Accessing 'Authentic' Knowledge: *Being* and *Doing* with the Sudanese Community

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Coming from backgrounds where issues of trust have often been violated, accessing reliable information from resettling refugee populations can be fraught with dilemmas. Those trying to document these people's lives without recognising the politics of memory and the danger of re-traumatisation can potentially serve to further silence the narratives of those who have experienced difficulties associated with forced migration. This paper reports on the research process and the necessity of elevating the voices of Southern Sudanese men resettling in Adelaide, Australia to better understand how they have responded to traumatic experiences. Finding empowering approaches that assist these men in expressing their lived experience and future aspirations in sensitive and respectful ways can make progress towards further realising the liberation and well being of those beginning to create a new life far from home. The process of accessing 'authentic' knowledge is discussed by forwarding an imperative to establish a relationship with the refugee community. This relationship is further qualified by differentiating 'being' and 'doing' for those wanting to support and better understand resettling refugee populations.

"You cannot fix a leaking roof in the night." (Interview participant)

Sudanese resettlement and successful integration in Australia remains a controversial and topical issue within current political and social debates. During October 2007, 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 & Maiden, 2007). These comments angered and frustrated the Sudanese community and many support organisations working to assist them. The evidence used by Andrews was questionable and illustrated a Sudanese Dinka proverb, "Y*ou can not fix a leaking roof in the night."* A participant in this study noted the limited voice that the Sudanese community had to respond:

> **Isaiah**
> *Kevin Andrews's comments relate to a Sudanese saying that says, "While you are a crocodile in your country, when you go to another peoples' country, you will be a lizard." Can you see the difference between a lizard and a crocodile?*
> **JM** *Yes, there is a big difference.*
> **Isaiah**
> *That was what Kevin Andrews was doing. He said those things because it is his country.*

While there is a growing body of knowledge, little is still known about the experiences, hopes and aspirations of Sudanese refugees resettling within Australia. Those who have experienced forced migration have often lived through dangerous and traumatic situations where distrusting others could be seen as functionally adaptive survival strategy (see Kohli, 2006). Thus, it is perhaps not too surprising that accessing reliable information from those resettling can be fraught with challenges acknowledging the power disparity between crocodiles and lizards.

Telling stories are a universally shared human experience. However, the 'type' of story that is told may vary depending upon the audience, sociocultural norms, time, place and notions of power. Further, the inherent fluidity of story and expression brings forth controversial and contested notions of what 'truth' and 'authenticity' might actually represent. Acknowledging this difficulty, there

is a growing recognition that taking an emic or insiders view that considers important elements in a person's life such as culture, language, spirituality, etc are essential to understand how refugees have made sense of their lives after experiences of forced migration (Blackburn, 2005; Goodkind, 2006; Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006; Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008; UNHCR, 2002; Yu-Wen, Phillip, Xiulan, & Larke, 1997). These accounts allow us to delve into the thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of these people's lives. However, such rich understandings do not happen magically. They can even evolve and change significantly over time (Guerin & Guerin, 2007); and thus, issues of gaining entry into the Sudanese community and accessing reliable knowledge come to the fore.

This paper discusses the experience of working with the Sudanese community in two capacities: as a former social worker and current doctoral researcher. The research study involved understanding Sudanese male's responses to traumatic experience from forced migration as distinct from the effects from trauma. Such a research question has presented many challenging questions about how to engage, interpret and disseminate such sensitive and privileged information with this resettling community. The following methods for this study were used: (1) conducting multiple semi-structured individual interviews with 24 English speaking Sudanese men and (2) participating in community celebrations, mournings and important events all through invitation. The men who participated were from Southern Sudan and had been resettled in Australia at least two years. Informed consent was obtained through a process of meeting with participants on several occasions to explain the research focus, which often required an engaged interaction of several months. This project received ethics approval from the relevant academic institution.

The power of story, memory and representation

"Only the story...can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story...that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us." (Achebe, 1987, p. 124)

There is a rich body of literature that has documented the resulting sequelae of those who bared witness and experienced the atrocities of civil war, conflict, and oppressive regimes (Cienfuegos & Monelli, 1983; Coker, 2004; Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005; Goodman, 2004; Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008; Mollica, Caridad, & Massagli, 2007; Silove, 1999). Others have directly related their personal experiences as refugees or internally displaced persons in autobiographical or other written works (Deng, Deng, Ajak, & Bernstein, 2005; Eggers, 2006; Menchu, 1983). However, the veracity of past accounts can be contested noting the difficulties in establishing or proving these people's claims of lived experience. These challenges bring forth serious debates about the politics of memory and the medium through which it is expressed: one's story.

