

The Experiences of Sudanese Unaccompanied Minors in Foster Care

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Sudanese unaccompanied minors were separated from their parents in childhood and lived apart from their families in refugee camps for close to a decade before being resettled in the United States. This phenomenological study examines the refugees' experiences of living in American foster families after living in peer groups in the camps. Interviews with 18 young adults, 7 years after resettlement, revealed that nearly all of the youth struggled with parental authority initially, and nearly half of them changed placements because of relationship difficulties with their foster parents. Misunderstandings based on cultural differences often exacerbated conflicts. However, 15 of 18 youth currently had a positive relationship with at least 1 foster parent, sometimes with a parent from their second or third placement. Changing foster families is often considered a failure in the child welfare system, but several Sudanese youth reported that having supportive relationships helped them during the acculturation process whether those relationships developed during the first or last placement.

Keywords: unaccompanied minors, Sudanese, foster care, parent–child relationships, cultural differences

As a result of what is known as the second Sudanese civil war that began in 1983, approximately two million Sudanese were killed and many more were displaced (Bixler, 2005). Families were torn apart by the fighting as many adults were killed and a significant number of children were separated from their parents when their communities were attacked. It is estimated that 25,000 Sudanese children, predominately males, fled on foot to refugee camps in Ethiopia (Geltman et al., 2005). This group of unaccompanied refugee boys later became popularly known as the “lost boys of Sudan.” A regime change in Ethiopia in 1991 forced the boys to return to

displacement camps in Sudan and eventually to make another long trek to a United Nations refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya to escape attacks from Sudanese government forces. Once in Kakuma, the youth lived predominantly in a peer group setting without parents for about 8 years. In 2000 and 2001, approximately 3,800 “lost boys” were resettled in the United States (Bixler, 2005); among that group were approximately 500 minors who were placed in foster care (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to describe Sudanese refugee minors' recollections of their experiences in foster care and their perceptions of their relationships with their American foster parents. Most of the research on immigrant and refugee families has focused on challenging family dynamics after migration as a result of acculturation gaps, separation, new family configurations, shifting gender roles, and parental adaptation difficulty (e.g. Foner, 1997; Qin, 2006, 2008; Rumbaut, 1997; Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Little research has been conducted to understand the experiences of one group of refugee children—unaccompanied refugee minors who enter American foster families. Unaccompanied refugee minors represent an important subpopulation within the migrant population in the United States. Compared with children who immigrated to the United States with their biological families, they usually face additional trauma and challenges in their adjustment, for example, war trauma, not knowing the fate of their biological family members, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). For the minors who were taken in by American foster families, how they adjusted to parent–child relations has

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We want to take this opportunity to remember our dear colleague and friend, Tom Luster, who passed away in March, 2009. We gratefully acknowledge his leadership and vision in this research.

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important implications for their future adaptation. The experiences of the Sudanese youth in our study provide a rich and unique context within which to explore how unaccompanied refugee minors adapt to having nonbiological parental relationships in a new land.

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

An *unaccompanied minor* is a “person who is under the age of majority and not accompanied by a parent, guardian, or other person who by law or custom is responsible for him or her” (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988, p. 7). Historically, a number of groups of unaccompanied refugee minors have been resettled in foster care or other alternate living situations. An estimated 13 million children were orphaned as a result of World War II, and approximately 900,000 children lost one or both parents as a result of the Vietnam War (Ressler et al., 1988). Examples of large resettlement efforts include the Basque children during the Spanish Civil War (Legarretta, 1984), Jewish children from Eastern Europe during the World War II Kindertransport (Harris & Oppenheimer, 2001), survivors of the Holocaust (Moskovitz, 1983), Cuban children in Operation Pedro Pan (Conde, 1999), the boat people from Southeast Asia (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991), and children displaced by wars in Greece, Korea, and other countries (see Ressler et al., 1988, for an overview of the resettlement of unaccompanied minors). Several developed nations have provided asylum to unaccompanied refugee minors who fled or were evacuated from their country because of war or regime changes.

Refugees in Foster Care

Research on unaccompanied refugee minors' experiences in foster care is very limited. Much of the prior research focused on the mental health of these children because of concerns about the possible deleterious effects of separations from parents (Bowlby, 1973; Freud & Burlingham, 1943). The available research on their foster care experiences has shown that parent-child relationships can be protective as these youth cope with many new challenges (Duerr, Posner, & Gilbert, 2003; Moller & Minard, 2002), but little is known about how these relationships develop under these unusual circumstances. Moreover, many of the groups that have been studied had experiences quite different from the Sudanese in that they were evacuated to neighboring countries with the assistance of their parents; the youth went directly from their parents' homes to foster care or group care settings and usually spent only a few years in the host country.

