Beyond the Discourse of Trauma: Shifting the Focus on Sudanese Refugees

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The refugee label acknowledges the plight of people marginalized, oppressed and pushed to the periphery of society. While having this status affords a number of rights from countries signatory to the 1951 UN convention, the concept of 'refugeehood' within resettlement contexts can become a master status that defines a person above and beyond any other form of identity. Drawing upon political theories of recognition, this dilemma is addressed by examining the powerful current Western discourses on trauma where refugees are often situated. It is then contextualized, using the example of Sudanese men resettled in Australia to differentiate ordinary and extra-ordinary stories of lived experience. This distinction provides a helpful framework for developing more sophisticated understandings of how people have responded to trauma beyond the 'event-worthy' underpinnings of forced migration.

Keywords: refugee, trauma, Sudan, recognition theory, narrative

Introduction: Rendering Concepts 'Newly Strange'

Stories of Sudanese forced migrants walking hundreds of kilometres through deserts, escaping lions and running with bullets at their heels in the decades of civil war capture outsiders' attention and imagination. Whilst such stories of trauma, hardship and despair reveal the oppressive and marginalized circumstances of people's lives, professionals and associated support agencies are at risk of giving overriding value to these accounts at the expense of information outside the refugee context. From an exclusive trauma-focused understanding, a thin description of the individual is created where other important considerations of identity and history (social, political, cultural) are easily lost or hidden. Thus, the story of a person's experience(s) of trauma associated with forced migration and how it has negatively influenced his/her life can overshadow other co-existing stories which can emphasize something very different about what a person values and readily identifies with.

Several authors have recently published (auto)biographical and fictionalized accounts that document the experiences of civil war in Sudan (see Deng *et al*. 2005; Eggers 2006; Bixler 2005; Hecht 2005). Many of these stories are about young males, labelled 'Lost Boys' by Bixler (2005). Displaced by war, these Sudanese boys acquired this label by walking huge distances without their parents. They survived wild animals, hunger, thirst, sickness and conflict settings to find a relative 'safe haven' in Ethiopia from 1987 to 1991, and then moved again to Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp in 1992. This refugee journey and the sensationalized descriptor of 'Lost Boys' have captured readers' imaginations and engaged their sympathies.

There is clearly value in knowing about the hardships encountered by the 'Lost Boys' as this illuminates the lived experiences of oppression and injustice. However, written between the lines of these adverse and traumatic events are the boys' stories and responses of supporting one another, remembering and living by their parents' teachings, maintaining hope and forms of survival. For this paper, these responses are often grounded within what is termed the *ordinary* understandings of one's history, spirituality, culture, background, folklore, etc. as distinct from the *extra-ordinary* events usually associated with and underpinned by trauma. This distinction was inspired by Bourdieu's (1988: xii) discussion of rendering familiar perspectives newly strange through 'exoticizing the domestic' by asking how it is that we can move preconceived concepts and ideas outside what is routinely thought and imagined. Bourdieu used this term to address the concern of taking the 'exotic' or most sensational and engaging aspects about a group of people and rendering these observations as 'domestic' or everyday understandings of them. To counteract this tendency, he suggested that taking the 'domestic' elements of people's lives and making them 'exotic' was a way to transform the familiar as strange and hence to critically engage anew. This perspective can be more easily understood within forced migration contexts as trying to place greater emphasis upon understanding a person's life beyond the ascribed status of being a refugee and the associated traumatic experiences of forced migration. In this paper, the 'exotic' and 'domestic' terminologies have not been used, in view of the associated polysemic and contested meanings in contemporary contexts. Rather, the terms *extra-ordinary* and *ordinary* are emphasized to delineate different aspects of the refugee and trauma-related story. This distinction is also partly informed by Kohli (2007), who writes about differentiating the ordinary and extraordinary lives of unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

When elevated from pejorative understandings, *ordinary* stories can help acknowledge people outside the refugee label and realize where they have drawn strength during their forced migration and resettlement experiences. While recognizing the importance of the *extra-ordinary,* this article addresses the significance of elevating the *ordinary* in refugee related research and professional practice by first discussing Fraser's political theory on recognition to examine what is at stake for resettling refugee communities. This discussion is

then grounded within the author's doctoral research with 24 Southern Sudanese men resettling in Adelaide, Australia. This research not only recognized the impact of trauma but importantly ascertained participants' initiatives, hopes and values which inform how they respond and cope through difficult situations.

