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Living at the Fence – Navigating Complexities While Settling in New Country: Lived Experiences of South Sudanese Refugees in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Australia welcomes significant numbers of humanitarian arrivals every year. Over 24,000 South Sudanese have come to Australia in the last two decades, and most faced difficulties during the settlement process. The aim of this study was to understand the barriers and challenges that have impacts on settlement and integration experiences among South Sudanese refugees in Australia. Further, this explored the factors influencing the social and cultural integration of South Sudanese refugees living in Australia for more than five years. This study used a phenomenological approach with purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 26 participants who self-identified as South Sudanese refugees. Participants were recruited via community networks and were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interviews were conducted by a bilingual interviewer and were analysed thematically. Participants' experiences portrayed the complexities of integrating into a new society and experienced multiple challenges and barriers. Despite this identity dilemma, they showed a consensus about the experiences of coming to and living in Australia with close association with a group identity. While there are positive elements of the integration experience, inter-generational conflicts require further investigation. Government and settlement organisations need to make an effort to understand the context while developing appropriate processes.

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Introduction

For South Sudanese refugees, the journey to make Australia home is often very distressing, which makes post-migration settlement in the new environment more complex (Khawaja and Milner 2012). Many refugees come with highly traumatizing experiences

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of witnessing executions, the death of family members and different forms of abuse including rape and forced separation from loved ones (Schweitzer et al. 2018; Tutlam et al. 2020). The acculturation process for these refugees may be a stressful and difficult experience compounded by multiple dilemmas due to their history and the trauma they experienced prior to entering Australia. These experiences not only diminish their capacity to participate but also lead to profound emotional, psychological and social impacts on families, individuals and communities which further complicates the integration process (Abur 2019; Perugia 2019). Although settlement is recognized as a complex process generally, it is important to note that the level and extent of complexities that these refugees experience in navigating life in the new society are extremely challenging (Macaulay and Deppeler 2020).

Australia has a long history of providing permanent resettlement for refugees and protection to those most in need who are displaced because of conflict, prosecution and human rights abuses (Department of Home Affairs 2023). Australia hosted approximately 60,000 refugees and 80,000 asylum seekers, most of them from the Middle East or Asia (UNHCR 2022). The humanitarian settlement in Australia happens through offshore and onshore processes, where most offshore entrants come through UNHCR under Refugee Convention criteria for resettlement and the onshore process offers protection to the people who have already arrived in Australia with the lodgement of asylum claim with granted protection under the human rights obligations (Department of Home Affairs 2023).

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are those who reside outside their country of origin and are unable to return due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion (UNHCR 1951). The size of the refugee population has increased substantially from 20 million in 2000 to 41.1 million in 2010 and 79.5 million in 2019; of these at least 26 million are stateless (UNHCR 2019b; UNHCR 2019a). Of particular note, most of this increase was between 2012 and 2015 caused by the conflicts in Syria, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and South Sudan. While the number of South Sudanese refugees declined in 2018 from 2.4 million to 2.3 million, it remained the third most common country of origin among displaced populations (UNHCR 2019a).

There are many reasons for people fleeing from their home country and some of the factors include violent conflict and persecution, and this situation is further compounded by rising food insecurity, natural disasters, and poor governance. It has been internationally recognised that refugees often experience poorer health outcomes in general due to barriers including language and cultural differences, institutional discrimination and limited access to resources (WHO 2022), and this has been observed among people of South Sudanese origin in countries like Australia. Refugee populations remain the most vulnerable group and face several issues including human rights abuses, health-related issues, educational disruptions and lack of employment opportunities (WHO 2022). Refugees are often excluded from the mainstream programs and under-represented in the decision process for culturally responsive policies and services (Braithwaite et al. 2019; UNHCR 2017; UNHCR 2019b).