The groups whose experiences may be most similar to the Sudanese were the unaccompanied minors from Vietnam and Cambodia who were resettled in the United States after the Vietnam War; many of these minors were placed in foster care. Records show that 40% to 50% of these youth changed placements. Factors that contributed to placement breakdowns included cultural differences, the trauma the youth experienced before resettlement, and clashes over

expectations and preferences (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988). The characteristics and behaviors of foster parents played an important role in how well the children adjusted to their new living arrangement. Among Indochinese children, those who lived with foster parents from the same ethnic background were less likely to show depressive symptoms (Porte & Torney-Purta, 1987). Other characteristics of the foster parents—such as patience, interest in another culture, and a sense of humor—were also viewed as important for successful placements (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988).

A goal of this study was to add to what is known about the development of relationships between unaccompanied minors and their foster parents. In this case, many foster parents took in two or more teenagers from another culture who had traumatic war experiences, including separation from their parents, and who had lived without parental authority in peer groups for many years. The following research questions were addressed: How did the youth describe their relationship with their foster parents when they lived with them and after they moved out of the home? More specifically, how did the youth respond to having foster parents in an authority role after living in peer groups for several years? Why did many of the minors move to different foster care homes or into independent living and what, in their opinion, precipitated these moves? Did cultural differences contribute to conflicts and misunderstandings with foster parents? In addition, we were interested in how the family experiences of unaccompanied minors in foster care are similar to and different from those reported in studies of other immigrant youth who relocate with their biological parents (Qin, 2008; Sluzki, 1979; Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Qin, 2006). Unaccompanied minors are likely to experience many of the stressors and challenges of other immigrant youth. As they deal with acculturation stress, unaccompanied minors may enjoy an advantage in living with parents who understand the host culture; on the other hand, they must adapt to their new context without the affective ties and shared culture that other immigrant youth have with their biological parents.

Method

The goal of this study was to describe the Sudanese minors' experiences living in foster care families in the United States based on their accounts of their experiences and relationships and their interpretation of those experiences. In doing so, we have taken the existential-phenomenological inquiry approach that focuses on understanding and describing the human experience in contexts of families, communities, and cultures (Gilgun, 2005; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

Participants

Eighteen Sudanese refugees, who had been placed through a foster care program for unaccompanied minors in the United States, participated in interviews 7 years after resettlement; this is 20% of the 89 unaccompanied minors resettled in Lansing, Michigan and neighboring communi-

ties. With the assistance of the resettlement agency, we sampled for diversity in the foster families the youth were placed with to obtain a sample of youth who were exposed to diverse families and circumstances. The families were diverse in terms of type of community (urban, suburban, rural), family structure (two-parents, single mothers, single fathers), and prior parenting experience. Most of the foster parents were European American, but we selected foster families that reflected the range of ethnic diversity that was available in our population.

At the time of the interviews, all of the Sudanese youth were adults, ranging in age from 18 to 26 years ($M = 22$ years; $SD = 2.31$). Of the 18 youth we interviewed, 16 were men and 2 were women. Only 13 women were resettled in the Lansing area, and of the 3,800 "lost boys" resettled in the United States, only 89 were female (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, 2005). All of the youth in this study identified themselves ethnically as Dinka, the largest ethnic group in southern Sudan. At the time of resettlement, the mean age of the youth was 15 years ($SD = 2.34$), and the youngest child was 11; some of the youth did not know their exact age, and in those cases we used the age estimated by the United Nations refugee organization based on their level of physical maturity when examined in the refugee camp.

With regard to educational attainment, 2 of the participants had graduated from 4-year universities and 1 had obtained a vocational training certificate at a community college. Eleven were currently college students and 4 others were not currently enrolled but planned to return to school. Four of the youth were now parents themselves, including both women (see Table 1).

Procedures

For the larger research project on unaccompanied minors in foster care, we conducted separate interviews with the Sudanese youth and their foster parents. However, for this paper, we focused almost exclusively on the data provided by the youth and used the transcripts of the foster parent interviews as background information that enhanced our understanding of the youths' context.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics of Sudanese Unaccompanied Minors in Foster Care

Characteristics of Sudanese youth	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) range	%
Age at interview	22 yrs (2.31) 18–26	
Age at resettlement	15 yrs (2.34) 11–17	
Years living in the United States	6.9 yrs (0.38) 6–7	
% of male youth		89
% of youth attending school		72
% of youth working		61
% of youth enrolled in 4-yr college		28
% of youth enrolled in 2-yr college		44

Note. $N = 18$.

Interviews were conducted first with 13 foster families who were recruited with a letter sent from the resettlement agency. During the interview, we asked the foster parents to provide contact information for the youth who had lived with them. With the contact information provided by the foster parents and the assistance of a Sudanese cultural consultant, we were successful in locating and interviewing at least 1 youth from each of these foster parent homes. To determine if they had similar perspectives on their experiences in foster care, we interviewed five pairs of youth who lived with the same foster family at least part of the time, including two brothers and two sets of cousins. Of the youth we invited to participate in the study, 78% agreed to be interviewed; two males and three females decided not to take part in the study.