Any story requires a minimum of two people: a story-teller and a listener. However, this premise becomes far more complex as the story is inter-woven within the threads of the social, historical, cultural and political backdrops amongst the narrator and audience. While it is acknowledged that immigration officials, embassies, and those processing requests for refugee status need to distinguish between actual and fabricated accounts of experience, making such a differentiation is more difficult than establishing a dichotomy between fact and fiction. A participant in this study stated,

Today we are making a story of

Sudanese people. It is a series or a story of a journey between two worlds. Because our people came from a first world to a second world, you can say. Yes, you can say it is a journey between two worlds and this journey between two worlds- some people will not understand.

Indeed, a refugee may be very cautious about what they say to another person- not because they are inherently dishonest or being devious, but rather because of the very real consequences of a statement being misinterpreted or taken out of context (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; McKelvey, 1994). In addition, refugee accounts of 'hard' facts may not represent 'objective' reality or possibly presented in conflicting ways (Kirmayer, 2007). Several men in this study have spoken about their perilous journey fleeing civil war and walking hundreds if not thousands of kilometres across Sudan seeking safe haven. Hearing such stories, I have occasionally noted time and date discrepancies between their stories. Does one account negate the other? Arguably not as both stories support an understanding of a long and difficult journey where time as measured by days or in other terms becomes obscured through experiences of hardship and survival. As Eastmond (2007, p.260) maintains:

Stories are never transparent renditions of reality, but partial and selective versions of it, arising out of social interaction. 'Narrative truth' refers to the inescapably imperfect and fluid work of memory, organization and meaning. Narration as purposive action also relies on a certain measure of control and a situation in which... the criteria of credibility and plausibility are known to both narrator and audience, if not shared by them.

This quote illustrates the complexities of understanding and documenting refugees in resettlement contexts. What then should we take from a person's story if it is clouded by notions of power, opportunity, meaning and context? Kelley (1996) provides an important distinction in documenting such people's lives noting that a person's story may not necessarily accurately portray the past but it does say something about his or her present situation. Such a perspective allows a person's narrative to be explored beyond a false dichotomy between truth and fiction as it thrusts the imperfections of memory into a context situated within a person's present and future. Embracing this concept allows the listener to grapple with and explore the hopes, dreams and aspirations of those who have made a journey between two worlds.

A political exercise- Gaining access and entry

"How stories are told, by whom, to whom, under what circumstances, and for what specific purpose – vary according to sociocultural prescriptions." (Carter-Black, 2007, p.32)

Conducting research with the Sudanese community, it was recognised that my role needed to be as transparent as possible. To establish this position, a number of several key elders and gate keepers provided advice about conducting the study in a sensitive and respectful manner resonant with Sudanese values. These elders emphasised active engagement with the community, and offered myself the opportunity to make public announcements at church and other community events. They spoke of the importance of not only talking about the past but also to ascertain these people's experiences of resettlement and current vision today. However, I was expected to make a stand. Almost without exception, I have had to address my opinions about Kevin Andrew's comments regarding Sudanese resettlement and often my perspective on the two civil wars that raged for decades between

Northern and Southern Sudan. My own person had to become political.

While consulting several Sudanese community leaders and elders to better develop the research question, they stated the difficulties of accessing what they called 'authentic knowledge.' From this cautionary tone, they spoke of how their own stories while living in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp had been used to benefit or elevate the status of the researcher often with little or no benefit to the teller. They also spoke how they never heard from this person again after they disclosed their experiences. These accounts are further buttressed in refugee-related examples where an outsider's analysis and resulting dissemination was incorrect, unfounded or worse- lead to negative outcomes for the participants (see Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007). Miller (2004) notes that initial information from refugees can often be 'front-stage' responses, which may be highly rehearsed and of limited accuracy but serves to protect the community from outsiders. He then discusses the importance of trying to ascertain 'backstage' information, which is more difficult to obtain but more likely to have a higher degree of authenticity. One interviewee spoke of his experiences sharing his story in Kenyan and Ethiopian refugee camps:

> **JM** *And have you shared your story many times? Have you had a chance to share your story?*
> **Deng**
> *No. You see, I haven't had the time to share my story with some people. During the time I was in the refugee camp, sometimes people go and ask me from agencies like UNHCR; sometimes they meet you and they ask you what happened and you tell them. This is not a very long story; they ask what you are facing now- they ask you about the food, have you got anything, if you are tired of living, where you are getting*

> *water, clothes, shelter, and what you are doing. That is part of the history that we share. But we have not gone deeply [talking about their experiences].*

'Going deeply' and accessing more authentic accounts is easier said than done. As researchers and oftentimes strangers entering into the lived experiences of refugee lives, it is important to recognise that these people may have learned a level of functional distrust that may assist them in what might possibly be a hostile encounter with the unknown (Kohli, 2006). Further, it must be recognised that refugees may feel hesitant in telling their stories of forced migration due to associated feelings of shame, guilt or humiliation. Others may be fearful of reprisals from cultural, societal and/or government responses if they were to speak of their past experiences. While it is certainly arguable that most practitioners and researchers working with refugee populations have good intentions; misinterpretation, misrepresentation and the potential for re-traumatisation can certainly have hostile implications.

Implications of going deeply

"Some of the things I am telling you, they are not out of nowhere. They are out of experience. The issues that have happened... I could tell you more but I don't want to. I don't want to go into that." (Interview participant)

Those displaced through forced migration have often been exposed to harrowing experiences of psychological, physical and/or emotional form of trauma (Momartin, Silove, Manicavasagar, & Steel, 2003; Silove, 1999; Steel, Silove, Phan, & Bauman, 2002; Weine, Becker, McGlashan, & Laub, 1995). Thus, it is imperative that we understand the backgrounds that these people are coming and have an awareness of the potential dangers that a refugee might expose his or herself by telling their story. For example, Goodman's (2004, p.1184) study of Sudanese youths resettling in the United States found that suppression and distraction was a major coping strategy noting a young man's comment, "thinking a lot can give

you trouble". In my work with Sudanese people resettling in Adelaide, trying to ascertain the responses to trauma was something that had to be done carefully and patiently. It necessitated prioritising the comfort and safety of the story teller well beyond the needs of the research question or any intellectual curiosities. An interviewee related his experience of fleeing Sudan:

> **Robert**
> *I came to Egypt. I ran to Egypt. [He looks at the map of Sudan] Difficulties... Very very very bad. Sometimes if I recall what happened, sometimes it is hard. Sometimes tears come out.*
> **JM** *You said that tears come out?*
> **Robert**
> *Yeah, sometimes it is tough- like if you talk to me, I can listen to what you are talking but here [touches his head] there is nothing... Because everything has been blown out... So, I don't go to touch that much because I am afraid. It will disturb our research.*

Some of the men interviewed for this study did not agree to participate until we had known each other for more than 18 months. By establishing their responses to trauma and what has been helpful to them in wake of traumatic experiences, these men were able to express their stories about sustenance, hope and survival. Time was something that needed to be embraced and nurtured. Hasty interviews would have likely lead to front stage responses.

> **JM** *Would you say are there any ongoing effects in your life today from these experiences?*
> **Desmond**
> *Yeah, there are some effects. Because yes, there are some really difficult things and it is really hard to forget it. So, it is still in my mind and it is still in my emotion, so it is still really hard to forget. So I have just to go slowly through*

it yeah.

Recognising the injustices of these people's past, there is a danger that a person's story can easily become a one dimensional trauma-focussed history whereby other stories of healing, identity or resistance to the trauma itself can be hidden. Thus, the story of a person's experience(s) of trauma and how it has negatively influenced his/her life can easily overpower another story which might emphasise something very different about what this person values. The preferred story that an individual might have about their life can become subordinate to the one about trauma, which often focuses upon deficit, pathology and loss (White, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). From this limited understanding of a person's experience, a thin description of the individual situated within the purviews of trauma is further ensconced where other important considerations of identity can easily be obscured.