Participants and Study Design

More than 24,000 Sudanese refugees have immigrated to Australia via the humanitarian programme visa scheme since 1996 (DIC 2007b). Of the 13,000 refugees who gained permanent residency under this scheme in 2005–2006, almost 30 per cent of all successful applications were Sudanese (DIC 2007a). Though the number of African entrants declined in 2007–2008, nearly 10 per cent of the total allocated humanitarian visas still went to Sudanese-born individuals (DIC 2008). Most of these recent Australian arrivals have come from Southern Sudan as a direct consequence of a 22-year civil war between rebel groups in the South and the government forces based in the North (see Jok 2001; Ruiz 1998; Duffield 2003). With few exceptions, Southern Sudanese refugees have survived traumatic and dangerous experiences associated with forced migration, including loss of family members, torture and rape (Bolea *et al*. 2003; Schweitzer *et al*. 2006; Jeppsson and Hjern 2005). Many Sudanese spent several years in refugee camps before resettling under humanitarian auspices in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.

There is now a growing body of scholarship on Sudanese people living through conflict settings (Khawaja *et al*. 2008; Westoby 2008; Schweitzer *et al*. 2007; Patrick 2005; Goodman 2004; Lustig *et al*. 2004; Hoeing 2004) that offers helpful perspectives beyond the pathologizing, and often all-encompassing, master status of refugee. Such studies have attempted to elicit the forms of strength, resilience and coping that provide insight into how people respond to traumatic experience. Building upon these qualitative inquiries, this study attempted to capture the *ordinary*, and when appropriate, the *extra-ordinary* stories that inform how Sudanese men have responded to trauma. After a relationship was established with the Sudanese community, 24 semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed that carefully documented these men's responses to trauma and aspects of the trauma story itself. The interview process was inspired by Denborough's (2006) 'double storied testimony' which provides a framework to acknowledge both the trauma story and a person's response to it. After transcription, the participant was given a written copy of the interview that included a two page executive summary of what the author thought were the main themes of the interview. In subsequent meetings (ranging from one to six additional interviews), the participant could make any deletions, changes or additions to the interview transcript and executive summary as he saw fit. In total, more than 70 interviews were conducted with the 24 participants. The

amended transcript was then imported into the qualitative software package NVivo 8 to help sort, manage and code the data. Analysis was carried out through a process of initial and focused coding, writing memos, theoretical sampling and using the constant comparative method as in constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). This fieldwork was conducted from 2007 to 2009.

Refugeehood, Recognition and Trauma Dominated Discourses

Within the popular media and much of the academic literature, refugees are often presented as those who are traumatized, lost, psychologically damaged and overwhelmed by grief. While there is little argument that refugees often experience very difficult and traumatic events, the psychological sequelae, associated trajectories and responses to such events are poorly understood. Several authors have noted that an almost automatic assumption of Western humanitarian aid organizations is the need for psychosocial interventions to address the 'emotional states' of refugees and others who have survived conflict settings (Pupavac 2002; Summerfield 1999; Bracken *et al*. 1995). Indeed, Pupavac (2002) argues that the dominant Western psychosocial model may even deny the resilience of survivors, as words such as 'scarred for life', 'indelible effects' and 'vulnerable' become the descriptors that embody and embed the refugee master status. These words, she maintains, impede recovery and she concludes that through the

> internationalization and professionalization of adversity, indigenous coping strategies are thus not merely demeaned and disempowered. The community itself is pathologized as dysfunctional and politically delegitimized (2002: 493).

The arguably *a priori* conceptions of refugees as scarred, weak and traumatized can essentialize people and communities within the context of trauma and associated negative effects (i.e. damaged, destitute, disturbed).

Following Hegel's famous phrase 'the struggle for recognition', resettling refugees can find themselves in a contested landscape whereby political, economic, social, cultural and media-driven forces influence the wider public's perception of them. Drawing upon Fraser's political theory on recognition and redistribution, it is possible to envision what is at stake for emerging communities in resettlement contexts. There are a plenitude of debates within the social theory, moral philosophy and political analysis associated with recognition theory, and even a partial explication of these is well beyond the scope of this article. However, Fraser's dual focus on recognition and redistribution provides an important justification to move beyond the discourse of trauma and the *extra-ordinary* underpinnings frequently associated with the master status of refugee.

