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Navigating Dialectic Contradictions Experienced by Female African Refugees during Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Julie L. Semlak, Judy C. Pearson, Najla G. Amundson,
& Anna D. H. Kudak

An increasing number of new Americans are refugees who have fled persecution, war, and the loss of basic human rights. The current study examines the dialectical tensions experienced by female African refugees during the cross-cultural adaptation process. Twelve female African refugees participated in two focus groups, uncovering the communication challenges experienced when relocating to the United States. These women navigate contradictions of positive and negative features of their new lives, of being included and excluded, of being accepted and rejected, and of the real and ideal. Their narratives are understood through the lens of cross-cultural adaptation and dialectical theory.

Keywords: Acculturation; Cross-Cultural Adaptation; Focus Groups; Refugees; Relational Dialectic Theory

Ever growing populations of refugees live in the United States, yet little is known about the communicative problems refugees experience while adapting to American culture. A refugee is someone “with a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or

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political opinion, who is outside of his or her country of nationality and unable or unwilling to return” (Human Rights Watch, 2005, p. 1). Refugees are sometimes perceived as illegal immigrants or security threats (Mandel, 1997), and report facing racism and bigotry (Papastergiadis, 2004).

Today’s refugees flee poor and war-torn countries and are resettled in the United States by either faith-based or secular nongovernmental organizations (Nawyn, 2006). More than 58,800 refugees (United States Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2005) were resettled to the United States during 2005, a number which has held steady in recent years. Although refugees to the United States annually come from over 40 countries, and are resettled across the country, this paper focuses on female African refugees who live in Fargo, North Dakota.

Lutheran Social Services (LSS) of North Dakota regularly relocates refugee families. While North Dakota may seem a strange destination for African refugees, Fargo has been home to over 2000 refugees from 2000 through 2005, with 771 refugees coming from Africa (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The services LSS and the community are able to provide, combined with the relatively small size of the city, creates an appropriate place for the relocation of refugee families (S. Milovanovic, Director of Lutheran Social Services New Americans Program in Fargo, ND, personal communication, February 24, 2006). This paper is dedicated to reporting a study exploring the dialectic contradictions experienced by female African refugees living in Fargo.

Review of Literature

Cross-cultural adaptation, or acculturation, is the process by which a person adapts to an unfamiliar culture. The basis of this cyclical and dialectic process lies in a human being’s instinctive desire to adapt to unfamiliar environments in order to function effectively (Kim, 2005). The cross-cultural adaptation process begins by knowing the values, beliefs, and traditions of the country of origin, continues into a dialectic tension of acculturation to the new culture and deculturation from the old culture, and ends in a state of assimilation to the new culture. The process of adapting to a new culture is grounded in communicative activities, including speaking, listening, interpreting, and understanding verbal and nonverbal messages (Kim, 2005).

Most academic scholarship examining acculturation in the United States focuses on singular ethnic groups. For example, experiences of Japanese women who married American service members following World War II, and subsequently immigrated to the United States, have been chronicled. These Japanese immigrants reported many communication problems with both their husbands and their Japanese-American children (Pyke, 2005, Usita & Blieszner, 2002). They expressed particular difficulty negotiating the differences between traditional parental roles in Japan and the roles expected of parents in the United States (Hedge, 1998). Other same-cultural studies have been conducted examining Vietnamese refugees

(Dsilva & Whyte, 1998), Cuban refugees (Massing, 1980), Soviet Jewish refugees (Birman, Trickett, & Vinokurov, 2002), and Bosnian Muslim refugees (Snyder, May, Zulcic, & Gabbard, 2005).

Although the situations faced by female African refugees and post-war Japanese brides are different, both groups of women also faced many similarities. For example, both groups of women left their cultures of origin and home communities, an experience which can intensify already troubled marriages or parent-child relationships (Pyke, 2005). Further, immigrants and refugees from different cultures clearly have different expectations of spousal and child behavior, differences which may intensify in an unfamiliar setting (Umaña-Taylor, Bahanot, & Shin, 2006). Finally, the immigration and refugee experience makes receiving support from family left behind difficult, which may take an emotional and financial toll on individuals, romantic relationships, and families.

Extant research focusing on the communication issues faced by immigrants and refugees foreshadows the present study, but provides significant differences. For example, many studies focus on groups of individuals from the same country who are able to maintain a higher level of cultural ties with each other after their immigration or relocation. Portland, Oregon, for example, is the home to African refugees from many countries, but has a significant number of individuals from each country so they are able to associate with people from their original homeland (Hume & Hardwick, 2005). The African refugees in Fargo comprise small family units and come from many different countries. Consequently, they have no such support system.

Cross-cultural adaptation is not a new area of study for communication scholars, however there is a paucity of knowledge about the communicative challenges refugees experience. The refugee experience inherently requires one to leave home, with little or no preparation, to protect the safety of the refugee and his or her family. Although this review of literature will examine communication challenges experienced by refugees, immigrants, and sojourners, immigrants and sojourners have chosen to leave their former culture, and may be more vested in adapting to the new culture. Further, many refugees proclaim their desire to return to their culture of origin when it is safe to do so, and many female refugees explain their wish to retain their home-culture's prescribed roles, regardless of their current living situation (Bhuyan & Senturia, 2005).