The increased deterioration of security in countries of sub-Saharan Africa over several decades has resulted in growing numbers of internal displacement and cross-border

refugees (UNHCR 2019a; UNHCR 2017). Australia welcomes significant numbers of humanitarian arrivals annually through sponsored humanitarian programmes with a commitment to provide equal opportunities, services and the resources required for successful integration into the new society. Among the humanitarian arrivals, the Sudanese population has come to be the fastest growing and has formed a newly emerging community in Australia with over 24,000 people in the last two decades (RCOA 2018). Of those Sudanese refugees who settled in Australia, people from South Sudan are the most disadvantaged and face multiple settlement challenges in adjusting to the Australian social structures and service systems (Abur and Mphande 2020).

Despite the many difficulties, integrating into a new society is an ongoing process and it takes time to negotiate with emerging societal norms, cultural constructs, lifestyle and expectations. Cultural differences between South Sudanese refugees and the host communities in Australia need attention to make the integration process a rewarding, comfortable and empowering experience (Hove 2019). However, the individualistic construct, social structure and agency of mainstream Australian communities are quite distinct to these refugees who often value collectivist practice within their social system (Hatoss 2022). Despite the adversities of experiences linked to a long and often traumatic journey of finding a new home, South Sudanese refugees demonstrate high levels of resilience and adaptation to the new culture and constantly offer their capacity to contribute to the new society (Pearce et al. 2017).

In addition, the second-generation families, particularly the younger South Sudanese cohorts, are impacted by the different values of their culture of origin and those from Australian mainstream culture which often leads to intergenerational conflict in the family and makes negotiations between the two cultures harder in the integration process (Sellars and Murphy 2018). The rise of inter-generational conflicts between parents and young people has been a critical social problem impacting family relationships and social harmony (Pittaway and Dantas 2021). While maintaining one's original cultural values and meeting family expectations in identifying as South Sudanese is important, the many challenges young people experience to fit into new social norms and become Australians are undeniably concerning (Felix da Costa 2023). In addition, these young populations are further affected by the history and experiences of their parents and often are victimized by the media (Macaulay and Deppeler 2020). Sadly, negative media representations of Australian South Sudanese youths have intensified in recent years (Macaulay 2023). All these factors have posed significant challenges and created serious implications for the positive adjustment of South Sudanese populations into Australian mainstream society.

Another challenge that comes with the settlement while integrating into the new society is the identity dilemma. While there is a plethora of information relating to various population groups in the context of settlement into a new culture, in general, it is widely understood that identity is a fluid concept that is shaped by social interactions, physical locations and sociocultural realities (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Fina 2007). In many cases, cultural practices and the language of choice serve as markers of identity, and individuals may identify themselves to others through 'contexts of belonging' which relate to time, place, group association, and social interactions (Meinhof and Galasiński 2005). Informed by the framework of identity and belonging which best describes the complexities of constructing an

identity in a new culture, second- and third-generation refugees often experience identity dilemmas and impact their integration process (Anthias 2008; Antonsich 2010).

While it is expected that refugees will, over time, adopt some of the ways of the community of settlement, it is the experience of migration itself that may set them apart and shape their perception of identity (Albertini et al. 2019). In particular, family solidarity has been of interest, especially in the context where younger generations have grown up in the new environment or were born there (Berry 1997; Thomson and Crul 2007). The experiences of different generations may lead to the existence of different levels of cultural adaptation within families and communities, which in turn may result in intergenerational conflict centered on how individuals perceive themselves and their place among others (Macaulay and Deppeler 2020). In fact, it has been suggested that a wish to preserve cultural identity and traditions associated with the region of origin may serve to strengthen intergenerational bonds in migrant families and hence support adaptation by reducing some of the stresses associated with migration (Nauck 2007; Cela and Fokkema 2017).