Through collaboration and the recognition that there are powerful understandings of people's lives beyond the consequences of trauma, a richer sense of a person's life can become privileged. Such a mutual exploration for alternative understandings can even possibly lead to what Rappaport (2000, p.1) refers to as 'tales of joy'. An interesting aspect of this research and community engagement has been that by establishing these men's responses to trauma, they then often felt more comfortable to talk about their experiences of forced migration without being prompted. By asking them to speak further about their parent teachings, culture, spirituality and other forms of identity, these men noticeably became more animated and enthusiastic as the interview continued. Indeed, finding ways to move slowly, safely and appropriately into such powerful stories can help access the deeper and more authentic meanings that these people ascribe. Rather than asking for a detailed account of torture, forced marches and other stories of despair; privileging the

person's response to such forms of adversity provided scaffolding towards understanding what has provided sustenance and strength in this person's past and present. As these participants spoke of their values, hopes, skills and actions that acknowledged forms of healing and resistance to the trauma story itself, this discussion then often provided an entry point to discuss experiences of adversity. There is value in both the response and trauma stories, and embracing cautious and non-pathologising processes allows the teller to decide when and if it is appropriate to share such experiences.

The construction of 'authentic' knowledge: *Being* and *doing*

> *"I think there are times people don't want to talk about their background in full detail simply because I think we are sometimes compared between the primitive and the civilised world. And sometimes people make unfair comparisons. It knocks some people back. But, I think to be civilised is to be true to yourself. And I strongly believe that if I was born into the Dinka family, then that is my heritage. And I have to be proud of it. That is a good thing and that is who I am."* (Interview Participant)

A Sudanese elder who has supported this research as a cultural consultant stated, *"The only way to get the community to talk to you is to get to know them. They must see you as a person and one who is committed not only to helping yourself but to helping them."* This elder's valuable insight introduces a helpful distinction between *being* and *doing* that can assist both researchers and practitioners towards accessing deeper levels of authenticity in respectful and collaborative ways. This distinction is partly taken from Gorman's (1995) discussion on the inherent tension between being and doing as a practitioner and researcher working with marginalised communities.

Being

During the early stages of the research process, I always walked into community events with my satchel armed with information about the study, a notebook, diary and other various items that would help me collect and organise data. However, it quickly became apparent that I the guy who always attended Sudanese events with a satchel tossed over one shoulder. While aware that my role as researcher needed to be transparent; once I dropped the satchel and allowed myself to participate more fully with the participants, this *being* seemed to break down several barriers as others started to communicate and interact more freely. Indeed, the informal and everyday interactions proved crucial in being able to go beyond the rehearsed front-stage responses that Miller (2004) writes.

A particular challenge of working with the Sudanese community required a different way of conceptualising time. The idea that it was possible to conduct a two hour interview on a rigidly set schedule was unlikely to happen. More than half of the scheduled interviews and consultations were cancelled, rescheduled or started significantly later. After telling a Sudanese colleague about these experiences, he joked about what he called 'AST' or African Standard Time. This intended light-hearted acronym demonstrated the different social constructions placed between Sudanese and mainstream Australian understandings of time. However, these differing conceptions can present dilemmas for those working as researchers and practitioners where Western understandings of AST often do not exist in professional or personal contexts. Thus where possible, the concept of *being* is helpful here. Opening oneself to embrace AST may leave the listener receptive to new insights and ways of *being* that go beyond a snapshot of a particular issue (see Guerin & Guerin, 2007; Rodgers, 2004). *Being* with the community permits the listener to greater establish trust and rapport in a way that is more highly resonant for the

participants involved (without the satchel tossed over one's shoulder). There is an inherent value in being able to meet these people on their terms in both time and place rather than from territory of the often more powerful positions and perspectives that we command and enjoy.

Doing

There are many ways of conducting and disseminating research. It is argued here that the *doing* of refugee-related research in resettlement contexts should endeavour where possible to areas of reciprocity. As Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway (2007) argue, refugee-related research should aspire beyond harm minimisation as a standard for ethical research and try to achieve reciprocal benefits to both the researcher and the researched. Indeed, there were many times the 'official' research was put on hold to help someone with their taxes, driving them places, informing them about what house inspections entailed and connecting them to tutors for their respective academic courses. One man asked what it meant that he had just 'won' $500,000 from Readers Digest. Another wanted to know if he was in trouble because he had been selected for jury duty. Because my previous role as a social worker included counselling refugees and also organising an annual activities summer program for refugee children (see Hallahan & Irizarry, 2008), a nascent reputation and rapport within this community had already been established. This reciprocity of *doing* over time showed a commitment beyond a complete self directed and singular interest in obtaining a PhD.