Refugees report experiencing conflicting issues. On one hand many refugees report prejudice, misunderstanding of their circumstances, and ignorance of their cultural values by teachers and law enforcement officials (Usita & Blieszner, 2002). Female refugees also report threats, unwillingness to contact the police for legitimate problems, increased incidents of domestic violence than when they lived in their country of origin (Bhuyan & Senturia, 2005), and concern their children are not learning their home culture's values. Conversely, refugees also report satisfying refugee experiences, including a feeling of safety and security in their new environment, improved educational experiences for themselves and their children, and better economic conditions. Such contradicting feelings allow communication

researchers to examine the dialectic contradictions felt by female African refugees living in the United States.

While the refugee experience is challenging, men and women experience the pressures to adapt to a new culture in different ways. This pressure can be exacerbated if the culture of origin is a patriarchal culture, similar to most African cultures. This study specifically examines the challenges females face when relocating to the United States, because the barriers to cross-cultural adaptation are frequently higher for women than men, due to their childrearing responsibilities. These responsibilities limit a female refugee's ability to learn the language of the host country, as well as develop a support network (Ahmad, Riaz, Barta, & Stewart, 2004). Furthermore, the female is generally viewed as the communication center of the family, and is familiar with the communicative challenges faced by her intimate partner, children, and friends. This position of caregiver and communication center, combined with the marginalization female African refugees face living in the United States, creates a unique communication position to examine.

Problems Female Sojourners Experience

Female African refugees experience triple marginalization in the United States: as women, as refugees, and as minorities (Binder & Tosic, 2005). Female refugees arrive in the United States with disadvantages in social status and basic human resources relative to refugee and immigrant males (Bui & Morash 1999; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). Female refugees are frequently unable to actively participate in the new culture due to language, social, cultural, religious, and financial barriers (Bhuyan & Senturia, 2005; Raj & Silverman, 2002). Female refugees also may have difficulty forming new social networks to the extent their male counterparts do (Abraham 2000; Hagan 1998). Male refugees often serve as intermediaries between their families and external resources, and even when women are able to access services on their own, their partners may have a final say as to whether the women may access such resources (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002), which may dictate some level of their cultural adaptation.

Three of the primary challenges reported by female immigrants are domestic violence, changing family roles, and the lack of a clear support network. Although reviewed separately below, these challenges can and do act together to exacerbate their effects on refugees.

Domestic violence

Immigrant status, context, and culture of origin are all related to increased domestic violence (Ahmad et al. 2004; Raj & Silverman, 2002), as many cultures are more tolerant of domestic violence than the United States. Russian-speaking female immigrants report their culture requires them to be patient and tolerant of abuse for extended periods (Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan & Shiu-Thornton, 2005). Female refugees from a Cambodian community in the United States report they are culturally expected to endure abuse from their husbands

(Bhuyan, Mell, Senturia, Sullivan & Shiu-Thornton, 2005). In many cultures, domestic violence is perceived by both partners to be the fault of the female (Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thornton, & Ciske, 2005).

Women from submissive cultures tend to adapt to American egalitarian gender roles more quickly than their male partners. This adaptation may cause male partners to become more controlling of their female partners and more likely to use abusive tactics. Male partners may also attempt to maintain culturally prescribed roles due to financial insecurity and a lack of a cultural support system (Raj & Silverman, 2002). This contradiction between the culture of origin and the American culture likely creates a point of dissonance for a refugee couple.

Changing family roles

Cultural displacement takes a toll on the family unit. Families experience changes in relationships with other family members. Refugees report having less time with their children than they did prior to moving to the United States, as they tend to work multiple jobs with conflicting schedules. Refugees are reluctant to discuss the reasons for leaving their country of origin with their children thus erasing their cultural past. Finally, the refugee experience frequently results in the extended family being scattered, sometimes across the globe, making communication prohibitive (Weine et al., 2004).

In addition to problems communicating with extended families, many female refugees report parenting difficulties attributed to the cross-cultural adaptation process (Hedegaard, 1999; Weine et al., 2004). These difficulties include children becoming “Americanized,” by adopting American cultural norms, and disengaging from their culture of origin. Further, parents of refugee children and parents of first-generation American children report their children are not interested in learning about their culture of origin, their parent’s native language, and traditional religious practices (Keel & Drew, 2004). This reluctance to learn about the family’s culture of origin, combined with the parent’s desire for children to understand the importance of their cultural roots, leaves refugee children and first-generation American children of refugees torn between two cultures. Female immigrants cite this conflict as a source of sadness and confusion in their lives (Pyke, 2005).

Support network

Supportive networks may help refugees, immigrants, and other persons new to the United States build local ties and feel more comfortable in their new environment (Hedge, 1998). Consequently, many social service agencies in communities with larger refugee or immigrant populations have attempted to develop support groups for New Americans, both secular and religious in nature. Yet, Americans tend to approach cultural differences from an ethnocentric perspective (Chen & Starosta, 1996), assuming a support group may solve a problem without really addressing causes of problems. As such, refugees, particularly refugees from non-European nations, dismiss support groups as unproductive to solve their lived problems.

Many communities with relocated refugees, including Fargo, North Dakota, contain refugees from a variety of geographical and cultural backgrounds who are often quite dissimilar from each other with regard to their understanding of the English language, and cultural and religious beliefs. Creating a single support network for such a diverse group of people may not provide the services intended, due to the diversity of the refugee community. Most refugees and immigrants actually cite their homes as the true source of support, as nuclear families tend to observe the same traditions (Usita & Blieszner, 2002).