Fraser (2001: 24) notes that recognition is a question of social status that allows group members to participate as 'full partners in social interactions'

through what she terms the parity of participation. However, the ideal of parity is often not achieved, particularly with minority groups and those not enjoying privileged positions of power. Thus, Fraser (2003: 24) acknowledges that recognition through misrecognition can cause social subordination as 'institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction.' Clearly, the previous discussion on the *a priori* assumptions of refugees as traumatized or that they are in some way damaged can limit such opportunities for partnership.

> There is a misperception about Sudanese, especially from trauma. People think or conceptualize that Sudanese are coming from the war torn country and that they are all traumatized. That they always respond to any situation with emotion because of the trauma that they have had back in their country. This though, is not that much true (Participant 21).

While Fraser acknowledges the importance of recognition, she cautions that an exclusive focus upon it can be at the expense of an equally important consideration: redistribution. When people experience injustices related to socio-economic inequalities that lead to marginalization and exploitation, Fraser (2003, 2000) maintains that this issue involves concerns about both recognition and redistribution. Placed together, Fraser (2003) introduces her perspectival dualism that situates recognition and redistribution as two conceptual domains which are co-fundamental to achieving justice. As such, both domains are not reducible or subsumable to the other but interact together in complex ways. To illustrate the struggle of perspectival dualism and the parity of participation within this paper, a Sudanese man stated that he had refused to participate in a previous research project that intended to document the level of trauma his resettling community had sustained. He explained his reply to the researcher for that project as follows:

> I told him, 'If you already know that [we] are traumatized, why do you have to do the research? You have already answered your question, so I do not think that I will participate. We do research because we do not know, in order to find. But if you already know what you are going to find, why do you do it? You are wasting your time.'
>
> As a refugee, we are concerned about how refugees are portrayed. One of these problems is that people assume that refugees are traumatized people. And actually this assumption has become one of the factors that has led to some of us not getting work because employers think: 'Why should I employ people who are traumatized?' (Participant 13).

This man's statement is not only expressing a concern about being labelled as a traumatized person; it is also about the parity of participation in employment. Recent studies in Australia indicate the presence of a segmented labour market whereby African migrants are allocated low status jobs, if any, regardless of their prior skills and training (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006, 2007; Fozdar and

Torezani 2008). At the time of the 2006 Australian Census (ABS 2009), the average weekly income of a Sudanese born individual was less than half that of an Australian born person ($231 compared to $488). This census data further shows that the Sudanese born population of more than 5,000 residents has the highest unemployment rate of any nationality (28.7 per cent)—almost six times the average of the overall population (ABS 2009). Alongside Afghanis, the Sudanese community has the highest rate of housing over-utilization (46 per cent), defined as a needing at least one more bedroom for the number of people residing in a household (ABS 2009). In this data, the ABS acknowledges the few economic resources that the Sudanese community have to afford suitable accommodation and other basic necessities.

While employment, income and access to suitable housing are just a few issues directly related to distribution dynamics, recognition also comes to the fore. The last participant's quote poignantly acknowledges that if employers recognize the Sudanese community as traumatized people, then they will be seen as high risk employment prospects. This dynamic shows that recognition and redistribution are closely linked and interact in complex ways. As Fraser (2000: 113) states:

> Misrecognition, accordingly, does not mean the depreciation and deformation of group identity, but social subordination... To redress this injustice still requires a politics of recognition... it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with the rest.