Conversely, it is common for conflict to emerge within families over values and social norms that older members observe changing in the younger generations (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Thomson and Crul 2007). The resulting bicultural identity and its pressures on the younger generations of immigrants have been suggested to offer potential benefits in terms of social communication, cultural knowledge and creativity (Chen and Padilla 2019) whereas in practice, often result in an increased risk of vulnerability for the individuals involved (Ünlü Ince et al. 2014; Sempértegui et al. 2019). In fact, identity conflict deriving from the stress of the acculturation process is an important predictor of low psychological well-being among younger adults (Downie et al. 2007; Rabinovich and Morton 2016; Diaz and Bui 2017). It has been noted that there remains a lack of research to understand the complexities that South Sudanese refugees experience in the settlement process (Hughes et al. 2019). This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the factors influencing the social and cultural integration of South Sudanese refugees to better understand the barriers and challenges that impact their settlement experiences.

Materials and Methods

Study design: This study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). IPA is particularly appropriate when research questions are exploratory in nature and focus on how participants make sense of their lived experiences (Van Manen 2016). IPA, using narrative ethnography principles, was applied to enable participants the opportunity to recall and explain their experiences of social and cultural integration using their own words (Larkin and Thompson 2012).

Study sites: This study was conducted in metropolitan areas of Sydney in New South Wales, Australia which has a high level of cultural diversity. According to the recent census (ABS 2021), 52.4 per cent of both parents of the population of Greater Sydney were born overseas, compared to 36.7 per cent for Australia as a whole. The census counted 907 people in New South Wales with South Sudan as their country of birth (ABS 2021). For the past 20 years, the Blacktown area of Western Sydney has been the home to the largest Sudanese and South Sudanese

communities in Australia (Terry 2018) and the majority of participants in this study came from that area.

Participants' selection and recruitment: Local community groups, ethnic-specific organisations, community workers and South Sudanese community leaders were approached to promote the research by disseminating the contact numbers of the research team to individuals who might want further information about the study. Using purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Mohajan 2018), 26 participants were recruited to the project and all consented to participate in an interview. Participants were adults (aged 18 years and older) and long-term residents (over five years of settlement experience) from the Sydney metropolitan area who self-identified as refugees from South Sudan.

Tool development: A semi-structured interview guide was developed by the research team that identified broad areas of interest on which to focus and in line with the research questions for this study. This enabled the interviewer to stay focused on the research aim and to ensure that participants shared their settlement and integration experiences in an authentic manner. The in-depth interviews were designed to elicit the lived experiences of South Sudanese refugees who had settled in Australia.

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Six interviews were conducted face-to-face prior to the introduction of social distancing measures and the resultant lockdown. The remaining 20 interviews were held via telephone by a bilingual researcher. Participants were given the option to speak in the language of their choice in their preferred settings and all participants chose to speak in English with two participants speaking English and Juba Arabic interchangeably.

Interviews were conducted in a natural conversational manner by an experienced qualitative researcher from a South Sudanese background who was proficient in both languages. This researcher did not have a pre-existing relationship with any of the research participants. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and explored participants' sense of identity within the Australian society, their experiences of settlement and integration into the new society and how those experiences influenced their everyday life in Australia. Interviews were digitally recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the bilingual researcher followed by a back-translation of two interviews that were mixed with a language other than English for the validity of data.

Data processing and analysis: Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis derived meaningful insights from participants' lived experiences. Inductive thematic analysis was used following the steps of familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, defining and naming of themes and producing a report to derive the best possible representations of experiences from the data. Transcriptions were read and re-read independently by researchers to ascertain their meaning and develop codes. Generated codes were later merged to derive themes. All researchers reviewed and agreed to the final coding framework and confirmed themes.

Ethics, reflexivity and positionality: The Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research confirms that human research requires ethical reflection to maintain respect and research integrity (NHMRC 2018); however, conducting research with populations living in complex social settings does not always align well with the standard ethical guidelines and often poses methodological challenges to the

researchers demanding a flexible approach (Kaphle 2021). While this study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Central Queensland University (Approval Number: 22101) and all participants provided informed consent prior to participating in the study, researchers had to be vigilant to ensure that asking participants to talk about their experiences of coming to a new country to resettle as a refugee did not cause further trauma. Adhering to the core ethical principles and guidelines, we took a flexible, reflexive,and empathetic approach respecting the sensitivity of participants' experiences (Block et al. 2013).

