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Dialectic Tensions Experienced by Resettled Sudanese Refugees in Mediating Organizations

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An increasing number of global migrants are refugees who have fled religious, racial, ethnic, or other political persecution. As these refugee populations have grown, governmental and nonprofit organizations have emerged to help mediate the resettlement experience. The current study explores the dialectical tensions Sudanese refugees face in communicating with the organizations designed to make their resettlement successful. Six Sudanese refugees participated in semistructured interviews about their experiences communicating with mediating organizations. Four dialectical tensions emerged from participants' stories about their communication in and with mediating organizations: (a) dissemination and dialogue, (b) emancipation and control, (c) empowerment and oppression, and (d) integration and separation. Taken as a totality, these challenges both replicate and extend existing organizational empowerment research.

The United Nations defines refugees as persons who have crossed national borders due to a "well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (Convention, 1951, Article 1). While 14 million refugees met this definition in 2006 (Schweid, 2007), Lee (1996) argues that at least 25 million other migrants should be considered refugees as well (see also Myers, 1997; Pipher, 2002). As a result, refugee status is discursively constructed in the interaction among migrants, government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and host communities (Hardy, Phillips & Clegg, 2001; Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, & Turner-Baker, 2008; Phillips & Hardy, 1997).

However they are defined, the resettlement of such large numbers of refugees has generated a number of positive effects, including economic development for refugees and for host and native

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countries, improved security for refugees, and increased cultural diversity and tolerance (Global Commission on International Migration, 2005). Negative effects, however, include conflict between refugees and their host populations, exploitation of refugees, and violations of the human rights of refugees (Castles, 2000).

Because of such negative effects, a number of NGOs have developed to help mediate refugee resettlement (Huntoon, 2001). These organizations are critical to addressing refugee needs and ensuring a mutually beneficial resettlement process for refugees and their communities (Patrick, 2004). However, Ngai and Koehn (2005) argue that displaced persons present "special challenges" for the internal and external communication in these organizations because they are characterized by "extreme cultural diversity" (p. 226). This diversity, they argue, gives rise to communicative tensions that simultaneously allow for and inhibit the organization's mission to facilitate the refugee resettlement experience. Despite the significant role organizations play in mediating refugee resettlement, research has yet to explore the specific ways that communication may facilitate and/or hinder that mediation process. Thus, in this study, I seek to explore what specific communicative tensions, if any, refugees describe experiencing in organizations that function as mediating structures during the resettlement process.

According to Baxter (1998), dialectical theory focuses on the simultaneous existence of two apparently contradictory forces in a communication experience (e.g., certainty and uncertainty, openness and closedness) and examines the tensions that are created by the coexistence of such seemingly opposing forces. By applying such a "both/and" perspective to communicative experiences, dialectic theory helps us understand the complexity of experiences and relationships (Semlak, Pearson, Amundson, & Kudak, 2008).

In the present study, I will use dialectical theory to explore refugees' accounts of their organizational experiences to understand the communicative tensions refugees face in the organizations designed to make their resettlement successful.

Refugee Resettlement: Context and Communication

The Geographic Context

Formal refugee resettlement programs are carried out by 10 countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States (Mitrofanova, 2004). Of these countries, the U.S. accepts more than double the number of refugees than are accepted by the other nine countries combined (Singer & Wilson, 2007). As a result, more than 2.6 million official refugees have resettled in the U.S. since 1970 (Austein, 2007). The number of resettled refugees in the U.S. will continue to increase in the future, thus creating a need for this study.

The Social Context

Resettled refugees and the communities that serve them report facing three common sets of problems. First, refugees are more likely than are voluntary immigrants to arrive desperately in need of

medical care (see Burnett & Peel, 2001; Gavagan & Brodyaga, 1998; Pollick, Rice & Echenberg, 1987) and mental health care (see Eisenbruch, 1988). Second, once settled, refugees are also more likely than are voluntary immigrants to face difficult economic circumstances (Bollinger & Hagstrom, 2004) and to struggle to find and adjust to new types of employment (Stein, 1979). Finally, resettled refugees are regularly isolated by cultural and language differences with their host populations (Davidson et al., 2004).

