genders felt a deficit in their day to day communication. They recognized that effective communication would reduce marital conflicts and distress: *“it’s good to make an agreement because if you’re not telling your husband what you are doing or the husbands not telling the wife he’s sending the money to Africa then there’s going to be a problem but if they sit and say we’re doing this and this then they will see how they’re spending the money that will be OK”*. .

A number of recommendations were suggested around support (scenario two). Many participants pointed out the limitations of the current orientation programs and emphasized the need for a more comprehensive and hands on orientation program: *“Sure there is orientation back home, before we come here, but it’s not enough. They just tell you not to go in a bus without a ticket; it’s not enough we need these people to concentrate on other things which could cause problems for the breaking up of the families”*. Taking into an account that the demands of the new country are very different from those in South Sudan, they stated that orientation should focus on the importance of men and women adopting new roles in order to support each other and work together as a couple: *“It is very important to teach the man how to support your wife. They need to sit together and teach them because in Australia they need to run together to do everything together in the house and everything. In addition to that the man is responsible to take care of his wife, and here one of those is to pick the kids up from school if the wife is at TAFE”*. Participants highlighted that marital stress

would reduce if couples agree to share chores and responsibilities: *“If the wife and man sit down and make an agreement to do everything at home – cook cleaning washing small children it’s not hard”*.

It was pointed out that such orientation should occur immediately after entering Australia: *“This should be done within a couple of weeks after they arrive”*. Other participants added their thoughts on the manner the orientation should be delivered and stressed the significance of showing a South Sudanese man doing domestic chores: *“That would be good to show video of Sudanese men doing cooking and things”*. According to the participants, the newly arrived need to learn from the outset that it is acceptable for men to engage in activities, which were considered as feminine in South Sudan. Further, they elaborated that such orientation programs should be delivered by a South Sudanese and Australian team as it would foster integration and would provide an opportunity for the two communities to learn from each other: *“Sudanese and Australian to do it together, a mixture of Sudanese and Australian when they come together the Sudanese will listen more, that would be a good thing”*.

Participants elaborated on the content of the orientation program and stressed that the concepts of financial management should be taught. It was pointed out that they would need assistance with the language and a range of skills that are involved in the process of purchase: *“It’s also like shopping. When I go shopping I have to write my list, and that’s another way to learn English, then go and pick what you want”*. Participants also emphasized a need to educate the Sudanese refugees settling in Australia about the laws of Australia: *“For some people they need a tape, so they can learn how the law works and how to trust the law”*. Finally, they accentuated the responsibilities of the Sudanese community settled in Australia. According to them, those who have already adjusted and acculturated in Australia should act as role models and interact with the newly arrived in order to demonstrate how roles and behaviors can be modified in the new setting: *“there should be some community people here who have been in Australia for 2 or 3 years. If a new arrival*

*come, I have to invite him to my house and cook myself so he can see I am cooking. As an example he will see that it is alright”.*

In summary, Sudanese couples encountered acculturation stress which was having a negative impact on their relationships. This stress was associated with finances and new roles and expectations. Both men and women were unanimous about how the problems can be addressed with effective orientation programs as well as ongoing support within the community by Sudanese already settled in Australia.

#### 4. Discussion

The study explored how acculturation stress impacted the marital relationships of the South Sudanese resettled in Brisbane, Australia. Gender specific focus groups were used to form an understanding of the differences and similarities between genders about the perceived causes of marital stress and how it could be addressed. The findings revealed that the difference in the original and new culture created difficulties in understanding the requirements of the new environment. Men and women of this emerging community were undergoing acculturation at varying degrees, which created relational difficulties. Acculturation stress was further manifested by an absence of day-to-day living and communication skills, required to live effectively in a developed country (Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004). Nevertheless, participants shared useful ideas and strategies to promote the post migration adjustment of South Sudanese in Australia.

The shift from a collectivistic, hierarchical and patriarchal society to an individualistic and an egalitarian society appeared to be associated with acculturation stress of the South Sudanese community. Similar to a previous study (Jackson, 2007), the participants were not prepared for the new setting and lacked familiarity with the new demands. There was a limited understanding of how day to day issues could be managed. The newly arrived lacked the skills to live in the new culture.

The two a priori themes revealed that there was a tendency to mismanage financial matters and to encounter deficits in living as a family unit without the support of the extended family and relatives. Emerging themes further pointed out the effects of acculturation stress on the marital relationships.