The Interview

The semistructured interviews with the youth were conducted by six members of the research team—three faculty members and three graduate research assistants. All six interviewers followed the same interview protocol that included a list of questions that were asked of all participants and suggested follow-up probes to elicit additional information. The interviews were audiotaped with the consent of the participants and later transcribed. The transcripts of the interviews were sent to the original interviewers to examine them for accuracy before they were coded.

The interview with the youth, which took approximately 2 hours to complete, began with a short demographic questionnaire. The rest of the semistructured interview was divided into three parts. The first part focused on the youths' experiences in foster care and included the following items: (a) Tell me about your experiences living in an American foster family. (b) Tell me about your relations with your foster family. (c) What did you like most about living in a foster family? What was the most difficult part? (Probe: Was it difficult to have American parents telling you what to do after you lived for many years without parents?) (d) It can be difficult to adapt to life in the United States when you first get here. What did your foster family do for you that you found helpful in adjusting to life in the United States? (e) You came from a different culture. Did differences between American and Sudanese culture ever cause problems or misunderstandings between you and your foster family? (f) When you left the home of your foster family, what was the reason for leaving? (g) How would you describe your current relationship with your foster parents? Youth who lived in more than one foster home were asked about their relationships with each of their foster parents and their reason for leaving each home.

Two other sections of the interview addressed different aspects of their adjustment. Although these sections of the interview were not specifically about their foster care experiences, the youth continued to discuss their foster care experiences as they related to other topics such as challenges, accomplishments, and their sense of belonging.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness of the Data

The first three authors coded all of the transcripts independently. The following data analysis steps were followed (Giorgi, 1985): (a) The three coders read all the transcripts and gained a general sense of the interviews; (b) Next, natural meaning units (i.e., portions of the text that are judged to relate to an identifiable theme) were delineated from each interview transcript, coded, and transformed into themes. For example, "Where I came from I wasn't living with family. I'm not used to parent telling me do this and do this" and "Whatever she said, I don't have to, whether it is wrong or not, I say, yes ma'am, OK and you don't have to question" were words of the participants and considered "natural meaning units." The meaning units were then coded as "parents telling youth what to do" and "conforming to household rules"; (c) These codes, along with other related codes, were then transformed or grouped into a theme, like "parental authority." The themes contained a wide array of the youth's experiences, which were then synthesized and described as collective experience of the youth; (d) next, the three coders met weekly for 5 weeks, in which they discussed the findings regarding the various themes to describe the experiences of youth in foster care. During the meetings, the coders reached consensus about the key themes that emerged from the data. The findings included in this paper reflect the consensus of all three coders; (e) finally, the coders met with all members of the research team who had conducted interviews and read other interview transcripts to share their findings and interpretation of the findings; the larger group was able to confirm that the findings were consistent with what they had learned from the interviews and discussed examples that were illustrative of the themes and agreed on the wording of the themes.

The research team also hired a Sudanese cultural consultant, who had also been a participant in the study; the consultant provided important insights into the Dinka culture. As another check on the trustworthiness of the findings, the Sudanese cultural consultant, who had lived with two American foster families after resettlement, read the results section of the study and had a conference call with the research team to discuss the findings. He confirmed that the results were accurate based on his knowledge of the experiences of the Sudanese youth in foster care. In addition, one of the authors, Diane Baird, was able to confirm that the results were consistent with her experience working with both the youth and foster parents as part of her job responsibilities at Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.

Results

We begin the results section by noting the number of foster homes the youth lived in and summarize how the youth described their relationship with the foster parents while they lived with them. Next, we share the youths' perceptions of what it was like to have parents in authority roles after living in peer groups for several years. The third section focuses on the conflicts and misunderstandings the

youth had with their parents and the role that cultural differences played in those conflicts. The fourth section examines the youths' recollections of their reasons for changing foster homes, and in the final section, we share the youths' reflections on their current relationships with their foster parents.

Relationships With the Foster Parents While Living in the Foster Home

As an initial step in examining the youths' relationships with their foster families, we determined the number of different foster placements each youth had. Of the 18 youth, 8 had only one placement and continued to have a relationship with their foster parents at the time of the interview, 5 of the youth lived with two foster families, and 3 youth lived with three foster families. The other 2 youth moved into an independent living situation after having a falling out with their parents in their first placement and did not maintain contact with their foster parents after they left the home. Although more than half of the youth changed homes while they were minors, the youth did not always change homes because they had difficulty getting along with their foster parents. Some left for other reasons, such as trouble getting along with one of the other foster children. We will discuss these separations in more detail in a later section.