Even if there is a group of refugees with the same cultural background, the age and religious practices of individuals may not allow true support communities to emerge. Despite having the same cultural heritage, age differences can inhibit the creating of a support community. For example, older Jordanian women are more likely to justify wife beating than younger Jordanian women (Haj-Yahia, 2002). Additionally, diversity and intensity of religious beliefs, even in a group of people from the same country, may cause significant strife within a *refugee community*.

Relational Dialectic Theory

This investigation seeks to understand the experiences of female immigrants and refugees by identifying the dialectic contradictions experienced by female African refugees adapting to American culture. Relational dialectic theory explains the “simultaneous unity and difference” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998, p. 2) of an experience or relationship. Relational dialectic theory is a sensitizing theory, as opposed to a predictive theory, and attempts to understand or make sense of relationships (Baxter, 2004). Rather than attempting to find a balance between two opposing forces, relational dialectic theory seeks to understand the abyss between two contradictory tensions. For example, not all members of a family adapt to a new culture at the same pace. Communicative traits differ between generations (Zhong, Myers, & Buerkel, 2004), and children in school are more likely to learn the language and norms of the new culture faster than their parents (Monzo & Rueda, 2006). This difference may create tension in a family as the children are in a position to serve as cultural agents. The roles of parents as teachers and children as learners become blurred or reversed. Individually, parents as learners and children as teachers are unconventional roles. However, many children of refugees have greater access to, and interaction with, cultural knowledge than their parents (Monzo & Rueda, 2006). Relational dialectic theory does not provide a solution to the problem, rather relational dialectic theory explores opposing relationships and the contradictions such relationships cause. Irresolvable, opposing contradictions are central to dialectic theory (Braithwaite, 2002).

Consequently, the research question of this study is grounded in dialectic theory:

RQ: What are the perceived dialectic contradictions female African refugees living in the United States experience because of the cross-cultural adaptation process?

Method

The data for this study were collected from two focus groups conducted in February, 2006. Focus group participants included 12 female African refugees living in, or near, Fargo, North Dakota, whose countries of origin included Egypt, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan. The focus group participants were chosen to represent the diversity of female African refugees currently living in North Dakota. Although the countries of origin of focus group participants is diverse, with differing political and religious issues, female African refugees living in North Dakota appear to create ties of friendship, bonded together by common refugee experiences. Finally, African refugees relocated to North Dakota, who are provided similar services, claim to have found value in banding together, despite their cultural and political differences (S. Milovanovic, personal communication, February 24, 2006).

Focus group interviews allow for information to emerge which may not necessarily come out in a one-to-one interview. Focus group participants can expand upon or contradict opinions presented by another focus group participant, and also can allow complementary interactions. Complementary interactions provide an opportunity for focus group members to “broadly agree on an expressed view and add their own subtle shades of interpretation to the view” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182). Furthermore, focus groups provide a space for participants to express views about “sensitive or long repressed topics” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182), making focus groups a particularly appropriate methodological tool to address the research question. Further, focus groups allow for support and validation between group members during the sessions (Ruppenthal, Tuck, & Gagnon, 2005), as well as providing validation for experiences. This validation results in increased participant confidence and motivation for participation in conversations about difficult topics (Zorn, Roper, Broadfoot, & Weaver, 2006).

A cultural agent recruited participants. The cultural agent, a former refugee from Sierra Leone, was then working in a social service capacity with female African refugees living in North Dakota. Cultural agents are essential when conducting intercultural research if the researchers’ culture differs from the participants’ cultures (Littlefield & Thweatt, 2004). For example, a cultural agent was used to study Japanese students’ perceptions of general problems facing Japanese families, to both increase the trust the participants had in the research project, and to “increase the chances of obtaining accurate and candid responses” (Child, Pearson, & Nagao, 2006, p. 50). The cultural agent identified opinion leaders of the female African refugee population living in eastern North Dakota who were willing to share their experiences with the research team. Further, the cultural agent sought to recruit participants varying in time living in the United States, age, and living situation.

Focus Group Participants

The twelve African women who participated in this study ranged in age from 19 to 38. They had lived in the United States between two and ten years, averaging five-and-a-half years of residence in the Fargo, North Dakota, area. Ten participants

had children, ranging in age from 18 months to 18 years. Six of the participants were married with children, two were married without children, and four were not married but did have children. All but one of the participants worked outside the home. Most worked as certified nursing assistants for local nursing homes or in assembly-line jobs. After two focus groups, the cultural agent felt this research project had likely reached saturation of participants. The cultural agent explained many refugees living in Eastern North Dakota are reticent to commit themselves to *frivolous* experiences, such as focus groups, as much of their time is spent supporting and caring for her family (L. Mizero, personal communication, February 25, 2006).

Each of the participants spoke English as her second language. As the research team determined focus groups were the ideal method for data collection, all focus groups were conducted in English, rather than the native language of each participant. Given the diversity of nations represented, many speaking different languages and dialects, it would have been impossible to conduct focus groups in each of the research participant's native language. The decision to conduct the focus groups in English limited each participant's ability to express herself concisely at times, but allowed for participants to hear what others were saying, and to allow interactions between participants, an important feature of focus groups (Ruppenthal, Tuck, & Gagnon, 2005). Further, many participants ended up speaking in their native tongue occasionally, and then translated her thoughts for the rest of the participants.