Ethical reflexivity enabled researchers to understand the context, to assess the impacts of allowing participants to share their experiences and to accommodate the preferences to participate in the research (Block et al. 2013) as the situation started to become more difficult with mandated social distancing regulations introduced in Sydney due to the COVID-19 pandemic to commence data collection. It is acknowledged that institutional understanding of rigorous research should also take the research context into account to minimise harm (Kaphle 2021) and this is particularly important for research with refugees who experience high levels of vulnerability due to ongoing disruptions in their life (Block et al. 2013).

The positionality in this research was maintained allowing a flexible and adaptable approach to explore the lived experiences of participants (Tewolde 2021). This involved a researcher from a South Sundanese background taking the lead in designing the research and making culturally appropriate decisions to enable participants to share their settlement experiences. Other researchers involved were from diverse social and cultural backgrounds with extensive experiences in conducting qualitative research in complex social settings. Rather than claiming the status as insider or outsider, we took the mutually collaborative approach involving participants to make appropriate decisions about their participation and inclusion of their experiences. In some instances, the shared identity of the lead researcher helped to gain participants' trust and mutual respect; however, the experiences that each participant shared were unique within their context and journey of being a refugee.

Results

Out of 26 participants, 19 were male and seven were female; nine were aged between 41 and 50 years. Participants came to Australia transiting via different countries as refugees, including Uganda, Kenya, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia and Lebanon. The majority of the study participants ($n = 20$) had been in Australia for the last 10–19 years and 18 participants had arrived in Australia with their families or had family members who were already living in Australia. One participant did not state age and duration of living in Australia, and three did not report whether they were accompanied to Australia (See Table A1, in the appendix).

Participants' experiences portray the complexities of integrating into a new society due to the challenges that South Sudanese refugees experience daily. The themes identified indicated that South Sudanese refugees express an association with a Sudanese identity while reflecting on their positive integration experiences into Australian society. In the process of maintaining collective identity and social affiliation with the culture they come from, there are significant inter-generational conflicts that these refugees

experience in adapting to Australian society. Consequently, identity conflict emerges centering on what constitutes authentic cultural practice as well as who is entitled to claim to be a member of the South Sudanese culture.

Living at the Fence: 'Where Do We Belong?'

South Sudanese refugees experience enormous challenges in starting a new life in Australia and struggle to develop a sense of place and cultural identity. Their experiences reflect the gradual loss of attachment to the place and culture of Sudan, even though they still feel deeply connected to their old memories. Despite being in Australia for a decade or more, these refugees do not yet feel they belong to the Australian culture and society.

> It's an experience and it's also a feeling. So, you can think you are something, but that is different. You might think that you are South Sudanese, but once you are there [South Sudan], your body tells you something else – I don't really belong here. You don't really fit into a conversation and the way people do things [in South Sudan]. It becomes a question of values you have learned and the values of that society you come from after being here [Australia] for a long time. So, where do we belong?

Conceptual symbolism of identity closely tied to overt–concrete representation of cultures such as buildings, rivers, bridges and other things could differentiate the attachment and connections.

> The journey has been too long … since we came to the camp, it was 1989 and we came to Australia in 2005. That duration is quite long. The buildings in the camp that we used to live might have fallen by now. Those [the younger Sudanese] who born in camp in Sudan, they don't have any sense of what the place looks like. Even the parents might have forgotten many things happened in the camp. Things have changed completely since we got here.

This participant further reflected on the changes that had occurred and how their experiences unfolded over the years.