Though not a panacea for this issue, distinguishing between *extra-ordinary* and *ordinary* stories can be helpful. These perspectives when brought together do not diminish or invalidate traumatic experiences often associated with the 'refugee experience', but also recognize people as agents capable of responding to difficulties, recovering, and importantly, contributing to society. In fact, Fraser (2000) cautions that recognition politics can quickly descend into identity politics which can reify particular groups within a master status and obscure important redistribution considerations. Turton (2004) argues that when society views refugees more as ordinary people beyond the category of passive victim, there is greater potential to see 'them' as more like 'us' and consequently as members of the community. While it is more difficult to make a direct link to distribution dynamics from trauma dominated perspectives, the 'othering' process associated with refugee discourses can lead to exclusionary practices related to education, employment and other types of resources. Responding to how the Australian public has a predominantly pathologized understanding of the Sudanese community, a participant stated:

> Most of the [Australian] people here depend on the media, and what the media always brings up is the poverty in Africa. When you are from Africa, they see you as what they see on the television. So, the only view they have is you as person coming from poverty... And they just get a little view of us also from

the actions that are done by a few of us like the young people having a fight. This is how they view us. But these people exist within the mainstream. They exist in every society (Participant 24).

A predominant focus upon the *extra-ordinary* privileges stories of forced migration over the *ordinary* considerations that arguably speak more to who people claiming refugee status are over time and what they inherently value. One could certainly conclude from *Broken Spirits* (Wilson and Drozdek 2004), that there is some inherent form of disability or damage in having acquired refugee or asylum seeker status: namely that one is broken. In the preface, Drozdek and Wilson state,

> Broken spirits is a metaphor for 40 million people worldwide who are victims of war, political oppression, and torture in all their insidious forms and humanly devised demonic variations (2004: xxvii).

While experiencing hardship and adversity, it is certainly arguable that many of these 'victims' would directly challenge the accuracy of this sensationalized metaphor that is intended to describe them. Host community assumptions surrounding 'the refugee journey' and associated sequelae from trauma, and fears about the resettlers, can become the grounds for myopically rendering them only visible as refugees, traumatized and 'the other': a potent combination that often fosters unfounded stereotypes and discrimatory practices. Harrell-Bond (1999: 143) notes, 'Rather than viewing themselves as heroes who have stood up to and escaped oppressive regimes, today many refugees are reluctant to admit their status.' This reluctance relates to an awareness of pervasive discourses on refugees as traumatized individuals, dependent on social welfare and undue burdens on an 'overly generous' society. In this connection, a Sudanese man in this study expressed his frustration around (mis)recognition and the often automatic associations created between Australian humanitarian entrants and trauma:

> We need to get rid of that thinking that our people are traumatized. We were traumatized, yes this is true and that is fine. But that does not mean what we are. We are something different and we can provide. We can offer. We can contribute (Participant 16).

Malkki (1995) has shown how dominant discourses on refugees tend to narrowly focus on the person as a passive victim and further ensconce refugees within the purviews of trauma-focused understandings. Likewise, Fraser (2003: 31) warns that discourses of victimization can potentially promote 'externally manifest and publicly verifiable impediments to some people's standings as full members of society.' Again such impediments, as often informed exclusively through the *extra-ordinary*, can weaken the parity of participation. Pupavac (2008: 272) cites Arendt (1985) and maintains that when refugees are regarded as belonging to a political community then their rights are more likely to be respected and acknowledged. Thus, there is scope to

further elevate the importance of the *ordinary*, which can provide a helpful framework for viewing resettling refugees as peers in social life, capable of meaningful contributions to family, community and society.

Recognizing the Misrecognizers

One critique of Fraser's work is that it does not go far enough to look at the role of the misrecognizers and their associated powers (Markell 2003; McNay 2008). Garrett (2009), while acknowledging the aptness of Fraser's recognition and redistribution concepts, also states that her political theory does not adequately address the role of the state and the associated motives (economic, political, etc.) behind fostering or sustaining misrecognition. Markell (2003: 18) also critiques much of recognition theory in that it fails to acknowledge the misrecognizers and places too much emphasis on the misrecognizee, thereby 'focussing on the consequences of suffering misrecognition rather than on the more fundamental question of what it means to commit it.' For example, in October 2007 (just weeks before an Australian federal election), the then Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews argued that Sudanese people were failing to integrate into the fabric of Australian society. He stated his concern that some groups of refugees 'don't seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian way of life as quickly as we would hope' (Hart and Maiden 2007). These comments were never substantiated with hard evidence though they arguably contributed to fostering fear and exclusionary practices. Nearly every participant in my study mentioned Andrews' statements and spoke of the increased experiences of racism and discrimination that followed from this (mis)recognition.