Focus Group Procedures

Semi-structured, open-ended questions guided the discussion of participants' experiences in the United States. Specifically, participants were asked to describe their initial impressions of the United States, their background, and how their lives have changed as a result of moving to the United States. They were asked to describe challenges they experienced and to offer opinions for solving identified problems. The moderator posed appropriate follow-up questions to probe for deeper understanding of answers. Participants described their first impressions of North Dakota, and the issues they felt were most challenging to them individually, including problems with their male partners, children, and jobs.

The moderator of the focus group was a married woman in her late 30s, a mother of four boys, and a first-generation American. The research team felt this researcher would establish good rapport with the participants due to her age, similar experiences, and overall demeanor. The first focus group, attended by eight participants, lasted approximately 180 minutes, and the second focus group, attended by four participants, lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Data Analysis

The two focus groups produced 2022 lines of typed data. A qualitative, interpretative approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was used to guide data analysis by allowing the

researchers to understand the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 1998). The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to identify emergent dialectic contradictions discussed by research participants. The researchers used the following procedures to analyze the transcripts.

First, two of the authors read the transcripts in their entirety, to appreciate the content of the transcripts, as well as to glean the overall substance of the transcripts. Each researcher then re-read the transcripts, noting the existence of preliminary dialectic contradictions and seeking to determine if preliminary contradictions fully encompassed issues discussed by the participants. The researchers then shared their findings and refined the definitions of the four final dialectic contradictions described in this paper: acceptance-rejection, positive-negative, real-ideal, and inclusion-exclusion (see Table 1 for contradiction definitions).

The same two researchers then re-read the transcripts together, looking for dialectic contradictions. The researchers discussed each dialectic contradiction as it was identified, determined which dialectic contradiction(s) were represented in a given section of the transcript, and categorized dialectic contradiction(s) accordingly. The above process allowed the research team to let the dialectic contradictions articulated by participants emerge from the data, rather than from a pre-generated list of possible dialectic contradictions. As a consequence of the importance of the topic to the participants, as well as language barriers, participants often expressed several ideas in one passage. Accordingly, the research team determined one passage could represent more than one dialectic contradiction, and all contradictions were coded.

The transcripts of this project revealed one hundred fifty dialectic contradictions; approximately 70% were found in the first focus group and approximately 30% in the second focus group. Table 2 provides a complete report of the individual categories of contradictions found within each focus group. The uneven number of contradictions found in the two focus groups is a result of the discussion topic of the two focus groups. The use of focus groups allows participants to guide the discussion in some manner (Ruppenthal, Tuck, & Gagnon, 2005); participants in the first focus group spent much time discussing their family lives, including their relationships with their husbands, children, and extended families. The second focus group spent

Table 1 Dialectic Contradiction Definitions.

| Contradiction | Definition |
|----------------------|---|
| Positive-Negative | The participants express challenges adapting to life in America, but at the same time is happy to be in America. |
| Inclusion-Exclusion | The participants express a contradiction between a desire to be included in a new community and a perceived exclusion from a new community. |
| Acceptance-Rejection | The participants struggle with accepting or rejecting elements of American culture. |
| Real-Ideal | The participants struggle between their own lifestyle and their perception of the lifestyle of Americans. |

Table 2 Contradictions Identified in Focus Groups.

| | A-R | P-N | R-I | I-E | Total |
|--------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| FG ONE | 34 | 1 | 15 | 16 | 106 (70.6%) |
| FG TWO | 1 | 58 | 1 | 14 | 44 (29.3%) |
| Total | 35 (23.3%) | 59 (39.3%) | 16 (10.6%) | 40 (26.6%) | 150 (100%) |

Note: FG stands for focus group, A-R stands for acceptance-rejection, P-N stands for positive-negative, R-I stands for real-ideal, and I-E stands for inclusion-exclusion.

more time discussing work, perceived inequality, and their challenges helping their children navigate the public education system.

Results and Discussion

The research question of this study seeks to determine the dialectic contradictions female African refugees living in the United States report experiencing. While four dialectic contradictions were expressed, all contradictions stemmed from perceived differences between African and American culture. Regardless of the individual contradiction or experience, the participants indicated they felt each contradiction was solely a result of their relocation to the United States. For example, many participants expressed problems in their marriages or intimate relationships. While the satisfaction the participants felt about their intimate relationships prior to leaving their country of origin is unknown, the participants indicated they felt problems in their intimate relationships were a result of moving to the United States. Regardless of the real cause of all of the contradictions articulated by the research participants, all participants indicated they would never have experienced any of the dialectic contradictions reported in this study had they remained living in their country of origin. The four dialectic contradictions which emerged are defined and illustrated below.

The Dialectic of Positive-Negative

Of the four dialectic contradictions uncovered in the transcripts, the female African refugees expressed the positive-negative dialectic 59 (39.3%) times. The positive-negative dialectic allows for expressions of gratitude for living in America while simultaneously feeling living in America is challenging. Expressing her communication challenges, Subira¹ explains: “I really, I like America, but I don’t like for some. I am sorry for my English. I don’t speak English very well. My grammar is trouble” (Focus Group 1, lines 246–247).