Because of the problems refugees face, non-profit organizations routinely develop to help meet the needs of refugees (Huntoon, 2001). A vast literature exists detailing the challenges facing health organizations and healthcare professionals whose purpose it is to provide medical (e.g., Adams, Gardiner & Assefi, 2004; Downing, 1989) and mental health services (see Beiser, 1991; Silove, Steele & Watters, 2000) to refugee communities. Moreover, an important subset of these articles examines the healthcare challenges created by cultural and language differences inherent in the communication between medical professionals and refugees (see Bischoff et al., 2003; Conquergood, 1988).

The majority of non-healthcare refugee organizational studies address the role of nonprofit organizations in providing employment counseling and training (see Hohm, Sargent & Moser, 1999; Kramer, Nightingale, Trutko, Spaulding & Barnow, 2002) and helping refugees access social welfare services like food, clothing, or housing assistance (Lawrence & Hardy, 1999).

Overall, these studies of organizations that aid resettled refugees are primarily instrumental in focus — they focus on how to provide the most effective job training or medical care to refugees. However, very little research exists regarding the communication processes by which these organizations are negotiated, especially from the perspective of refugees. Thus, this study centers on the communicative tensions refugees experience in mediating organizations.

Mediating Organizations

Berger and Neuhaus (1977) defined mediating organizations as "those institutions standing between the individual in his private life and the large institutions of public life" (p. 158). Essentially, mediating structures connect people to institutions and cultures. Caragata (1999) argued that voluntary mediating organizations help individuals "experience defining a need, collectivizing it with attendant modifications and compromise, and through a collective process the need is met or problem resolved" (p. 280). These processes validate human competence and reinforce people as actors who have agency. Berger and Neuhaus (1996) refer to this as the empowering function of mediating organizations.

Voluntary agencies, formed by or for refugees, may operate as mediating structures for resettled refugee populations by seeking to directly influence state and marketplace policy to provide for refugees' needs (Patrick, 2004) and/or by providing space for refugees to organize to bring their unique cultural perspectives and experiences to a host culture (Mestheneos & Ioannidi, 2002; Wahlbeck, 1998). In both cases, organizations serving resettled refugees can empower them to act successfully in their new national homes.

Though intercultural communication has certainly examined the processes by which immigrants become acculturated into and enrich their new cultures (Roberts, 2007; Shuang & Louw, 2007; Vieira & Trindade, 2008), organizational communication has not developed the role that communication with and from organizations plays in mediating those processes. Thus, in this study, I seek to understand the particular communication tensions that arise in organizations that serve as mediating structures for refugees.

The Communication Context

The unique resettlement difficulties experienced by refugees "present special challenges for organizational communication" (Ngai & Koehn, 2005, p. 226). As Ngai and Koehn explain, refugee-serving organizations are often characterized by "extreme cultural diversity" (p. 226) due to both the numbers of cultures drawn into contact in the organization and to the cultural distance that often separates refugees and their host country. In these settings characterized by difference, "intercultural communication constitutes the organizing process that permeates all levels of activity and interpretation" (Stohl, 1993, p. 381). Working productively with difference is critical for the successful functioning of organizations in refugee resettlement contexts. The result of such differences, however, is a heightened "potential for miscommunication" (Cargile & Giles, 1996, p. 385) that may prevent the organization from effectively completing its humanitarian mission, or worse, might exacerbate the physical, mental, and social problems the refugees already experience.

Despite the very real communication challenges faced both by refugees and by the organizations that serve them, very little organizational communication research has attempted to understand, from the perspective of refugees, the communicative tensions that exist in the organizations designed to help them. Thus, in this study, refugees are asked specifically about the role communication plays and the tensions it evokes in their organizational experiences.

Dialectic Theory

In this study, I adopt dialectical theory (Bakhtin, 1935/2004; Baxter, 1998) to more fully explore the communicative tensions experienced by refugees in organizations that function as mediating structures during the resettlement process. In interpretive work, theory is not used to derive testable hypotheses but rather to assist the researcher in ''thinking in advance about potentially relevant concepts'' (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 69). Though the concept of dialectics has been defined in various ways, four elements are central to most of the conceptualizations: (a) contradiction, (b) motion, (c) totality, and (d) praxis (Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2006, p. 43). First, *contradiction* refers to the coexistence of oppositional forces in a communicative relationship. For instance, openness and closedness are opposing forces, but both may exist in a communicative relationship. Second, *motion* presumes that people are not fixed on a continuum (e.g., between openness and closedness) but instead shift between the poles through communication over time. Third, *totality* refers to the "constant interconnection and reciprocal influence of multiple individual, interpersonal, and social factors" (Rawlins, 1992, p. 7). This means that multiple dialectics may be operating at once, influencing one another. Finally, *praxis* assumes that each communicator is influenced by and influences the communicative environment. Taken together,