We asked the youth to tell us about their relationship with the foster parents while they lived with them. In all, the 18 youth had 29 foster placements. The youths' descriptions of their relationships in these various placements can be sorted into the following three categories: (a) had a positive relationship, with the youth focusing on the instrumental support the foster parents provided (i.e., food, housing, transportation, help meeting educational goals; $n = 10$); (b) had a close relationship with the foster parents based on receiving instrumental support and developing an emotional attachment with the foster parent(s) ($n = 13$); and, (c) did not have a positive relationship with the foster parents ($n = 6$). The ways that youth in each of these three groups describe their relationships while they lived with their foster parents are discussed next.

Positive relationship based on instrumental support. Most of the youth seemed appreciative to their parents for bringing them into their home and for helping them to pursue their goals, which typically involved furthering their education. However, 10 of the youth focused almost exclusively on the instrumental support that the foster parents provided and said little or nothing about emotional support or their attachment to their parents in their description of their placements. They noted assistance such as providing basic necessities (preparing food, doing laundry), transportation, and help with school work. The youth also valued their foster parents for helping them learn about the culture and improve their language skills. As one youth recalled, "It was a good experience for me. In the morning, (they) gave me a ride to school and when the school is done they brought me back home. Then from there, he shows me a lot of stuff because, I didn't know about a lot of stuff . . . like, how to find a job, how to go out there, how to dress good

when going for interview, and how to approach somebody, and how to make friendship.” Many of these youth seemed content to have parents who functioned much like mentors, although according to the resettlement caseworkers we interviewed in an earlier phase of the study, most parents seemed to have expectations of forming lasting, close attachments with the youth (Luster, Johnson, & Bates, 2008).

Close relationship. Thirteen youth, especially those who were younger at resettlement and spent several years in the same home, eventually developed more affective ties to their foster parents. As one of the women noted, “In the beginning, I was kind of scared because I did not know who they were, whatever. In the end, I came to realize that they were really good people who care about me. I connected with mom right away . . . We always do the girl talk.” The youth who seemed closest to their parents often noted that they were treated the same as other members of the family: “I did feel close to my foster parents . . . They treated me like one of their sons and their kids made me feel that I am one of their brothers as well.”

Not a positive relationship. Six of the youth described their relationships with their foster parents in one of their placements in generally negative terms. As this youth reported: “You know if I need something I can go to them and ask them . . . But if they are not there, it doesn’t really matter to me . . . I didn’t feel very, very tight to them.” Another youth’s salient recollections were mostly of clashes with his foster father: “My foster dad, he was just kind of a mean person to us.” Below we note some of the problems in the relationships that made it difficult for bonds to form.

Having Parental Authority Figures After Living in Peer Groups

We asked the youth what it was like to have parental authority figures after living independently in peer groups for several years. Not surprisingly, nearly all of the youth found it difficult to have parents telling them what to do after making important decisions on their own for many years. The list of issues they had with their parents would sound familiar to most parents who have reared teenagers—doing chores, phone usage, rules about dating, curfew, time spent with peers, and checking in with parents while they were out with friends. However, the context was different given the life experience of the Sudanese. The youth had been making decisions that had implications for whether they survived or perished on their sojourn through East Africa, and thus they found it difficult to accept someone else deciding what time they should go to bed or how long they should talk to their Sudanese friends on the phone: As one youth noted, “When I separated from my family, I was only 6 years, so from there 6-years-old to 17-year-old (I took care of) myself (with pride); so nobody tell me what to do, but I live myself. So that was the difference I see there. Like when you come here, ‘do this thing and do that.’” Another youth said their background made the transition to family life difficult, “First thing when I got here with a foster parent, I wasn’t comfortable with it because where I came from I wasn’t living with family. I’m not used to

parent telling me ‘do this and do this’ . . . where we came from a lot of people didn’t fit in with living with family, didn’t want it at all. Those are the people that end up going to four, five, different foster parents because they have this thought in their mind like you don’t want to listen to anybody, and it’s just how we were raised was the problem.”

Because of differences in the resettlement experiences of the minors and those 18 and older, the Sudanese youth seemed to have an exaggerated sense of how much autonomy youth have in the United States once they reach age 18. Having viewed their 18-year-old peers being placed in apartments without adult supervision, some youth seemed surprised when they were not given similar levels of autonomy in the foster family once they reached age 18: “There was a time, where I didn’t really want to go to bed early. This time I just want to go to bed when I want to because I’m 18 years old and I don’t need somebody to control me all the time when I want to go out with my friends. I came home late; I don’t need to be called so that somebody can tell me a lot of stuff.” Although it was not always the case, those who were younger when resettled seemed to follow the traditional Dinka practice of respecting their elders and had fewer problems accepting parental authority than those who were older: “For the people who were a little bit older than us, I am pretty sure it was challenging to say. ‘Hey listen clean your room. Do this, do that . . . that’s where it turned to Dinka culture where it doesn’t matter, back in the day, all the persons tell you what you should do, just shut up. Respect the call, respect the oldest people.’” In contrast, those who had been older among the peers in the refugee camps had some authority within their “alternative families” in Kakuma and seemed reluctant to relinquish that authority. Moreover, because their experiences exceeded those of most teenagers, some youth expressed frustration over being treated as children, as was the case of this youth who had been a child soldier in many battles before being wounded in combat and discharged to the refugee camp: “I mean we were not children, right? And, and as sometime when you feel treated as a child, sometime you don’t like it.”