> Sometimes people can abuse you, and the things like Kevin Andrews says, what brought us here to Australia is not because we are looking for something to eat, it is war. That is what brought us here. We ran there because we wanted the freedom. That is why we came here. To be safe. So, it affects us and it is a new place for us here now, we are not settled. It is hard for me and my children (Participant 10).

Andrews' comments resonate with Pupavac's (2006: 7) claim that 'the closeness of the refugee burden, rather than the possibility of a refugee fate, has exercised policy-makers' minds.' This concept of burden is often derived from medicalized and individualized discourses of trauma as expressed in unemployability, adverse mental health, lawlessness and incompatibility in resettlement contexts; the outcomes of war trauma. Fassin and D'Halluin (2005) acknowledged the historic shift in viewing refugee lives, from a political focus to a medicalized one. They argue that for refugees the primary social currency in the 'terrain of truth' rests more with physical and psychological injuries associated with trauma than people's testimonies and narratives. This currency is what often gives people admission to camps, refugee status and access to a humanitarian visa. However, as Silove and

Ekblad (2002) argue, if refugees are presented to host countries as psychologically damaged, then the debate of asylum can easily move from humanitarian responsibilities to the economic implications and associated fears of accepting them. Related to this critique, Zetter (2007: 188) has demonstrated how bureaucratic powers can deconstruct and reinvent interpretations of the refugee label to legitimize state interests: 'Labels reveal the political in the apolitical.' Indeed, Andrews' comments support political platforms of 'border security' and maintaining 'Australian values' when a major election looms large, justifying Markell's call to critically examine how misrecognizers might benefit from (mis)recognition.

> You can say yes, the war of course has affected significantly the Sudanese, but the Sudanese have had their own coping mechanisms. And these coping mechanisms have of course helped them to manage their own emotions, their own response to violence, and you can not say that the only option available to Sudanese is to use violence. So, media is like any other profit making organization. Their motive is to try to tell the public that we are doing this to make a selling. So the people buy and then they read about Sudanese. And I think that is what rules their motives. And I think that is not really a very good motive (Participant 12).

Consideration of the wider social and political context is important. As Zetter (1988: 1) points out, 'The label "refugee" both stereotypes and institutionalizes a status.' A focus on the *extra-ordinary* gives credence to perceptions where a tall black African walking down the streets of Adelaide could be (mis)recognized as a dangerous person. Unfortunately, the descriptors of poverty, conflict, chronic exposure to violence and destitution often become the public's explicit and tacit understandings of refugee lives. Such perspectives are reinforced in media reporting that clearly have overtones of racial profiling and sensationalism. For example, a Melbourne based newspaper story responds to a murder within the Sudanese community around the time that Kevin Andrews made his comments: 'Local [police] officers know that Sudanese men come from a warlike culture and arc up more quickly than most when in a group' (Bolt 2007: 34). Words such as 'arcing up', 'packs of youths', 'tides of boat people' demonstrate an underlying hostility towards refugees and a voyeuristic fascination with trauma in much media reporting. Other examples of journalistic sensationalism are also evident in Windle's (2008) analysis of the Sudanese community during this time period. A participant challenged the automatic associations between being a Sudanese refugee and a traumatized person as follows:

> As I said before, trauma has two sides to me. And I am sure this is true for other people. One is that these experiences are teaching them to think, to think hard, and to know what life is and what are the possible ways of dealing with it... I know at the moment other people say [about refugees], 'Oh, trauma, their mind is lost, their personality, they have lost a lot of things, they have nothing.' It is not completely horrible the way it was. Somebody will come up with the

idea now, at least most Australians, that the Sudanese people are violent because of the war that they have been subjected.

While examples of overt racism and blatant exclusionary policies are relatively easy to recognize, it is the tacit and often well-intentioned forms of misrecognition that can be much harder to pinpoint. An example of a well-meaning but somewhat misguided approach to assisting refugees comes from my experience working with universities in South Australia. A number of faculties in these universities have identified that a significant number of tertiary Sudanese students are struggling to pass their coursework. In response to this situation, a university based academic support service sent the following email asking if I would meet with them to discuss finding approaches to better meet the needs of the Sudanese student body:

> Hi Jay, there have been some calls for extra support for Sudanese students who are struggling academically. We are trying to find out if there has been any research on the problems/progress of Sudanese students at university and how we might best support them. We are aware that there are many issues and that it is not only Sudanese students who have suffered atrocities and who are encountering some difficulties.