contradiction, motion, totality, and praxis provide a dialectic perspective for understanding the ways in which seemingly contradictory messages may coexist, generating communicative tensions that persist in relationships. Thus, I will use this theory to guide my work in the present study to help understand some of the communication tensions and persistent contradictions created by communication in organizations that serve as mediating structures in culturally diverse contexts.

Consequently, the research question that guided this present study is grounded in dialectic theory:

RQ: What dialectical tensions do refugees experience in organizations that function as mediating structures during their resettlement process?

Method

While a postpositive approach to research is typically grounded in a belief in a single, knowable reality, interpretive research is grounded in the belief that individuals each experience and interpret their reality in unique ways (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). As a result, interpretive researchers seek to examine specific experiences or contexts deeply to more fully understand the meaning that the participants hold about an issue (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In the current project, I adopt an interpretive framework as I seek to understand how refugees describe and interpret their experiences communicating in and with organizations that mediate their transitions into resettlement communities. Whereas this research is not generalizable to all refugee experiences, it allows us to gain a deeper appreciation of some of the communicative tensions experienced by refugees in mediating organizations.

Participants

For this study, extensive semistructured interviews were conducted with Sudanese refugees who have resettled in the U.S. To participate, refugee participants had to meet three criteria. First, the participant had to self-identify as a refugee. I allowed individuals to self-identify due to the practical difficulty of requiring proof of refugee status from my interviewees. Moreover, based on the information available on their Web sites, most of the organizations that serve refugees allow them to identify themselves as such. As a result, self-identification seemed like an appropriate way to access the same population that would be participating in organizations designed to mediate refugee resettlement. Second, refugee participants had to be at least 19 years of age (as required by my university's Institutional Review Board). Finally, they had to be resettled in the U.S.

Refugee participants were a very difficult group to recruit for two reasons. First, many potential refugee participants were, given their life histories, understandably apprehensive to answer questions about their personal lives. Though I assured their anonymity, many potential participants were uncomfortable discussing their experiences with someone who works for a state university (and is thus technically a government employee). Second, a significant subset of potential refugee participants were not comfortable completing the interviews in English, and limited resources prevented me from hiring translators. Therefore, I sought out participants using a convenience/snowball sampling technique, where I asked local social service agencies to provide details about my study and my contact information to

refugees whom they believed might be interested in my study. I also then asked participants if they knew anyone who would like to participate in the study.

I was able to locate and complete in-depth interviews with five refugee participants — two women and three men — from a Midwestern city in the U.S. The average age of the participants was approximately 45 (the age is approximate because my refugee participants were more comfortable disclosing age ranges rather than specific ages). By happenstance, all five respondents were refugees from Sudan. Though this cultural uniformity was not intended, it actually provided me a unique opportunity to hear different perspectives on refugee interactions with the same agencies, including national (Sudanese) and regional (African) cultural centers.

Procedures

A semistructured interview protocol was designed to elicit rich descriptions of the communication experienced by refugees in a variety of mediating organizations. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about what organizations refugee participants interact with, the forms and content of communication in these organizational contexts, and their perceptions of the communication's role in mediating their resettlement experience in both positive and negative ways. All of my interviews were conducted in English.

The experiences of refugees in their organizational interactions were gathered through individual semistructured interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Semistructured interviews begin with the interview protocol, but allow the author flexibility to follow up on interesting ideas. They also allow the participant to shape the conversation as that person believes is most important (Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Thus, using the protocol as a guide for discussion, the author conducted individual interviews that were tape recorded. Once collected, the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I answered the research question by following the six-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, I engaged in a repeated close reading of the transcripts to gain a greater understanding of what they contain. Second, I coded interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion, paying particular attention to examples of contradiction, motion, totality, and praxis. Third, I collated coded data into potential tensions or themes. Previous researchers have identified a number of common dialectical tensions (e.g., between connectedness and separateness or certainty and uncertainty (see Baxter, 1998). In this stage, I checked to determine whether the coded data appeared to fit one or more of these pre-existing themes. Fourth, I checked to ensure that all of the potential themes were consistent with the data in the coded extracts. Fifth, I defined the themes, and finally, I selected vivid, compelling extracts from the data to represent each theme.