In addition to the positive-negative dialectic caused by communication challenges, the participants described certain changes in their family relationships, resulting from their move to America. Nia explains:

Men in Africa, they have jobs, like my husband he used to work in an office, but when he come here, there is no more office job. And the only thing they have

to do is to go back to the factory. And it is most humiliating. (Focus Group 1, lines 801–804)

Perhaps the most frequent positive-negative dialectic discussed by the participants was a change in their intimate relationships they attribute to moving to America. Many participants seem to have embraced the more liberal attitudes Americans have about women, but simultaneously express frustration that their husbands or romantic partners seem to want to maintain African gender roles. For example, Amadi frequently commented on the positive aspects of living in America, including the chances for education and learning to drive, but also laments:

Back in Africa the men are supposed to act their wives way better and even though you didn't know any better but you used to be somebody [to them]. But compared to here, you are nothing, you are like a dog. But you have a right to have him help you. You say you get a job and he don't. That's wrong. (Focus Group 1, lines 826–829)

The positive-negative dialectic allowed participants to express the advantages of living in the United States including freedoms afforded to women they did not experience in their home countries, the opportunity for education, and the ability to financially contribute to their households. However, they also expressed the disadvantages, such as children not learning about their culture of origin, allowing their romantic partners to support them financially, and the reality that it is difficult for two adult members of one household to attend school at the same time and financially thrive in the United States.

Although many of the issues discussed by the participants are similar to issues discussed by immigrants, exchange students, and other people new to the United States, many of the problems revealed by the participants are unique to the refugee experience. For example, social service agencies which relocate refugees are required by federal law to provide specific services to refugees, services not provided to most immigrants or sojourners in the United States. One of these services is a needs assessment, to determine the *best* way for the family to become self-sufficient in the nine-month financial support period mandated by the United States Office of Refugee Resettlement (S. Milovanovic, personal communication, February 24, 2006). This process normally results in a male, who is typically more educated, returning to school to earn a bachelor's degree, and the female, who rarely has substantial formal education, entering the work force in a position requiring minimal English-speaking skills. This solution is perceived as the best way to achieve financial independence, and consequently a good choice for the family. Subera rationalizes this attitude when she says: "we think that because he go to school, we are going to be better off" (Focus Group 1, lines 641–642).

In addition to serving as the breadwinner for the family, the research participants reported they were also expected to retain culturally prescribed role as family caretaker, resulting in feelings of resentment towards male partners. Funanya poignantly explained:

The African men. You know what? They treat us like a slave! A woman you love . . .
A woman that bear a child for you, how are you going to treat that person—like

a slave! You treat that person like your enemy. You have all the hatred for your wife . . . We do two jobs, like me . . . I work hard. My husband go to school full time. I do everything all the job. My husband never help me to take the garbage out. He treat me like a big donkey. He treat me like I'm the worst, stupid woman in the world. He treat me like without him, I will never have no husband. (Focus Group 1, lines 593–601)

Funanya goes on to explain the extent of her frustration with her husband; how between her job and caring for her children she lives on three or four hours of sleep a night. Funanya says when her husband comes home from class or being out with his friends he will not help with housework, child-rearing, or other domestic tasks, yet expects her to make herself available to his physical and sexual needs. Later in the discussion, many participants indicate African men are unable to work and go to school at the same time:

Moderator: I don't understand. He is going to school. But it's not like he's not capable of doing something else besides going to school.

Subera: America people go to school and they also work.

Moderator: Right.

Subera: African man, they cannot go to school and work. I mean they cannot combine.

Moderator: It's not a consideration to do . . .

Subera: They don't want to do it! (Focus Group 1, lines 775–781)

Although immigrants and sojourners likely experience both the positive and negative aspects of living in the United States, refugees are alone in being required to attain financial independence in a short period of time. Although services are provided to help refugees reach this goal, the needs assessment conducted by the resettling agency focuses on attaining financial independence, and de-emphasizes the cultural moirés of individual couples. Consequently, refugees are able to experience both relative safety of living in the United States, as well as the pressure to provide financially and emotionally for their family. As Subera declares, “the marriage is hanging on children and culture” (Focus Group 1, line 767).

The Dialectic of Inclusion-Exclusion

The second category of contradictions articulated focused on participants' desire to be included in their new culture while, at the same time, feeling excluded. Forty (26.6%) contradictions fell into this category, many focusing on perceived inequalities in the workplace. Funanya explains:

You go to work and get oppressed at the same time. You can feel it right away, and people are really automatically seeing the class in the United States. In the work you can see, you know, if you are lighter, you get more things . . . if you are dark, you stay at the back. (Focus Group 2, lines 190–200)

Many other participants expressed sentiments echoing Funanya's lament, explaining, “It's hard to describe it, you know, it just comes everywhere and just hits you right on the face” (Funanya, Focus Group 2, lines 236–237).

In addition to feeling included and excluded concurrently in the workplace, participants also described contradictory feelings of inclusion and exclusion when it came to raising their children. Gbemisola provides an example of how her son was treated at school:

I remember my son he was in fourth grade I think. And just think the teacher doesn't like him or what, and every day the teacher would call. You son is like this, your son, your son. Oh my God. I'm so tired and everyday I would go pick my son and say how's school and he said good. And one day I went to get him and then we were coming home and then I say how was school? I said, what did that lady say to you again today? That teacher, I asked my son. He say the teacher doesn't like me. I say what? He say yeah. I say, uh, how? He said, when I do something, she puts me in time out right away. But when other people do something to me, then I tell her, and then she would say nothing. (Focus Group 2, lines 299–307)

Gbemisola attempted to explain the situation to her son, but she was not the only participant expressing her frustration with the way her child was treated at school.