This support service obviously has good intentions to assist Sudanese students. However, the reference to 'atrocities' shows that the locus of inquiry is in significant part upon traumatized students, rather than for example how university structures are not meeting the needs of increasingly diverse student bodies, or how an Australian education often unknowingly promotes a predominantly Western discourse and pedagogy. The misrecognition of traumatized students obscures the important consideration of how university structures may unwittingly create learning spaces or academic policies that can be exclusionary, i.e. 'the problem is about them'.

Recognizing the *ordinary* stories of refugee lives is just a first step towards acknowledging people beyond trauma dominated perspectives. As Markell (2003) explains, the mirror must be turned on the misrecognizers who often employ the *extra-ordinary* to present at best an overly simplistic generalization of a group of people, in order to examine why such misrecognition is happening and what might be the consequences both in relation to distribution and recognition. Such reflexive practices (provided the political and social will) are a starting point for placing higher value on the *ordinary* stories of refugee lives, which is the focus of the rest of this paper.

Double Listening: Placing an Emphasis on the Ordinary

By documenting a refugee's response to trauma, it was possible to iteratively explore, despite the consequences of forced migration and conflict, how people have responded to such adverse situations. This form of inquiry has the potential to open another discussion that goes beyond the level of trauma,

hurt and anguish a person has sustained as a refugee to what they actually want and aspire to in their lives. To capture the *ordinary* from the *extra-ordinary* stories that Sudanese participants told, an approach called double listening (White 2004) was used to differentiate their responses to trauma from its effects. White (2004) notes that the skill of double listening or double-storied accounts can help go beyond the thin description of trauma's effects and acknowledge other important considerations of a person's life which include their responses to trauma. From a narrative perspective, a person is never completely passive in the face of trauma as they may find a number of ways to respond to such an adverse situation through trying to modify, endure or counteract its negative effects (White 2004; White and Epston 1990). However, these responses can often be relegated to what Foucault (1980) termed subjugated knowledges, which are rendered hierarchically inferior, hidden or even disqualified within the purviews of more dominant discourses. When subjugated, refugee responses to trauma are rarely questioned or privileged in the face of significantly distressing and tragic events. To illustrate double listening, the following transcript captures a participant's experience (name changed) of being detained and tortured:

> Isaac: Look here [shows a scar on his arm], here I was tied like this [hands and feet bound together]. My legs could not move and they used a very hot stone, this part of mine is put on it [his chest] and they stand behind here while others hold the tight ropes. So here you feel something is burning you. It is something that I will never forget...
>
> JM: What was it that got you through this awful time?
>
> Isaac: Look, when I was tied down and somebody step on me—nothing come out from my mouth—just only word that I said which was 'Jesus!' That's all. So that word, it is my belief that it is what helped me because nobody is more powerful than Jesus.
>
> JM: Nobody is more powerful than Jesus.
>
> Isaac: So I believe that I come out from that detention because of that word. Because of the word, Jesus. So, I believe up to this day that Jesus is the mighty God that is always with me. I have a small piece of the Bible that I carry with me [points to his back pocket]—that is my gun; that is my weapon. Wherever I go, I have my weapon. It is like this word... Always have something good with me, I open and any page, I read it.

There are at least two distinct foci in this excerpt. One is the torture that Isaac experienced, which certainly embodies the *extra-ordinary* and captures the reader/researcher's attention. While there is a value in the trauma/torture story if approached cautiously, a potential danger is that because it is so compelling other important considerations can easily be obscured. The other looks into what has sustained and continues to assist Isaac through this experience: namely having Jesus and using the Bible as his weapon. This latter focus provides insight into what helped Isaac respond to this traumatic

event. Rather than accepting the consequences of trauma, Isaac reveals himself as an agent, directly responding to events. From this line of enquiry, it was possible to trace the history of Isaac's spirituality as informed through his parents' teachings, community life, cultural practices and influential role models. Isaac noted that he had never been asked these questions before even though he had spoken of his forced migration journey to officials, embassies and health care providers many times over the years. Thus, it is about elevating the *ordinary* from pejorative and insignificant connotations to significant and 'extraordinary understandings' (as opposed to the *extra-ordinary*). These understandings can sit within or outside a person's refugee background and provide powerful insights into a person's sources of resilience, resistance and approaches to healing.