I verified my findings using two procedures outlined by Lindlof and Taylor (2002). First, I participated in a one-hour interactive data conference with 12 other researchers trained in interpretive methodology and dialectical theory to ensure that they believed my themes were clearly named, defined, and consistent with the data. Second, I confirmed my findings in a member check with one of my

interview respondents to ensure that my results resonated with that person's experiences of communicating in these organizational contexts.

Results

Four dialectical tensions emerged from participants' stories about their communication in and with mediating organizations: (a) dissemination and dialogue, (b) emancipation and control, (c) empowerment and oppression, and (d) integration and separation. These four dialectical tensions both facilitated and simultaneously complicated the communicative relationship between refugees and organizational workers, volunteers, and participants. I will discuss each in turn, although this sequential presentation masks their interdependence. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) have discussed, dialectical struggles form an interdependent cluster in which each contradiction overlaps with other related contradictions.

Tensions of Dissemination and Dialogue

Initially, the refugee participants in my study all described a tension between their desire to rely on information communicated from/by the organizations to survive in their new surroundings and their desire to share their own perspectives and experiences so that these organizations did not misdirect them. Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) describe this as a dialectical tension between dissemination and dialogue. According to them, groups often "rely on outside, expert-disseminated information to guide their empowerment" (p. 57). However, groups may simultaneously participate in empowering activities by "sharing . . . information, ideas, stories and experiences" of their own (p. 57).

The refugee participants consistently described relying on communication disseminated from mediating organizations to teach them how to live in the U.S. For instance, Della described arriving in the U. S. during the winter:

> The place was very cold when we came. We came in the 20th, December 20th, so it has, um, become cold and this we don't know. So, there is a lady that worked there that helped me, like, you need to buy some under your clothes from, you need to wear like certain shoes. If you didn't use that, you can fell down. Of course, I fell down in the, really, fell down when we come here. So, this, the thing is, it is look like what people are very helpful. And I cannot ask anyone, like, I didn't know there are even some clothes you can wear inside, because we never wore pants back in our country. So, I really appreciate her help. Not for me, but for my kids. Like, there is some lotion you need to use or,we just used oil in my country. Like the oil you cook with, you can apply on your body. We don't have, like, oil for the body [laughs] because, I don't know, we were not rich in my country. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 3)

Della clearly explains that she and her family relied on various mediating organizations to disseminate needed information about living in the U. S. to her family. Curtis, who arrived in the U.S. as a teenager,

repeated this theme of relying on disseminated information due to cultural differences. Curtis notes this in discussing one of the organizations that helped him resettle:

> There were some real younger age, probably about college age students, that would talk to me about how school was like here, because it is totally different. Like the schooling is different, you know. Like the way students behave in class or after class is totally different. Or your professors or teachers are totally different. So, they would, you know, tell us how it is like, how you can handle something that is total out of your comfort zone. Or, yeah, how you can make friends. Yeah. So that was really helpful. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Curtis, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 4)

Curtis echoes Della's sentiments that, given the cultural and material differences between the U.S. and Sudan, refugee families often relied on disseminated information from the organizations to facilitate their transition.

Beyond simply providing information for everyday living, Della emphasized that mediating organizations also need to be aware that their role in disseminating information is critical to ensure the physical safety of refugees:

> So, they need to make sure there's someone there can help them. Not let them take a shower with the soap for clothing. We took a shower with the soap that we use for clothing and our skin became very, very dry. . . . Make sure we are safe. We cannot use Clorox and ammonia together. I'm happy because I was a science teacher, I know this. If people put together, they make a poison. And I see a lot of people from my community doing this kind of thing together. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, pp. 5–6)

Thus, for the safety of their families, many refugees turned to information disseminated by the organizations mediating their resettlement.