Conflicts, Concerns, and Misunderstandings

We probed the topic of what led to conflicts or misunderstandings with their foster parents and asked specifically if cultural differences ever caused problems or misunderstandings. Particularly in the first year after resettlement the youth recalled misunderstandings resulting from parents’ and youths’ lack of familiarity with each other’s culture. The youth noted a variety of issues and incidents, but those that were mentioned by three or more youth involved: eye contact, differing interpretations of their limited communication with the parents, privacy, and confidentiality, requests for remittances from relatives and friends in Africa, and resolving differences in expectations.

Cultural differences regarding eye contact. Three of the youth discussed cultural differences in making eye contact, a topic the foster parents talked about as well. In the

United States, parents expect children to look them in the eyes when they are having a serious conversation and averted eyes are interpreted as signs of dishonesty or disrespect. In Sudan, if children look an elder in the eyes when the elder is talking to them, that is a sign of disrespect, as this youth noted: "My foster dad said to me to look into his eyes. But as far as for my culture, I am not supposed to look at somebody who is older to me in their eyes especially when we are having an argument."

Differing interpretations of their limited communication with the parents. Three of the youth thought that their foster parents misinterpreted their limited communication with them as a sign of a problem in their relationship. The youth offered various reasons for their relatively noncommunicative style. One youth explained that he was preoccupied with thoughts of his biological family and whether they were still alive. Another youth reminded us of the horrific things that they had seen as children that resulted in "the mind's full of a lot of bad stuff"; as he dealt with these intrusive memories, he might appear to be angry or sullen, but it was not a reflection of how he felt about his foster parents. Still another youth noted that he spent most of his time in his room studying because that is what he came to the United States to do; it was not intended to be a slight to the other members of their foster family.

Privacy and confidentiality. Six of the youth brought up issues related to privacy and confidentiality. Three of the youth noted that they did not like it when their foster parents talked to other adults, such as other foster parents, about them. The youth viewed this as a violation of their privacy and argued that this was something that was not typically done by Sudanese parents. As one youth lamented, "Like sometimes I tell her some stuff and she'll just go and talk with a friend and everybody about the whole thing and I did not like that." Three other youth also expressed concerns about parents who went to their caseworkers to discuss a problem they were having with the youth; the youth sometimes felt blindsided by these meetings and were upset that the parents had not done more to resolve the issue with them first. Coming from a culture that attaches great importance to the reputation of individuals and families, the youth worried about the effects of their foster parents' words on how others viewed them.

Remittances. Three of the youth discussed conflicts involving the frequent requests for money the youth received from friends or relatives in Africa. Because of time zone differences those phone calls often came in the middle of the night, which irked the foster parents. The youth, who had first-hand experience with the living conditions of those left behind, felt compelled to help as many people as they could; this, in turn, led to more requests for money. The three youth noted that their foster parents argued with them about sending their allowance and earnings back to Africa—especially if the recipient was not a family member. As this youth noted, sharing what they had with others was an important Sudanese cultural value: "And also another problem was sending the money. Because I was sending money and then she keep on asking, 'Whom do you send money?' and 'Why do you send money to them?' and

I say these are my relatives, and she was like no, no, you don't have to send the money. That was a part of my money and I say that, you know, we share. We don't have money; they don't have money. If we have money, we need to share it together."

Resolving differences in expectations. The Sudanese youth thought that American parents were more insistent than Sudanese parents about doing chores as soon as they were told, and nagged the children when they did not comply promptly. Five of the youth noted that this was more of a problem with their foster fathers than their foster mothers who seemed to give the youth a little more latitude. The youth noted some confrontations in which both the Sudanese youth and the foster fathers would "dig their heels in" and tensions escalated. The problems in these confrontations were compounded by the Sudanese youths' limited English language proficiency. Communication problems made it difficult to de-escalate these disagreements using problem-solving strategies available to parents and teens who share language and culture. One of the youth who was unable to resolve problems with his foster parents recalled, "It was a very, very big challenge trying to adapt to English here, and for them to understand me and for me to understand them."

Two of the youth could not recall having any conflicts with their parents. Other youth were philosophical about their squabbles, noting that disagreements are part of relationships, and both the youth and parents worked at resolving issues. However, other relationships did not last. In the following section, we examine the reasons why some of the youth decided to change homes or were asked to leave.