Consistent with previous literature the South Sudanese settled in Brisbane were experiencing acculturation at varying levels (Caetano et al., 2004; Khawaja et al., 2008; Schweitzer et al., 2007). Men and women were adapting at different rates, which led to several difficulties associated with acculturation stress (Hwang & Ting, 2008; Poppit & Frey, 2007). Men appeared to use separation as an acculturation strategy by resisting the new culture and holding on to their original authoritarian and patriarchal roles. They perceived themselves as the decision makers, in charge of the family and the household and expected women to accept their authority. Men believed that it was appropriate for them to control the finances. Some went to the extreme of not sharing the money with their wives. They also felt that all financial matters fell into men's domain as women lacked skills to manage money competently. Additionally, consistent with studies (Hebbani et al., 2010; Pouch, 2006; Tempany, 2008) they believed in following the gender specific roles. They expected the traditional roles to still work in Australia. Men refrained from assisting women with the household and child rearing demands, as they were contrary to South Sudanese men's role. At times men have little knowledge of how to undertake the activities expected of them by the women or resisted changes and were too proud to request guidance.

The findings revealed that women were burdened by their responsibilities as a home maker, mother and a wife, in the absence of support from the men. They encountered challenges in their day to day life as well as with the upbringing of children and teenagers. South Sudanese women were concerned that men were not assisting them with the complex intergenerational conflicts associated with the teenagers, who had assimilated with the host culture and were rejecting the original culture. Men's inclination to not provide assistance with caring for the children, despite not working or

having other commitments has been reflected by previous investigations (Darvishpour, 2002; Hyman et al., 2008)).

The women participants believed that the men were too focused on adhering to traditional customs and beliefs, whereas they were adopting new values and behaviors in Australia and showing signs of assimilation. The women recognized their rights and ability to gain financial freedom in Australia, which they had embraced. They demanded a share in the money and a say in how it was going to be used. Such changes in the roles led to disagreements over finances, which in turn escalated and frequently resulted in accusations of domestic violence and subsequent interactions with the police. This intensifying of emotions and reported physical abuse has been cited in the literature as the result of a difference in the stage of acculturation between partners or family members (Lovell et al., 1987; Nilson et al., 2008). The men in the present study expressed feelings of resentment due to the perceived unfairness of the treatment they received. This finding was in line with a sense of injustice expressed by Iranian men resettled in Sweden with their wives, who felt the authorities favored women (Davishpour, 2002). Further, the findings are aligned with other research indicating that differences in stages of acculturation causes conflict, particularly when a partner who is less acculturated than another feels emotionally threatened (Morrison & James, 2009).

In some situations, women were able to secure a separate allowance from the government. This enabled them to be economically and socially independent. In worse circumstances they preferred terminating the marriage, leaving their husbands to live independently. Men appeared to resent this empowerment and financial independence of the women. Previous studies of refugees with economical problems of adjusting to a new culture have revealed, that men's patriarchal approach towards women's financial independence leads to conflicts, which causes immigrant families to run a higher risk of separation (Darvishpour, 2002; Hyman et al., 2008). The finding is

also consistent with previous studies, which have shown that men can feel disempowered and can experience an identity crisis following resettlement in a culture with differing cultural conditions from their own, where their values, norms and dominant role are questioned, which in turn creates a greater risk of marital conflict (In-Soo, 1997; Darvishpour, 2002; Nilsson et al., 2008).

South Sudanese men were seriously concerned about the women's distorted understanding of freedom, which they interpreted as an over emphasis on privileges at the expense of responsibilities and duties. Further, they were grieved by the separation and divorces in their community. The aggressive and financially independent women, who had rejected men, were seen as a threat and many tried to protect the female members of their families from such women. The opinions of the male participants in the present study were consistent with those expressed by other immigrant men from patriarchal societies, who also desired to prevent their wives from spending time with other women who were independent of their husbands, as they reported 'women were not ready for this freedom'; and their belief that adhering to Western values and behaviors would likely be harmful to the family unit (Davishpour, 2002; Nilsson et al., 2008). Similarly, the women's views in the present study mirrored other immigrant women, who have also in the past continued to live in unhappy marriages as a result of the fear of losing their children (Nilsson et al., 2008). The change in family dynamics following the survival of traumatic experiences and a move from a collectivist society to an individualist society, through forced circumstances, creates changes in traditional roles; differences in expectations of family members and differences in rates of adjustment, and is clearly the cause of acculturation stress resulting in the breakdown of relationships and thus family units. This potentially causes further separation from family and a lack of emotional support, which serves to increase acculturation stress (Melville, 2003).