Some refugees so deeply appreciated the role of the agencies in disseminating critical information to them that they volunteered their time at the agencies to help other newly arrived refugees. Ben described his volunteer positions with two different agencies:

> I was helping her [at the first agency] welcome new families at the airports, like what I am doing now with [Church] Family, and yeah, so many things like how to make up the beds, and how to prepare houses for them and when they come we take them to places where they can get their food stamps and so on. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Ben, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 2)

Curtis, like Ben, also described volunteering as a translator with the organizations that had helped him. Moreover, Della works for a nonprofit cultural center that also helps disseminate information to new

refugees. The refugee participants in this study clearly relied on and wish to further the dissemination function of communication in these mediating organizations.

While dissemination of information necessary to live safely in the U.S. was highly sought, the refugee participants simultaneously expressed a desire not to simply be recipients of this information; they expressed a need to engage dialogically with organizational workers, so that the workers could adjust to the refugees' unique perspectives and experiences. For instance, when Alana was asked what she might change about her experiences with one mediating organization, she responded, "Just that they need to listen" (Interview with Sudanese refugee Alana, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 3). The sense of frustration that the organizations were not listening was a common theme among respondents. Curtis described growing upset while explaining his need for medical insurance to an organization that he felt would not listen to his perspective:

> So, that's really frustrating 'cause, you know, whatever organization it is, there have to be, like, there has to be some real, there has to be some real good communication, or communication skill is one big thing and you have to be a good listener. So, if you don't do both, you know, it's going to ruin your career. Because if you can't listen to your audience, that's, or your clients, you're not going to be able to help them. So, that's one of the things I've seen that, you know, some organizations are not doing. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Curtis, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 6)

Whereas Curtis appreciates the skill necessary to disseminate information (what he calls good communication), he simultaneously recognizes that the dissemination must be based on a dialogue designed to understand the positions of those being helped. Della furthers that view by emphasizing that organizational communicators must actively learn the culture of their participants in order to disseminate information effectively:

> Especially for human services or, and the people who interact with people for the first time. They need to make sure that people who communicate with, or trying, they at least know the culture or the language. So they can help them move along easily. Because it's very hard for, people don't know how the situation you are in when you came from there and you come here. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, pp. 5–6)

In short, participants valued communication disseminated from the organizations mediating their resettlement, but wanted the dissemination to simultaneously emerge from a dialogue in which refugees could share their unique experiences and perspectives.

Tensions of Emancipation and Control

Whereas the first dialectic between dissemination and dialogue relates to how the communicative relationships are structured in terms of information sharing, the next two tensions described by refugee participants in this study relate to how the communication with the organizations impacted their lives.

They described a tension that emerged because the communication from and with mediating organizations helped them gain economic emancipation and self-sufficiency while simultaneously forcing them to participate in rigid, controlling organizational systems. Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) describe this as a dialectical tension between emancipation and control. They explain that the communicative processes of facilitating emancipation often "require the disempowered to embed their actions in some control system that guides them to move from dependence to self sufficiency" (p. 56).

Initially, the refugee participants, who often described arriving in the U.S. with limited economic means, stressed that economic and social emancipation was one of the primary positive outcomes of communicating with the mediating organizations. Several of the respondents reported relying on communication with and from mediating organizations to help them fulfill immediate material needs. Alana explains that, through her communication with one of the nonprofit refugee resettlement agencies, "They helped us find a house and they helped us to get food and things for the house" (Interview with Sudanese refugee Alana, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 2). Alana was not the only refugee participant who expressed gratitude to the organizations for providing refugees with initial material belongings. Edward similarly explained, "I interacted with [Agency], which assisted me temporarily with the basic needs for the first two months before I got a job" (Interview with Sudanese refugee Edward, Midwestern U.S., November 2008, p. 1). Certainly, mediating organizations perform an important material function in the days following resettlement.

However, the refugee participants described how the mediating organizations did more than simply provide a material function, as these organizations also communicated to help refugees obtain the materials basic for survival:

> It was [Religious] Charities that helped us you know, there were people who work with them who helped us go to appointments, go shopping to the store, and maybe go to some of the, like when there's clothes distribution, at church. So, they would take us there if we see something that we like we'd grab it and bring it home. So, that was really helpful. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Curtis, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 4)

Curtis described being thankful not just for being given food or clothes but for also learning how to go to the store, how to go to appointments, and how to perform other necessary tasks. The communication functioned then not simply to provide for immediate physical needs but also to help refugees develop their own path to economic emancipation.