> You know these new technologies and internet have made easier for younger people to learn about the place they come from, they can even see the geographical view. Most things in Sudan are gone – perhaps only the church exists. To be thankful, we have home in Australia and our children have school they can go to, they have passport to identify as Australian. This is totally different, as they won't see things that they have here in Sudan. Even for me, if I go back to look for the bridge that cross past the local river, that may not exist anymore. [low tone of voice]

Some participants discussed acculturation issues relating to their perception of place which raises questions about their positionality in Australia.

> I could say life in Australia is better because of the freedom and opportunities available to us compared to Sudan, where we come from. This will suit to young people. Since Sudan has been in civil war for many years, we were displaced, and we had no opportunities or freedom to do anything. Instead, we fled to Egypt as refugee and came to Australia, which we are very grateful for. When we came to Australia, I was a teenager. I used opportunities given to us – went to school and did university.

At the same time, participants also noted the complexities inherent in positive social integration and the media's role that have left younger individuals with a further dilemma about where they belong and why they are not treated equally in Australian society.

> I also observed and experienced the general sense that Sudanese people aren't integrated to the Australian society, they can't fit in, which is in fact the only small minority that struggle to adapt and fit in to the new culture – majority have integrated well. In every society, there is always minority odd group but there is a strong assumption made against Sudanese people by media and some people follow those comments to treat us differently. This impacted us as well as our younger generations.

Similarly, another participant added,

> If something wrong happens, media's blame South Sudanese young people as 'African gang'. Why can't they just call us group of young people, the same way they refer other youth? Sometimes I feel valued and welcome but when these labeling happens, I wonder about my identity.

Further comments were made around not understanding the context of the refugee status that is based on where they come from and how this has escalated the level of stereotyping by the government and services in Australia.

> I feel bad that there is different perception and treatment against African people in Australia. I know how it feels being a refugee, fleeing home country, living in camp and coming to Australia to settle. I understand the situation back home and I can relate how it is like for others who are still there. I always say to other people that you cannot understand how it feels unless you lived in that situation – sleep without even having one meal for the day. It is a real suffering and people don't understand it. I want these people to go back, be with these Sudanese refugees, understand the hardship and be in their shoes to feel the situation.

Generational Impacts: 'What Did We Do Wrong?'

South Sudanese refugees see identity conflict as an intergenerational issue impacting everyone trying to integrate into Australian society. It results in worries about the impacts on the experiences of children and young people who are beginning their schooling, university education and/or career. Participants described several hindering factors that arise consistently limiting their ability and access to opportunities.

> The things we worry about here [in Australia] are things like exclusion, systemic racism as all these factors affects our children and they don't understand why. Where else do they go? Our children have done everything the same way as other children but still their background stays with them and they are treated differently. I try to relate by telling my story when I was a child – age five I was at Nile, age six I was at Kenya and it feels like just a story to them. But for me it stays as my identity, that's why people will stare at me and say, 'you are African' and I am okay about it. But why do they do the same for my children who born here [Australia]? Why do people still point them? What did we do wrong?

There was a significant identity dilemma among the younger South Sudanese population due to the way their perception of treatment by mainstream media which left them with long-term impacts in integrating into Australian society.

> Look at the media – what media does and portrays for South Sudanese kids and young people. They only pick up the content of those kids, they don't know the context where and how these kids come from, what have been through – the war and all sort of things. The same goes with politicians – all the blames and pointing fingers at South Sudanese communities and young people without knowing the backgrounds and the context of these

> communities. If they know the background, they could acknowledge the history and the past to provide appropriate support to settle in Australia. Sadly, these people don't even know where the South Sudan is, and they are ignorant about the history of these refugees. The impact of how they view us [South Sudanese] in Australia as criminal is huge for these innocent children – young people are struggling to get jobs.

Participants were worried about the fact that the ongoing assumptions and judgements made against South Sudanese refugees have impacted everyone in the community and restricted younger individuals from concentrating on their study, career development, jobs and other opportunities.