In-home discipline was another source of feelings of inclusion and exclusion. A traditional form of African discipline, pinching children, has been interpreted by the children of the participants as a form of abuse. Consequently, the children threaten to call 911 when their parents attempt to discipline them in a manner appropriate for their parents' culture of origin. This threat appears to work, as when 911 is called, "the cops come. Not one, he comes six, four persons. Six car come to your house, make shame for your house" (Subira, Focus Group 1, lines 322–323). Many participants expressed reluctance to discipline their children the way they are used to, in fear the police will come, shame them, and possibly remove their children from their custody.

One final area in which participants expressed the inclusion-exclusion dialectic was in regard to navigating American systems. Participants told countless stories of difficulty managing the American financial and legal systems. For example, Zola told a story about a challenge she experienced with a long distance telephone bill:

One day, they call me and they ask me about long distance. I say no, I don't want any long distance. They said why? I say because I am not working, I cannot afford. It cost 29 dollar or something like that. Yeah. Then I get bill and call and I say what is this bill for? I told you I couldn't pay a long distance bill for 29 dollar. They say well, because of you long distance. I say what long distance? I didn't ask for long distance, and they say, yes you told us yes. (Focus Group 2, lines 264–296)

Zola eventually paid the bill, as she "don't want my name and credit destroy" (Focus Group 2, line 256). However, other participants told stories about being misunderstood because of their accents, being threatened with ruined credit, and threats of legal action with regard to unpaid bills for charges assessed prior to their arrival in America. Participants expressed a desire to fit into American culture, while feeling at the same time frustrated by perceived discrimination because of their skin color, accent, or inability to articulate their concerns clearly over the telephone.

Although the challenges described above are likely experienced to a certain extent by all people who move to a different culture, the refugee experience brings many

issues of inclusion and exclusion to the forefront. For example, refugee children enrolled in school are required to undergo a health screening prior to attending school. Refugee children are frequently found to be deficient in mandated vaccines (Plotinsky, et al., 2007). Because refugees are monitored by social service agencies, healthcare deficiencies are discussed in depth, and refugees are encouraged to correct such problems.

Additionally, adult refugees often have difficulty communicating with their health-care provider, are much more susceptible to what Americans consider childhood illnesses, including mumps, rubella, and measles, as a result of not being vaccinated as children (Merrett, Schwartzman, Rivest, & Greenaway, 2007). While to Americans, childhood and routine adult vaccines like tetanus boosters and Hepatitis-B immunizations are considered normal, the health history of a refugee is scrutinized immediately upon entry to the United States, causing the refugee to feel vulnerable. Legal immigrants and sojourners experience such scrutiny prior to entering the United States, and illegal immigrant adults often do not seek healthcare. Refugees are immediately required to navigate the American health care system, and frequently have difficulty communicating their needs to their primary physician (Johnson, Evans, Mohamed, & Carress, 2006). Nomusa validates this problem when she says: “I cannot explain how I feel [to the doctor]. This the problem now . . . I don’t like translation between me and the doctor” (Focus Group 1, lines 935–936).

Should a refugee have an immediate health concern, the problems of navigating the health care system can exacerbate the health problem. For example, Poday was pregnant when she arrived in the United States, and explained:

I went for my prenatal exam. So one day, I went [to the doctor] and I sat, because all the doctors busy. I change mind, I left. After two days . . . I make appointment and I will be there. They tell nurse. She pick up thing and of course she listen to my womb and she said “uh.” Afterwards she sat typing for a long time. Making a decision. Of course she said to do her job. I cannot understand computers well. So they go, I will give you a call. After long day, I call her back. I’m so sorry because your English is not well. So I’m so sorry for that. Ugh. I was so mad. Like for two days, I couldn’t eat, I was crying. (Focus Group 2, lines 50–58)

Poday’s concern about her appointment, and the health of her unborn child, was overshadowed by her frustration with not understanding the doctor appointment process, not realizing the prenatal care procedures in the United States, and her health care provider not understanding her spoken English. Having to immediately navigate the American health care system is a unique feature of the refugee experience which other newcomers to the United States can avoid.

The Dialectic of Acceptance-Rejection

The third dialectic contradiction focused on accepting cultural values while simultaneously rejecting other cultural values. Thirty five (23.3%) of the contradictions fell into this category. Participants told stories of adapting to American

culture while rejecting African culture, or retaining African cultural values while rejecting American cultural norms. Regardless of the cultural value being accepted or rejected, the fact a cultural value was discussed during the focus groups was important to the researchers, as the mention of a cultural struggle indicated the participant felt a pull between the two cultures.

Some of the cultural decisions appeared to be easy for the participants to make. For example, Lesedi explains some of the men in her native African community “beat their wives. They beat their wives” (Focus Group 1, line 527). She went on to explain “When I get to America, my eyes were opened. In Africa I suffered so much. And I thought because I have to bear it, I have to do this. Here, no way. I won’t die anymore” (Focus Group 1, lines 542–543). While Lesedi did not seem to struggle with this decision, other participants explained members of the refugee community struggle much more with rejecting their traditional gender roles in favor of American gender roles. Subira explains many women cannot stand up to their husbands, and Ebele explains “it is a shame in our culture to kick a man out of the house” (Focus Group 1, line 823).