#### *4.1. Implications*

The study is useful for the helping professionals, who may work with this community in clinical and community settings. It contributes to an understanding of the relationship difficulties, experienced by members of the South Sudanese community in Brisbane. These difficulties were impacted by the ongoing stress caused by the acculturation with potentially devastating consequences for family units. The findings revealed a necessity for the relocated South Sudanese to adopt some features of the Australian culture, while retaining positive values, traditions and behaviors of their original culture. Resettlement in the host society required the new community to manage their daily matters with the help of new living and communication skills. There was a need for the two genders to work together. Further, the community needs to learn to share and use power effectively. This highlights the importance of developing further ongoing practical culture specific information and adjustment programs, not only by government and NGO's but also the South Sudanese community themselves, thus allowing them ownership of this initiative.

Despite the differences in experiences both South Sudanese men and women provided similar solutions to the issues. They emphasized a need to learn new social, communication and financial skills. The importance of being able to budget money was stressed, which included effective discussions between the couples to develop an agreement about how the money was going to be spent by both parties. This was considered particularly important keeping in view the differences in financial responsibilities that many participants experienced in Australia and their native Sudan. For those participants, who had lived in tribal villages, paying rent, electricity, car insurance and school expenses, were novel and new. These individuals needed an ongoing emotional and instrumental support to master the environment and the relevant skills.

The male participants expressed resentment at being accused by their wives of domestic violence which resulted in the police removing them from their home. Although they did not blame the police for managing the situation this way, they stated that it would be beneficial to both the



police officers and to the Sudanese community if there was more knowledge about their customs to avoid any misunderstandings. Both genders emphasized that refugees of any culture require more comprehensive orientation programs on arrival in Australia. The participants offered suggestions regarding how this could be administered by stressing the need for Australians and Sudanese, who have settled in Australia, to present the orientation jointly. Further, they suggested that integration of new South Sudanese into the community should include assistance from other South Sudanese community members on a practical level within their own homes. This initiative would result in a form of social networking, which alone is beneficial in reducing acculturation stress following resettlement (Khawaja et al., 2008).

#### 4.2. *Limitations*

The findings of the present study are tempered by several limitations. The study was based on a small sample. Therefore, in order to examine this issue further, it would be beneficial to increase the sample size and include South Sudanese from a variety of areas and social backgrounds with varying experiences. However, given that the issues addressed are consistent with those identified earlier in the limited literature available, it is likely that the experiences of a broader range of South Sudanese refugees would closely reflect those reported in the present study. Even though deductive and inductive methods were used to study the areas of interest as well as new emerging themes, more research with data driven methodology is warranted to explore broadly the acculturation and marital issues of the South Sudanese community.

#### 4.3. *Conclusion*

The current study is the first to explore the manifestation of the impact of acculturation stress in married relationships of Sudanese refugees within an Australian context. Future studies should be undertaken within other similar communities with a view to increasing understanding of the

ramifications of this effect, and developing suitable programs for the prevention and amelioration of marital discord as a result of acculturation stress.

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## Appendix

### *Scenario 1.*

Deng and Abuk are married and they have been living in Africa but now they are living in Brisbane. They have some young children and they receive a Centrelink allowance. In Africa Deng was responsible for the money for the family but in Australia Abuk would like to have some money too. Centrelink agree to pay Deng and Abuk separately. Deng is angry that Abuk is spending money and that she is sending money to her family in Africa and this is causing them to argue.

What do you think is happening for this family?

What is Deng experiencing?

What is Abuk experiencing?

What is the best solution for Deng and Abuk that is fair for them both?

### *Scenario 2.*

Deng and Abuk have been living in African in a village with family and friends to help them. Deng does the work that is expected of the men and Abuk works alongside the other women. Now Deng and Abuk are living in Brisbane and Deng goes to TAFE to learn English and then he plays cards with other Sudanese men. Abuk takes care of the home and the children and is always busy working. Abuk is angry at Deng and this is causing them to argue.

What do you think is happening for this family?

What is Deng experiencing?

What is Abuk experiencing?

What is the best solution for Deng and Abuk that is fair for them both?