Changing Foster Homes

Of the 18 youth in our sample, 10 changed foster homes or moved into independent living situations while they were still minors. Because some youth moved more than once, there were actually 14 transitions, and we examined the reasons for those transitions from the youth's perspective. The reasons for changing homes were categorized into three groups: (a) perceived problems with the foster parents ($n = 8$); (b) leaving despite having positive relationships with the foster parents ($n = 4$); and (c) problems in the behavior of the youth ($n = 2$).

Perceived problems with the foster parents. Although there were sometimes multiple reasons for a change, the youth explained eight of these transitions primarily in terms of problems in their relationship with their foster parents or an incident that caused a falling out with the foster parent. Many of the clashes involved issues noted above such as accepting parental authority. Other problems included disagreements concerning the allowance provided by Lutheran Social Services, feeling as if the parent had little time for the youth because of other commitments such as working long hours, or believing they were wrongly accused of misconduct by the foster parents. In two cases, the youth said they left the home because their friend or relative, with whom they were living in the home, had a problem with the foster parent; when the friend or relative moved out the youth

changed homes so that they could continue to live with the friend or relative.

Leaving despite positive relationships with foster parents. Four of the youth reported having a good relationship with the foster parents but left for other reasons. For example, one youth lived alone with a single mother and asked to move because she felt isolated from her Sudanese peers. In another case, two brothers, who were placed with a single foster mother who had immigrated to the United States as an adult, thought highly of her, but decided it would be mutually beneficial if they left. This mother seemed overextended with working full time and caring for several biological children; the boys thought they could benefit academically from living with an American family who understood the American school system. Another youth liked his first foster family but had trouble getting along with his cousin and asked to be moved.

Problems in the behavior of the youth. Sometimes the youth acknowledged that their behavior contributed to a problem in their relationship with the foster parent. Based on the interviews with the foster parents, we knew that two of the youth had been asked to leave the home. Although neither youth mentioned that they were asked to leave, both discussed, with regret, how their behavior created a problem in the relationship. One youth had a problem with alcohol, and when he drank, he did not follow the house rules. His foster parents arranged for him to receive counseling, and he reported having a good relationship with his foster parents again now that he is not drinking—a view that was corroborated by the foster parents. Another youth had problems regulating his anger; this problem was exacerbated when his older brothers left home to attend college, and he was highly stressed by their absence. He had difficulty with another foster child who moved into the home, and this led to more anger directed at his foster mother who eventually could no

longer accept his emotional outbursts. He reported being happy in his new home and eventually repaired his relationship with his previous foster mother; this reconciliation was also corroborated by the foster mother.

Current Relationships With Foster Parents

When asked about their current relationships with their foster parents, 15 of the 18 participants reported having a positive relationship with at least one of their foster parents. Particularly the younger youth who lived with the same parents for several years reported feeling very close to their parents and felt that they would continue to be members of their foster family: “She is real nice lady and pretty much I got lucky to know her and become the foster care with her . . . my relationship with them and especially with (Mom’s name) became . . . like family forever.” Another youth who had re-established contact with his biological father in Sudan a few months before the interview indicated that he thought of his foster parents as his parents and did not foresee ever moving permanently to Sudan because that would mean leaving his parents and the place he considered home: “My relationship with my foster parent is pretty good; I kind of take them right now just like my parents because I never knew my parents Now I talk to my (biological) dad on the phone and I know him. I don’t remember what he looks like and still I haven’t gotten any chance for him to send me his picture Yeah I’m always going to be here . . . I’m going to be here because (Dad’s name) and (Mom’s name) are just like parents to me. I can’t move back home (Sudan) forever.” Other youth described relationships that seemed to be friendly rather than emotionally close, such as this youth: “I still talk with them . . . on holidays, like Thanksgiving and Christmas, we always get together. (See Table 2 for a summary of the findings

Table 2
Summary of the Findings Regarding Sudanese Unaccompanied Minors in Foster Care

Themes	Findings	No. of cases
No. of placements	One placement and maintained relationships with the foster parents	8
	One placement and did not maintain relationships with the foster parents	2
	Two placements	5
Youths’ description of relationship with foster parent while living together	Three placements	3
	Positive relationship with emphasis on instrumental support foster parents provided	10
	Close relationship focusing on both instrumental support and affective ties	13
Reasons for changing foster home	Not a positive relationship	6
	Perceived problem with the foster parents	8
	Left despite having a positive relationship with the foster parents; other issues	4
Youths’ report of current relationship with foster parents	Problems in the behavior of the youth	2
	Has a positive relationship with at least one foster parent	15
	Does not currently maintain a positive relationship with a foster parent	3

Note. $N = 18$.

regarding number of placements, relationships with foster parents, and reasons for transitions.)