In addition to accepting and rejecting traditional marital roles, participants expressed sadness that their children are unfamiliar with their cultures of origin. Nomusa explains maintaining traditional values are both a challenge and a perceived necessity:

If you go back to your country and you don’t know anything about your culture, that’s kind of shame for you and your family. If you stay in America it really doesn’t matter. But I’m sure most of us plan on going back to our own country sometime. I have a brother, he is 14 now. When he came here, 3 years old, I think. He hardly speaks, he knows it, and he hardly speaks our native language. And that’s like really bad for our family, like if we go back to our country and he barely speaks the language, my grandparents will be like, “What the heck is wrong with him?” (Focus Group 1, lines 1223–1229)

Many participants indicated they want to return to their country of origin when it becomes safe, and thus maintaining traditional cultural values appears to be important. At the same time, participants are raising their children in a different culture from their culture of origin and they see some positive aspects of American culture.

Participants appeared to want to accept American cultural gender roles and to want their children to learn their traditional cultural values. Participants also explained the way American women dress and the speed at which Americans live creates tension in their lives. Small cultural differences, yet practices engrained in the fabric of American culture, appear to cause tension in the lives of the participants.

Refugees are in a unique position from immigrants and other people new to America. While many immigrants come to the United States in search of a better life, the refugee process inherently requires proving it is unsafe for the refugee to return home. Refugees also have little choice of their relocation location, and consequently may end up in communities quite unlike their home and far away from familiar cultural ties. The pressure initially to reject American cultural values experienced by

refugees is likely quite high. However, as many participants indicated, as they became aware of the rights women in the United States enjoy, they wanted some of those rights, while maintaining other practices of their culture of origin. Consequently, the participants appeared to want to choose their cultural practices à-la-carte, choosing the American cultural values associated with liberation and equal rights for women, yet maintaining their African cultural heritage, particularly for their children.

Further, many participants expressed a desire to return home, yet realized their situations meant they could not return home at this time. Their children have acculturated to their way of life in the United States to the extent they felt taking their children back to their country of origin would be bad. For example, when faced with the idea of taking her children back to Africa, Gbemisola responded:

When the kids grow, I want to go back home. I want to go back to my parents. I haven't seen my parents in so long, I live here five years, and almost two years in the camp. But I honestly don't want to go right now home. Right now we have kids in school. That's why we came here. But, for me, there is family. Because people are seen dying there then, I people are still living there, sometimes you don't even have like uh, coffee to drink. Sometimes you don't even have one piece of cookie to eat. But I said if I go home with those kids, I don't know. Sometimes with my sister, it's those kids are too much. Yeah, and my sister said "if you take those kids home, don't expect them to like it. They won't live that way." They eat drink, chew, eat, drink, chew, eat, drink, chew, eat, drink, chew, all day all night. (Focus Group 2, lines 145–155)

Gbemisola expresses the contradiction of wanting to return home, while realistically knowing her children would not thrive where she grew up.

The Dialectic of Cultural Real-Ideal

Many participants in this study struggle with the perceived disparity between their lifestyle and their perceptions of the American lifestyle. Sixteen (10.6%) of the contradictions identified fall under the real-ideal dialectic. The general perception among the participants is Americans, particularly women, "have it all," and are able to manage their personal relationships, division of labor, and balance their work and family. Several participants discussed their admiration of American women, including Subira who said,

Many woman in America you have to work hard work, and have a husband, and have a children, and have a lot of bills, and stay beautiful. They go to the gym, they organized. Organized, organized you guys. (Focus Group 1, lines 1098–1100)

American men are also held in high esteem, especially compared to the participants' African male partners. The broad disparity between how the participants think American men treat their wives compared to how African men treat their wives is illustrated by Ebele:

When you have a baby, you no more sexy. They no more regard you as a human. But American people, especially American men, they really work hard for their

wives and they show their love even if they are eighty—eighty years old. That love, that they married and express it. They still have that love for them But not the African men. You know what? They treat us like a slave. A woman you love—A woman that bear a child for you, how are you going to treat that person? Like a slave! You treat that person like your enemy. You have all the hatred for your wife (Focus Group 1, lines 590–596)

The participants wanted American men to teach their husbands and partners how to treat their wives through meetings and classes. Zuri made a proposition to the focus group: “I think we need to have an African man meeting, [where] American men tell them how you are supposed to treat your wife. Teach them right. Because they are still in Africa” (Focus group 1, lines 1024–1028).

The participants also indicated they wished their children would behave as they perceive American children to behave. Ebele said of her children,

They won't help you to take the garbage out. They never help you to do laundry. Guess what? You cook for them, do laundry for them, you clean you do everything. You are just like a maid. (Focus Group 1, lines 629–632)

Subira makes the comparison more explicitly saying,

The kids of the American families are organized. My son, he come to school 18 years old. Because my kids not organized. Sometimes, sometimes my kids forget the jacket in my car. I see the morning I go drive my car; I see five jackets in my car. What's going on? (Focus Group 1, lines 1103–1106)

The real-ideal contradiction manifests itself through comparing one's life to those they are surrounded by in their new culture. Unfortunately, the comparison may not be a realistic comparison. For example, Makda said: “Anytime I watch the movie I see some romantic story and cry and I tell myself why you not lucky?” (Focus group 1, lines 292–293). While the authors know American marriages are not always romantic, American women are not all organized, and American children are sometimes forgetful, the participants feel a contradiction between their perceptions of American life and their reality.