> The bad image about South Sudanese in the news affects everyone in every way – work, study, finding jobs etc. We have to try harder to convince people that we are not the those what is said in the media or news but still we don't get a chance in the first place. There are a lot of other barriers come into effect because of the bad image that media portrays for South Sudanese as bad people, gangsters, robbers, criminals.

The anger and frustrations of inappropriate labelling of South Sudanese refugees as criminals is a serious and significant issue in terms of the long-term trauma and impacts on the current and next generations.

> When people see me, they already have their own thoughts and assumptions. They think we are less intelligent. When I was in high school, I work at locally fixing exercise bikes. I found weird that the owner of the bike place was keep staring me and I was wondering why he is keep giving me a strange look. The next day, he came to ask if I knew what I was doing, I felt disappointed with his comment as I was very confident about fixing bikes and I was doing it well. I was hired for my ability of doing this job well and why would he still judge me? I felt terrible. Since then, I have gone through lots of staring and judgments by other people. I can see that happening to my children too but they don't talk about it much – assumptions and racism against African is everywhere and it is still the same. Other people are always quick to make judgement about South Sudanese.

Ongoing frustrations and exhaustions resulting from negative profiling and messaging about South Sudanese refugees were raised consistently. Questions about identity seemed to be linked to a tension many participants felt in choosing between an Australian self-conception and a desire to reclaim their status as South Sudanese Australians.

> This is a common question that everyone asks even when we are born here in Australia. They keep asking us - 'where do you come from? I struggle what to answer, as they don't think we are Australian even if we have the Australian citizenship. We cannot ignore our South Sudanese identity as well. We don't ask white people where they come from, but they ask that question to us all the time. We don't want to know about them, but I don't understand why they question us that way.

Participants raised the serious complexities of systemic discrimination against South Sudanese refugees that they largely perceive as failing to respect and acknowledge their legal status in Australia. South Sudanese individuals across generations feel constantly victimized and the concept of 'othering' has directly impacted individuals and families in accommodating to the new society. This for many has created a dilemma of 'fitting in' or 'stepping out' to protect their identity and cultural constructs as South Sudanese in Australia.

Cross-cultural Integration: 'How Do We Fit In?'

The complexities of finding answers to the everyday quest of 'where do we belong' raised additional questions among participants of how to 'fit in' to Australian society when they perceive constant discrimination based, as they see it, on invalid assumptions and judgements. This complicates the process of integration and settlement for children, young people and families into the Australian system.

> We struggle even making friends. When we go to work, people talk about their own business [matters]. It is harder specially for adults as they didn't go to school here [in Australia] and they didn't learn Australian systems. They come here with the trauma of being through the war with a hope of having a better life, but they can't fit in. They can't speak English and they like to follow their own culture. It is harder to engage in activities they would like as everyone in Australia seems busy and older people specially miss their culture, local conversation and the time they used to spend with kids in their own way. So, how do we fit in?

Integrating and settling into the new culture and social systems require a supportive environment and resources and these participants often feel they lack both. Most importantly the host society tends to ignore the context of newly arrived refugees in providing support for their adjustment to their new communities. This has created mistrust of mainstream communities and social systems.

> When I first came to Australia, not many people knew African or Sudanese or South Sudanese people. They were quite scared to see us and didn't know how to react or what to expect, like they have never seen an African person in real before. Back in days, there were more racism compared to now against the African people. We are not bad people, and we are just human like everyone else. End of the day, there should not be any difference between Australian and African people.

Experiences of racism that newcomers experienced living in Australia were a common theme. While these South Sudanese refugees shared a hope that there should be no differences between people, they reported that it is an exhausting journey to achieve positive social integration.

> We are not there yet. But I see we will get there, and it might take a while. I believe there is a future, as we all got potentials. We are going to schools, getting the degrees, starting to open businesses, so the future looks bright.

The hope of finding a better future one day is constantly distorted by the experience that there are a number of barriers that these participants feel in being valued in Australian society. These barriers include racism, discriminatory assumptions, judgements, language and ongoing media attacks. Difficulties in gaining employment were also mentioned as a critical factor in social and cultural integration.