Again, the value of knowing the trauma story is not disputed here; rather, it is that we as researchers, practitioners and community members should more strongly consider the worth of the *ordinary*. Looking again at Isaac's account we can see that within experiences of profound suffering are often *ordinary* responses. We therefore must be accountable for the questions we ask. If one asks about the trauma, why is this explored and for whose benefit? What are the ramifications of this line of inquiry and what do these questions reinforce in this person's life (i.e. the experiences of trauma or the responses to it)? The same can be asked of the responses. This sort of reflexive questioning builds upon Freire's (1990) concept of maintaining a 'critical curiosity' where we are not only curious about the lives and actions of others but also our own.

Elevating the Ordinary: Embracing Alternative Perspectives

Entering the conversation via an exploration of the participants' responses to trauma meant that they often offered to speak more deeply about their experiences of forced migration without being prompted. Ghorashi noted that 'in order to capture refugees' experiences and narratives it is necessary to create space within research to be able to notice the untold within the interviews' (2008: 117). This space with regard to the Sudanese community was created by a prolonged engagement over several years that allowed participants to express a preferred story about their lives by tracing the history, intentions and values of their responses (see Marlowe 2009). A sincere engagement with the *ordinary* and elevating this focus from pejorative connotations to something of real value can provide recognition beyond the refugee master status and experiences of trauma.

White (2006: 88) discussed his work with people who have experienced trauma as metaphorically trying to move the person out of the trauma river to the bank: another territory of identity where one would literally not be swept away. When Isaac, who spoke of having Jesus and using the Bible as his weapon, read his transcript of the interview that we conducted together, he asked for multiple copies because he said that it was proof of his

story. He said that it acknowledged the importance of his spirituality, education and his parents' teachings in his life and that this document was something that he intended to share with his children when they were older. Rather than asking for a single sided focus of trauma as detailed in experiences of torture, forced marches and other stories of despair, privileging the person's response to such forms of adversity provided a route towards understanding what has provided sustenance and strength in their past, present and into the future.

Distinguishing between *extra-ordinary* and *ordinary* stories provides a salient consideration for those working to support and work alongside resettling and refugee populations. Focusing exclusively on the negative sequelae of trauma can potentially pathologize people and give rise to misrecognition as has already been discussed. However, it is also important to validate and dignify such experiences. Acknowledging the losses and taboos commonly associated with forced migration, Doka's (1993) notion of disenfranchised grief, where mourning one's experiences is not socially sanctioned, highlights the importance of opening spaces to work through such losses. This discussion places the call to critically engage both the complexities and inherent values of acknowledging the effects of trauma and people's responses to it.

Conclusion

> The term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable 'kind' or 'type' of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations (Malkki 1995: 496).

The stories of refugee lives are characterized and often sensationalized through experiences of hardship and adversity. While the Sudanese men spoke about traumatic and life-threatening experiences, they also acknowledged what helped them through hardship including their culture, parental teachings, spirituality and how they maintained hope. Placing a focus on these latter elements has revealed the *extraordinary* within the *ordinary* in research contexts. Thus, recognizing people's responses can play a partial but important role in addressing the misrecognition of refugees commonly associated with trauma focused identities. Such a shift is arguably a key step in recognizing refugees as agents in their own lives who are capable of making meaningful contributions to society.

This paper does not advocate an exclusive focus on either the trauma story or the response to the trauma, as both perspectives provide important insight. There is value in knowing the *extra-ordinary*. After all, bringing their stories of oppression and injustice before the world can give those most marginalized a louder voice. However, there is equal significance in understanding the *ordinary* stories of people's lives. We all have such stories and they are

often grounded within our history, culture, parental teachings, morals, traditions, folklore, and so on. Inquiring into people's lives outside the refugee journey can provide critical insights about the effects of trauma and how people have directly responded to such experiences. As such understandings begin to emerge, it is possible to understand refugees beyond trauma-focused identities and importantly, to learn what their hopes and aspirations are for the future.

Acknowledgements

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