Similarly, some of the refugee participants in this study described how communication from and with the mediating organizations helped refugees gain emancipation by helping them to gain English language skills. Curtis explains, "And, uh, they've helped Sudanese class, North. It's like a Neur [Sudanese language] class. And then, there's like Sudanese women teaching ELL [English Language Learners Class] and helping them learn. Yeah. So, that's really a good help" (Interview with Sudanese refugee Curtis, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 1).

The English language skills taught through communication with organizational employees and with volunteers were specifically described as helpful in obtaining employment in the U.S. As Della explains,

> So, [Religious] Service took me to the electric company [Name], and they have some testing in English, application in English you need to fill out in that way. So, the person who took me, he helped me a lot with that, so I got a job. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 2)

Thus, communication with and from the mediating organizations functioned to emancipate refugees by helping them find work and fulfill their material and economic needs.

While the refugees described being grateful for the helpful communication, they simultaneously described being frustrated with the controlling ways in which the help was provided. Alana summarizes this frustration by saying, "Human Services does not understand what I need. They have rules and they follow them without understanding the situation" (Interview with Sudanese refugee Alana, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 2). When asked to provide an example of one communicative encounter in which she felt that Human Services was communicating in a particularly unhelpful way, Alana elaborates:

> As far as their requirements to find a job, they keep saying I have to find a better job or they are going to take away the money they give us – for housing, for food. They think it is so easy. I have a number of children at home and I have to be able to take care of them. This means that I have to work a third shift job or I have to find a babysitter to care for them while I work during the day. Babysitters are expensive. Working all night doesn't allow me to spend time with the children. The economy is not very good either which makes finding a job hard. Right now I work as a babysitter for the [City] Housing Authority, which allows me to be home with my children sometimes, but I still cannot be there when I need to be and the job does not offer me enough hours, so Human Services says I must find a job or benefits could be removed. . . . They don't understand that I cannot just find a job anywhere when I have children at home. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Alana, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, pp. 2–3)

Presumably, the agency believed that their communications encouraging Alana to find a job would help her to gain economic self-sufficiency, but Alana felt that the system produced overly threatening and controlling communication.

Other refugees described the communication designed to empower them as being so controlling as to hamper attempts at economic self-sufficiency. Della explained,

> For two months, I'm really suffering about where to find food . . . Because she [the organizational worker] asked me to bring, like, pay stubs, so I take, like, only one because I get the same check, like every two weeks I get the same check. I think the one is enough. So, she didn't tell me you have to bring, like, for the whole three

> months. She just said for my understanding, one is enough, because I get the same
> hours and the same – she didn't tell me that. She said, 'Okay, we cut the food stamp
> because she didn't offer all the requirements for the paper.' (Interview with Sudanese
> refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 4)

In this situation, Della felt that the organizational process designed to help her apply for food stamps had such inflexible rules that when she misunderstood the worker's request to bring her pay stubs, the worker actually took away Della's ability to provide food for her family.

Finally, refugee participants described being discouraged by the ways in which communication from mediating organizations was controlled rather than open to all. Curtis explains that, after filling out his citizenship application, he went to visit a nonprofit organization that helped a refugee friend file the paperwork:

> So, I went there and the guy that I, you know, I was referred to didn't help me much.
> He told me straightforward, 'You're not my client, I can't help you' . . . I'm like 'Come
> on,' you know, 'you're here to help. So, all I need is you can, you know, send it to those
> people because I already fill it out. All you can do is go through it, look at it, if I'm
> missing something show me this is, this part should be there, yeah.' So, it's, like, 'Well,
> I can't, I can't help.' (Interview with Sudanese refugee Curtis, Midwestern U.S., October
> 2008, p. 5)

Thus, participants valued communication with and from the organizations mediating their resettlement that helped them to gain economic emancipation, but felt that the rigid structures designed to help them often generated controlling, threatening, or unresponsive communication instead. As a result, the communication processes designed to facilitate emancipation exist in tension with requirements that compel the refugees to embed their actions in a system of control.

Tensions of Empowerment and Oppression

Refugees described a third dialectic — similar to the second between economic emancipation and bureaucratic control — in which the communication from and with mediating organizations exposed them to new rights, but also opened them up to abuses, both from organizational members and from others in the community. Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) called this a dialectical tension between empowerment and oppression, saying, "A plan that seems to have the potential to empower actually backfires and a person becomes further oppressed" (p. 57).