Collaborative research requires a commitment towards *doing* and a sincere engagement with process that may need to step outside the researcher's initially established timelines and scheduled milestones. Acknowledging the unanticipated twists and turns of collaborative processes, the research question becomes further grounded within an ecological perspective that considers a broader focus upon the person in environment and

context (see Rappaport, 1977). Such perspectives can help facilitate more sophisticated and reciprocal forms of research and action.

Bringing the two together

To further comprehend the profundity of resettling peoples' lived experience, there is a greater call for research methodologies that allow for these people to have collaborative roles in research and action. Inherent within this framework includes a level of community engagement that goes beyond what might initially be seen as the research agenda. This immersion though, will help shape and fashion the research question by rendering it in a way that will likely have higher resonance with those who inform it. Guerin & Guerin (2007) discuss their experience of working with the Somali community over several years in New Zealand stating, "Many times we felt like our research was going around in a circle, but more often, we found that the research was on a spiral, still going around in circles, but progressing for the better" (p.150). Visualising the research and consultation process beyond the perspective of a two dimensional circle to three dimensions shows the complex layering and necessary journey towards further understanding resettling populations (Ghorashi, 2008). While this spiralling process continues, it will become apparent that the reciprocity of *doing* and active engagement with the community provides a higher likelihood of gaining access to the more authentic backstage responses.

As deeper levels of access are granted, it is important to recognise the politics of memory and research. *Being* with these people can help overcome many potential obstacles in the spiralling journey as the foundations of rapport create greater spaces of trust and safety. However, research with such groups of people often marginalised and pushed to the peripheries of society is not a neutral exercise. And nor should it be. The person is political and as professionals involved in research, interpersonal practice, community engagement

or policy; we play an integral role in elevating people's voices in a collaborative manner that acknowledges who these people are and importantly, who they want to be.

Finding ways to capture research participant's lived experience and future aspirations in a sensitive and respectful way can make progress towards further realising the liberation and well being of those beginning to create a new life far from home. Embodying such values as inherent in the research process connects us to the 'why' of *being* and *doing*. If we want to illuminate the depths of resettling people's backgrounds and aspirations, embracing the concepts *being* and *doing* can help lift our eyes to such relevant concerns in appropriate ways. It is argued here that more highly authentic information is not surprisingly derived from authentic relationships. Accessing rich stories from refugees requires both *being* and *doing*. The *being* element connects people to our common bond of humanity and can help establish necessary relationships to gain entry and engage with the rich descriptions of these peoples' lives. The reciprocity of *doing* can help such communities address relevant resettlement concerns, speak for themselves and also drive a better informed research agenda.

Conclusion

> *"The world is big. Some people are unable to comprehend that simple fact. They want the world on their own terms, its peoples just like them and their friends, its places like the manicured little patch on which they live. But this is a foolish and blind wish. Diversity is not an abnormality but the very reality of our planet. The human world manifests the same reality and will not seek our permission to celebrate itself in the magnificence of its endless varieties. Civility is a sensible attribute in this kind of world we have; narrowness of heart and mind is not."* Bates

College Commencement Address (Achebe, 1996)

There are many challenges and obstacles towards garnering people's stories of lived experience. However, we need to continue to look for ways of relating to these people by embracing respectful and sensitive approaches towards documenting such stories. Through *being* and *doing*, we allow ourselves the opportunity to traverse beyond 'front stage' responses and hopefully develop a stronger sense of trust and rapport that will aid us in incorporating reciprocity within our work. Sadly, the refugee journey is often one that has commanding elements of hardship and exposure to traumatic experiences. Engaging with these histories highlights the importance of proceeding at the story-tellers chosen pace to reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation.

Is there one authentic story? Arguably not, the story of lived experience is inherently imperfect as it must elevate and amplify certain events, moments and memories at the expense of others. However, it is possible to elicit the deeper and more profound levels of 'authentic' experience or the 'backstage' responses that Miller (2004) writes. Resettlement from Africa to Australia is often a journey between two worlds where one must forge a workable synthesis of the past with the present. The *being* with these people and the reciprocity of *doing* allow for a stronger degree of mutuality and collaboration when it is appropriate to share such powerful stories. We would do well to participate and listen; otherwise, refugee voices and their associated stories can be further marginalised or worse- silenced all together.

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Acknowledgments

Short Biography of Author

Jay Marlowe is an associate lecturer and PhD candidate within the School of Social Work at Flinders University. He has worked with disadvantaged communities and at risk youths in Australia, Guatemala, Ecuador and the United States.

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