Four of the youth had children of their own and noted that their foster parents were now involved as grandparents. This was especially true of the two women in the sample who relied on their foster mothers for child care assistance and parenting advice: "Now they help me with the baby; my mom, my [foster] sister; they take turns, like they come here every weekend, try to help me, and then I went to live with them when I, of course, had the baby." Similar to these new parents, many of the youth who had moved out on their own had developed a new appreciation for all that their foster parents had done for them when they lived together: "Actually it's lot better now when I am on my own because I kinda miss them and I appreciate the things they were doing for me and the things they were telling me before. I wish I would have listened to them at least some part of it. And now that I don't live with them, our relationship is very good, like you know, I just called mom for anything and I just tell her everything."

We determined whether those who changed homes had problems again in the new home or if they developed a better relationship. Seven of the eight youth who had lived in more than one home reported having a positive relationship with the last foster parent with whom they lived: "It's just real, real, real wonderful, you know. It's just, I connect finally better." Many of the early problems related to cultural differences were not much of an issue in the second or third home. The Sudanese had a better understanding of U.S. culture, and things that bothered them in the first home were tolerated in the second or third home: "We have no problem because we have been here (this home) for 4 years; we know what to expect; It's not like the first time we arrived at (first) home . . . everything is not new no more." In addition, they often found that they were more compatible with a new foster parent; the new foster parents were sometimes viewed as more flexible in their dealings with the youth, and the youth had no doubts that the new foster parents cared deeply for them. Once a positive relationship was established, the youth seemed more committed to working through disagreements. Moving beyond the teenage years also seemed to play a role. One youth who lived in three homes attributed the previous problems to being a teenager, "We were just going through a period when, you know, teens overreact." He was interviewed while he was home from college between semesters, and he was planning to spend time with all three of his foster mothers during the holiday season.

Discussion

In this paper, we examined the experiences of Sudanese refugee minors building and negotiating relations with their foster parents after arriving in the United States.

Overall, our findings based on interviews with 18 youth mirror the stages described by Sluzki (1979) in his classic model of immigrant family adaptation. After a very short initial period of happiness and stability, many youth and their parents went through a period of decompensation

marked by conflicts, misunderstandings, and other challenges that sometimes broke down the foster placement. Approximately half of our participants changed placements in foster families as a result of these struggles. The rate of breakdowns in the initial placements was similar to that reported for Southeast Asian refugee children who were placed in foster families after the Vietnam War (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988). However, by the time of our study, most youth described their relations with their foster parents as very positive, including relations with some previous foster parents with whom there had been relational strain during the time of placement.

It is important to note that relational difficulties are not just issues faced by immigrant or refugee children and their parents. In mainstream American families, on entering adolescence, many children experience some relational challenges with their parents (Fuligni, 1998). However, in immigrant and refugee foster families, additional challenges may exacerbate parent-child tensions at home. Consistent with the limited previous research with refugee children in foster care, our findings show that a host of factors including cultural differences and misunderstandings, difficulty accepting parental authority, and conflicts around autonomy and trust, contributed to relational strain between the Sudanese youth and their American foster parents.

Given the vast differences between the American and Sudanese culture, it is not surprising that these youth and their foster parents experienced struggles with cultural differences and misunderstandings (Brislin, 1993; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988). This was particularly striking in terms of their communication style (e.g., eye contact when talking to an adult). In addition, the Sudanese youth had lived for a decade or so independently in refugee camps with their peers. Moreover, the horrendous experiences they had prior to migration also contributed to their older experiential age and precocious sense of autonomy. Thus, the need to obey parents and accept parental authority in their new homes was challenging for many youth, particularly those who were older at the time of placement. Further, in contrast to biological immigrant parents and their children, additional barriers existed between the Sudanese youth and their American parents. For example, unlike other families, caseworkers were contacted to intervene in disputes between parents and children. It was not uncommon for some parents to talk to the caseworkers as a way of coping with problems they encountered at home with the Sudanese youth; in fact, it was encouraged by the resettlement agency to help resolve issues. The youth, however, viewed this as a breach of confidentiality and trust. Language barriers also made it difficult for the youth and the parents to communicate about problems and hurt feelings.

However, despite these challenges and struggles, at the time of our interviews seven years after resettlement, 15 of the 18 youth reported having a positive relationship with at least one of their foster parents. This again can be attributed to a number of factors. First, over time, the placements might have improved in terms of goodness of fit between parent and youth characteristics; with the first placement, the agency had no information about the youth, but had

enough information by the second placement to try to match youth with compatible foster parents. Moreover, two of the youth in our sample asked to move in with foster parents they already knew through other Sudanese youth already living in those homes. Second, the youths' acculturation played an important role in this process. As time went by, the youth developed a better understanding of the English language and American culture. This probably decreased cultural misunderstandings. Third, our findings suggested that the youths' maturation also contributed to their appreciation of their foster parents and their relationships over time. Moreover, for some of the youth there may have been an abatement of their mental health problems, such as PTSD and depressive symptoms. Finally, when the fighting in southern Sudan ended, many youth reestablished contact with their biological families, thus resolving the major stressor of ambiguous loss (Boss, 2006).