Although the participants indicated they want a reality which may or may not exist, this is likely not a particularly unique trait to refugees. Quite frankly, many Americans also strive for an ideal lifestyle, true love, and easy circumstances they cannot or will not attain. What makes the real-ideal contradiction described above unique for refugees is the manner in which refugees become aware of their desires, which they claim they never would have wanted had they not been relocated in the United States.

Participants universally indicated they were happy living their cultural and gender roles in their country of origin. Upon coming to the United States, their eyes were opened to many inequalities, generating perceptions of class. For example, Fatuma explained:

It a lot of challenge because hard to see it but it obvious a lot you want to catch up on and the future that you want to build. And then you see people that are ahead of you. That giving you already a lot of a lot of anxiety you know. (Focus Group 2, lines 192–196)

Prior to moving to America, Fatuma likely had little or no idea of the class system in the United States, and even if she did, likely she did not perceive she would be in the lower class as a result of her status as a refugee. Gbemisola explains: “it’s a fantasy you know, if you wanna go to a, do you want to go to school, do you want to raise your kids? If you want to you know, challenge of life itself” (Focus Group 2, lines 335–336). Gbemisola articulates a frustration commonly expressed by all participants, they feel they were sold a specific vision of what their lives would be like and what they could accomplish. The reality of their situation is quite different from that vision, resulting in contradiction between what is real to them, and the ideal they are striving for.

Relational Dialectic Theory

Although relational dialectic theory has been criticized as a meta-theory, or overall framework to study relationships, our participants live in a bewildering world of contradictions. The participants frequently used the contradictions they experienced to their advantage, allowing the contradictions to justify behavioral choices. Living in a heightened state of contradiction provided the participants an opportunity to examine the contradictions they experience, and the choices they have made.

The remaining assumptions of dialectic theory, dialectic praxis, and totality, although not the focus of this investigation, were also present in the transcripts. Dialectic praxis provides for behaviors enacted upon an actor to change the behavior of that actor, and focuses on creating meaning for actors. The communicative function of dialectic praxis can include the influence of the physical environment (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The participants indicated their relocation to the United States changed their behaviors in positive ways as they have enjoyed financial freedom, driving privileges, and access to consistent health care. The participants also indicated they felt forced to change some of their behaviors as a result of their relocation experience, including working outside the home, changing their style of discipline, and the cultural rules dictating their intimate relationships. This contradiction of acting in particular ways while assuming some behaviors with no choice, illustrated dialectic praxis can be the result of living in a different cultural environment.

Dialectic totality explains an individual experience cannot be separated from the contradictory experience, as experiences do not exist in isolation (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). Dialectic totality manifests itself in the cross-cultural adaptation process when specific behaviors of the old and new culture are compared and one is selected. Taken together, dialectic praxis and totality explain why the participants make some of the choices they do. The participants indicated they compare behaviors they see in America to similar behaviors from their culture of origin, and then chose to enact the behavior they prefer, again illustrating their desire to choose their cultural practices à-la-carte.

The four elements of dialectic theory, contradiction, change, praxis, and totality, can be used to provide a unique analysis of the cross-cultural adaptation process.

The participants not only felt each of these elements of dialectic theory, they actually used these elements to justify changes in their behavior. Future research should investigate the revelation that dialectic contradictions can change behaviors, in addition to attitudes, providing for expansion of dialectic theory.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this research was the language of the focus groups. Although the native language of the participants of this research was not English, the focus groups were conducted in English. Consequently, research participants had to speak in their non-native tongue. While the decision to conduct the focus groups in English was made to allow participants from different countries speaking different languages to participate in this research, the use of English was clearly a struggle for some participants.

This limitation, combined with a technical problem with recording equipment during the focus groups, resulted in audio-recordings which were challenging to decipher. Consequently, there were portions of the focus group dialogue, primarily expansions of experiences, which were not transcribed and consequently not included in this analysis. Future research endeavors using research participants whose native language is not the language of the focus group should consider the language of the focus group, weighing the advantage of using the focus group method with the disadvantage of the possible intimidation some participants may feel having to speak a non-native language.

The focus group questions were purposefully developed to be non-directive, in order to allow participants to express their thoughts about their experiences during their cross-cultural adaptation process. Although dialectic contradictions experienced by female African refugees emerged from our data, future studies exploring the cross-cultural adaptation process of refugees might purposefully explore the dialectic nature of the adaptation process.

Perhaps the fundamental issue surrounding refugee culture is that refugees are silenced by the majority of American culture, marginalizing the refugee's culture. The grand narrative of refugee status in moving to the United States is for the benefit of the refugees, particularly in a postcolonial sense. However, most refugees are not interested in being colonized, resulting in the perceived marginalization of their voices. The marginalization continues as refugees continue to fail to find a place within the dominant discourse of the area in which they live, creating frustration and resentment to the culture they now have to function within

While an abundance of empirical research documents the experiences of individual immigrant and refugee groups, limited understanding of the impact of dialectic contradictions on refugee and immigrant populations exists. Replicating this study in a different geographical area, using a different and/or a diverse population may provide additional insight. For those who work with refugee populations on a daily basis, this information could provide more information on how services and programs can be adapted to assist refugees and immigrants

through the cross-cultural adaptation process. Relational dialectic theory celebrates the daily contradictions we all experience, but often do not notice. As Ho (1995) observes, “These tensions may be the driving force for adaptation, creativity, and change” (p. 7).

Note

- [1] All of the names have been changed to protect the focus group participants’ identity, but are similar to names from their country of origin.

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