In terms of empowerment, Ben vividly described the way that organizations help women understand that they may have greater rights in the U.S. than they had in their home countries:

> Yes, there is something else, which is women. You know women, um, the first thing any
> woman who comes from Africa, that comes from, I'll give you an example, from
> Vietnam, they believe that the husband is everything. So, he thinks for them, brings

money, brings everything, the husband is everything. The wife at home is just to look after the house and so on. And beyond that, this is something she does not do. [In the U.S.], the woman goes out to work and gets a job somewhere. . . . This is a change in their lives . . . the organizations has to take out some of the thoughts, some of the ideas since they are there and are coming here. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Ben, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, pp. 4–5)

Ben elaborates further, noting that organizations have to communicate social and work-related customs to both women and men to help them function in their new lives.

Beyond communicating social and economic rights to women, Della described a situation in which a predatory company attempted to defraud her of her hard-earned money. She explains that she relied on a mediating organization to help protect her rights as a consumer:

I had trouble with the, they call me on the phone, I think. Some company offered me, like, 'We're going to give you free minutes' to talk to, like, your country. So, I don't know that because I don't know that there is cards you can buy. And I say, 'Okay.' And I call because my husband was in Kenya at that time. So, I talk with him maybe ten minutes and then the line is cut off. So, after one week, I get a bill that is maybe three hundred. So, I took this bill to [City] Action Program and a guy from Sudan was there. He called them. 'Stop your service. We don't know this service.' Because, some companies take advantage of refugees who come to the United States. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 3)

As she spoke, Della explained that this organization helped her to understand how to respond to companies which might take advantage of her as a refugee in the United States.

Moreover, just as some agencies helped refugees avoid predatory businesses other refugees also described being exposed to new powers of and opportunities for consumption. Edward explained that the agencies he worked with helped him to see "[America is a] 'land of milk and honey'. . . and filled with luxuries" (Interview with Sudanese refugee Edward, Midwestern U.S., November 2008, p. 1). Ben and Della both similarly commented on the role of organizations in helping them to not only gain economic emancipation but also to further empower them to act as purchasers and consumers in the U.S.

Despite these new social and economic rights, the same discourses that generated empowerment for refugees often also allowed refugees to be oppressed. Ben explained that the liberation of women from traditional family structures often generated significant family conflict:

But, other women thought it in a wrong way. They thought that it was a freedom to play. And you are a wife; it is time for you to get free from your husband. When you comes [sic] to the United States, she gets a job. She keeps her checks for herself. She doesn't pay for anything in the house . . . and then problems will appear. So, many of the refugee families, there's catastrophe. Why? Because the father is not living at home

with his children. Why? Because of such small problems (Interview with Sudanese refugee Ben, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 5)

Ben also believed that "some education must be done through these organizations" (Interview with Sudanese refugee Curtis, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 5) as to how to handle the newfound freedoms in the U.S. in a more productive way.

Additionally, Edward described how the newfound sense that refugees are empowered to act as purchasers and consumers could actually become frighteningly oppressive when they realized that they did not have the disposable income necessary to adopt the American standard of living:

> Many of us are in danger of losing hope, the solution of which is resorting to street lives of stress, hopelessness, and despair. We have merely been dropped here to envy these luxuries just like opening the eyes of a man born blind without giving him directives. . . . Many refugees have either committed suicide or have become homeless, including me, not because of our own choosing but because nobody has helped us adopt to the normal American culture and the standards of living. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Edward, Midwestern U.S., November 2008, pp. 2–3)

Thus, Edward believed that organizations can be oppressive by claiming that individuals are empowered to consume without any accompanying information about how to achieve those opportunities. Throughout his interview, Edward repeatedly noted that he felt like the capitalistic rights and opportunities promised him in his new American home never materialized.