> Yes, employment is a significant barrier. I don't know how to stretch it enough. They think we don't fit the criteria even if we have degrees. They make up other criteria either asking for other qualifications to fit to another person from Australian or another culture/background or a different person from another country. They use different method to eliminate people from South Sudanese backgrounds. I do see it as racism, discrimination and unfair treatment. These kinds of things do cause a lot of stress and lead to the depression.

The perceived racism, discrimination and unfair treatment these participants raised are interesting to note, especially in the context that they are grateful to have better access to

education and employment opportunities in Australia. However, the perceived experience of strategic exclusion in education and employment among this cohort compared to the Australian mainstream needs further exploration to understand whether it has potential impacts on the social and emotional well-being of individuals and groups.

> We don't get enough support. Now, there is no support and I started feeling difficulties to manage costs. It depends on the income you get, if you don't have income in the family, the life is really tough. This makes very hard because we studied hard with the hope of getting job and making income, but when we don't get a job in our field of study, we are helpless, and we have to live with no earning or a limited income from doing other things [non-professional work]. Fitting in different country is not easy.

The expectations of life in Australia are different from the reality that these participants experience while going through the acculturation process. The perception of difference can be overwhelming and often challenging to navigate but navigating various levels and kinds of complexities is a common experience for many going through the acculturation process.

> If you see other communities – Italian, Palestine, Iraqi, Asian and others, I think the government has issue differentiating black Africans. Most African communities experience discriminations and we can't compare ourselves with others in the community. That's why we are behind. We all know the answer – it is the color of our skin that makes us look different and this is the problem. Most of us come with a lot of traumas and we get more victimized with consistent questioning 'where do you come from' and the way that the government, services and other people treat us in Australia. I started saying that proudly that 'I am from South Sudan, and I am an Australian, how about you?' But the tone of their questioning of our identity never changes.

Over the past decade, individuals, families and communities from a Sudanese background have been the targets of racist attacks and represent the negative forefront in Australian media. These narratives reflect the agony, pain, discomfort, anger and frustrations that these South Sudanese participants confront in day-to-day life.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the South Sudanese refugees living in greater Sydney Australia experienced a great deal of identity conflict centring on their self-perception as Australian in some contexts and African in others. This distinction largely aligned with various domains of experience, with African identity more relevant in social and cultural contexts within their own community and within the family. Similar findings were reported in an earlier study conducted in Australia (Milner and Khawaja 2010). Australian identity, on the other hand, was more associated with the broader social context and participation in social and political institutions. This is similar to the experience of many migrant and refugee groups that other studies have highlighted (Webb and Lahiri-Roy 2019; Mavroudi 2020), including not the perception of being seen as Australian by people in their original community but as African by other Australians (Murray 2018). The experience of migration, whatever its causes and reasons, tends to change individuals as they adopt the cultural values, beliefs and norms of the host community (Bhugra and Becker 2005), and this can be

perceived by others from their community of origin but may not be noticeable to the individual involved.

The findings also show that the participants perceived themselves as being outsiders in Australia, which many associated with how they looked compared to others. This sense of othering on the basis of race seems to be a common experience that has been explored in previous research (Abur and Spaaij 2016; Baak 2019). While this is not a unique situation in Australia, where over 36 per cent of the population was born overseas (ABS 2021), these participants tended to associate any problems and negative events with the fact that they are easily recognizable as being of African origin. The way in which this perception of racism against them was expressed, even extending to the words used was consistent (Macaulay and Deppeler 2020), suggesting that there is a community narrative that explains the experience of South Sudanese in Australia that is known and promulgated by and among community members. Interestingly, this perception was often detailed by participants as part of their own discussion about opportunities (such as studying at a university) they had received in Australia.