Compared to most immigrants, the Sudanese youth were fortunate in the sense of having the instrumental support of American parents who did not have to struggle with adaptation or acculturation stress as immigrant parents often have to. However, many of the common challenges existing in regular immigrant families also influenced the dynamics between Sudanese youth and their American parents, although through somewhat different mechanisms. For example, in intact immigrant families, children's acculturation to the U.S. culture and learning of English can create cultural and language barriers with parents that result in strained parent-child relations (Qin, 2006). In the case of the Sudanese youth, cultural conflicts and communication difficulties originated in their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds from their American parents and acculturation by the youth tended to contribute to fewer problems over time with American parents.

Our study has a number of limitations. No attempt was made to obtain a random sample of the youth; instead, we attempted to obtain a sample that was placed in diverse contexts, and that goal was achieved. Some of the youth who may have posed the greatest challenges for their foster parents were not interviewed for both ethical and practical reasons (e.g., a youth who suffered from hallucinations or was in prison). Second, our study relied on retrospective perspectives of the youth. At the time of our interviews, the youth were mostly in their twenties. There might have been some inaccuracies in their recollections of their experiences from 7 or 8 years ago. Third, some members of the research team had conducted research with the Sudanese youth and foster parents prior to this study, and prior knowledge about the group may have influenced the interview questions we asked or our interpretation of the data. However, in the process of research design and data analysis, members in the larger research team who had no prior involvement with the Sudanese youth in foster care (including two of the three coders) provided valuable feedback and fresh perspectives.

Despite these limitations, our study increases our understanding of the experiences of a unique group of immigrant youth and their negotiations of relations with their foster parents in a cross-cultural setting. In particular, research on immigrant families tends to underscore the relational chal-

lenges and difficulties parents and children face after migration (Foner, 1997). Much less research has focused on the resilience of immigrant and refugee families.

It is important for future research to continue examining the strength and resilience of immigrant and refugee children and their families. In the case of the Sudanese youth, it would be useful to study factors that contribute to positive adjustment as they form their own families and care for their children. It is also important to continue to study how to best support immigrants and refugees following the transition to their new homeland; we think this is especially true in the case of unaccompanied minors who have experienced trauma. As noted below, what is learned about best practice from one group can be applied to newer groups, such as the Burmese minors who have recently been resettled in the United States.

Implications for Practice

Our findings have several implications for the selection and preparation of foster parents, as well as for caseworker training. First, because research on immigrant and refugee youth has consistently documented the importance and beneficial effect of maintaining native culture and language in their adaptation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), every effort should be made to recruit foster parents from the same ethnic group as the youth and other individuals with experience in their culture of origin. Unaccompanied minors placed with foster parents from the same ethnic background were found to have lower rates of depression (Linowitz & Boothby, 1988); however, that was rarely an option in the case of the Sudanese given the small number of Sudanese families resettled in the area.

Because most foster parents have little familiarity with the youths' culture, training is particularly important in helping parents communicate better and develop realistic expectations about family relationships. Orientation to the importance of the group in collective cultures like those of Sudan might help parents be more understanding about issues such as telephone calls and sending remittances to others in Africa (Triandis et al., 1988).

Although the state mandates foster parent training, it focuses on young children in domestic foster care and has little relevance to the unique situation of fostering refugee children. Prior to the arrival of the Sudanese youth, the resettlement agency offered foster parents three to four special training sessions regarding the background of the youth. At the time the Sudanese youth were placed, the agency hired Sudanese caseworkers and conducted cultural trainings for parents, but much of the training was developed on an ad hoc basis as problems arose. All foster parents of refugee youth should be offered more specialized training that deals with the unique combination of factors affecting parent-child relationships—cultural differences, adolescence, and the effects of trauma. Based on their experiences with the Sudanese group, the resettlement agency has developed specialized training that is delivered in many different formats, including one-on-one meetings with parents who cannot make group meetings. In addition,

the agency has made mental health counseling a routine part of the resettlement process for all unaccompanied minors to reduce the stigma attached to counseling and to address issues that could strain relationships in the foster home.

Our findings also indicate that when things did not work well in certain families, change of placement, when thoughtfully done, might be beneficial for the youth. A change of foster family placement is usually perceived as a failure in the child welfare system; however, in a number of cases, a change of foster family placement resulted in more positive relationships for the Sudanese youth. The youth reported that they benefited from having supportive relationships with foster parents whether that happened in the first placement or the last placement.

Finally, caseworkers need additional training and reduced caseloads to strengthen their ability to support foster parents. Because most caseworkers working in this field are new graduates, their needs include both general and specialized training as well as strong supervision. Given the complex issues associated with these placements, additional investments in foster parent and caseworker training and support are likely to improve outcomes.

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