This is not to suggest that members of the South Sudanese community do not experience treatment or reactions from others they understand to be racist; they undoubtedly do, and their experience of racism has been an ongoing phenomenon. Similar experiences were reported in another recent study conducted in Australia (Burford-Rice et al. 2020). However, it is also the case that many of the participants have benefited from a range of programmes and support available that enabled them to attend school and universities, buy a house, gain employment and so forth. While some engagement activities were found to be beneficial by a young population in another study (Abur 2016), overwhelmingly, the participants in this study did not acknowledge the existence of these benefits, despite very obviously understanding how to get them and make use of the resulting opportunities. A situation of negative media reporting against the South Sudanese population was mentioned in another research (Macaulay and Deppeler 2020), which participants in this study claimed was unjust profiling of individuals from African backgrounds by mainstream media. At the same time, none allowed that there might be some truth in the content of such reporting, such as the existence of gang activity within the African community.

Again, these perceptions of unfair treatment or profiling are consistent with other studies, regardless of age, gender, and social background of members of the South Sudanese population in Australia (Weber et al. 2021; Pittaway and Dantas 2021). It appears that the experience of migration to Australia as refugees has generated a very strong community narrative that acts as a framework within which individual experience is placed. This is likely the result of trauma at the individual and community level that derives from experiences prior to coming to Australia as well as post-arrival Given the experience of trauma and the impacts of resettlement was raised over a decade ago (Marlowe 2010), this issue will undoubtedly continue to be significant in the further development and integration of the community into the Australian mainstream society. The perception of themselves as outsiders who are viewed in a negative manner by others has the potential to act as a barrier to addressing social, education, employment and health and well-being issues within this community and, for this reason, needs to be better understood within the policy environment as well as by the institutions that serve the community.

Conclusion

The authors conclude that the South Sudanese refugees living in greater Sydney experienced a range of challenges leaving their home country, en route to Australia, upon arrival as refugees in Australia and in trying to navigate a new life in Australia. These challenges include educational, social and economic issues. While political opportunities were appreciated, the ways that South Sudanese refugees are consistently portrayed and treated act as a consistent barrier to successfully integrate into their new society. Their deeper attachment to the places they originally come from, and the traumatic experiences of fleeing home is still difficult for them to comprehend, while targeted comments that these refugees may hear in random situations in Australia add extra barriers to accommodating and integrating to the new social environment.

The hope for being treated fairly and equally shared by these refugees needs closer attention from the Government, the organisations providing services for refugees, stakeholders and Australian general community members. The sense of exclusion that South Sudanese communities develop because of the negative framing of language used to introduce them by mainstream media hasn't helped to establish a positive integration process and the impacts of this are evident across the generations today. This underscores a need for appropriate support, resources and responses at all levels.

Limitations

This study has some important limitations which we would like to outline here. Firstly, participants involved in this study were recruited from one capital city of one state in New South Wales, Australia. While the experiences of integrating into a new society can be similar, the findings may represent the experiences of all South Sudanese refugees in Australia. Secondly, given there were seven women in our study, the results presented do not differentiate gender variations to understand whether experiences are different between genders. While all interviews were conducted by a bilingual male interviewer, it is possible that responses were influenced by this context and the interview process. Thirdly, participant recruitment for this study was challenging due to the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 and the limited existing relationship of the research team with South Sudanese community groups. Participant recruitment occurred via community leaders and stakeholders which may have created a bias in getting representative samples from the community. Although all interviews were planned to be face-to-face in preferred settings, this was no longer possible due to the associated restrictions during the COVID-19 period, but the data collected via phone interviews were still rich and insightful.

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Appendix

Table A1. General background of the study participants.

Characteristics	Frequency
Gender	
Male	19
Female	7
Age group	
21–30 years	5
31–40 years	5
41–50 years	9
51 years and above	6
Not stated	1
Number of years living in Australia	
5–9 years	1
10–19 years	20
20–29 years	4
Not stated	1
The person accompanying to travel to Australia	
Self	4
With family or with family members who were already living in Australia	18
With friends or community	1
Not known	3