Finally, Della reported that relying on one organizational worker directly led to an oppressive situation. Della explains that her caseworker in one organization attempted to sexually assault her and her daughter:

> I don't know how to say this, one of their worker[s], he is not really good, good man. . . I was confused, really, at that time. So, after a while, but I know something was wrong. Like, [he] try to touch me or try to take my daughter. Only [he] said, 'Oh, yeah, I'll take your kids to the movies' and when he came he said, 'No, I need to take your little only.' She's about 15 years at that time. And I say 'No, you need to take them, take all of them,' because I have six boys and one girl. At that time I had five boys and my daughter. So I really feel bad about that. I didn't know. I think this is the way that American people are. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 1)

Though she later describes realizing that this was not normal behavior for Americans, she felt as if her reliance on communication with her caseworker to help her understand her new American home allowed him the space to use his communication with her in an oppressive way.

Refugee participants then valued communication with and from the organizations mediating their resettlement that helped empower them by describing their rights, privileges, and opportunities in the U.S. At the same time, unfortunately, they also experienced tensions between that empowerment and the ways that the communication may have actually facilitated greater restrictions on power and rights.

Tensions of Integration and Separation

Confirming the presence of our fourth dialectic, refugees explained that communication from and with the organizations helped them connect with non-refugee Americans and build community. Simultaneously, however, refugees managed to maintain separation or uniqueness from non-refugee Americans. Baxter (1993) posed this tension as a relational dialectic of integration and separation. She explains that when people are in a relationship, they experience tensions between simultaneously wanting to be connected to and separated from one another.

First, the refugees often mentioned communication in and with the organizations as playing an important role in helping them build relationships with non-refugee Americans. For instance, Ben explained,

> it is often now that refugees can or that the new citizens can form something and this is helped by the organizations that I've seen here. For example, there is an African Center, where they can do their activities there, and one of their members, who is a lady called [Name], and we invite the Americans to come and to enjoy this traditions and these . . . and also there is an Asian center. So, this will let them try to involve themselves to melt into this community. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Ben, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 3)

In this way the cultural centers served as a connection point between refugees and non-refugee Americans, allowing communication about traditions and cultures to be shared in a way that facilitated community development.

Four of the five refugee participants mentioned faith-based community organizations as playing a role in developing their sense of community in America. For example, Ben described his experiences:

> I took my family and we went to an American church where everything is in English and we do worship with them in that church, and we visit them in their houses, and they come to my house to learn something about me and I learn more from how they behave in their houses, how they stay, how Americans stay in their houses and so on. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Ben, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 3)

Alana similarly explained that the church she attended was "set up to help church people, other church people who belong there," regardless of their national origin (Interview with Sudanese refugee Alana, Midwestern U.S., September 2008, p. 3). Thus, religious organizations also helped integrate refugees into their American communities.

Della also described how one organization helped her to integrate more successfully into her workplace by explaining to her why it might be best for her to wear a smaller Islamic head scarf at work than she might normally wear at home. Della explained,

> But, at the same time, I need to know that [in] some companies the use [of my scarf] is dangerous for you because of the machine. The machine may be caught in it. So, kind of, I don't know, you need to look at both sides and tell them, like, if you are in job, do something small. . . . So, I think that people who find a job, or [a] newcomer need[s] to know the culture of the country, to give them some advice. 'If you need to work in this company, you need to do something different than [wear a] scarf.' And offer the people help with the company. I don't know, they need to find some way to help. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October, 2008, pp. 6–7)

Though she was unwilling to give up wearing her scarf altogether in order to integrate, Della was grateful to the organization for helping her understand why a compromise to wear a smaller scarf at work would help her integrate, to some degree, into the "culture of the country," particularly in the working environment.

Refugee participants then described how communication from and with the mediating organizations sometimes prompted them to maintain a degree of separation from those organizations. For example, Curtis described getting angry after being the target of insensitive comments and questions from some organizational members:

> One of the guys, yeah, walked up to me and it['s], like, "Yeah, what really nasty food have you ever eaten when you were back at home?" I was, like, "Dude, can we change conversations a little bit, you know, talk about something interesting? Because what you've seen on TV is probably not what we're going to talk about. And, it's probably not realistic." And, then they change conversation. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Curtis, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 3)

In this situation, the insensitive question caused Curtis to force a separation between himself and the other individual by refusing to talk about his home life. By changing the conversation, Curtis communicatively maintains some separation. Similarly, despite hearing from some organizations that she would be more employable if she would simply remove her head scarf, Della explained:

> I don't know, they just need to understand the people's culture. Because, I don't know, I feel, I feel like I have miscommunication with this culture. . . . So, a lot of people say that if you need to have a job, when you go there, just take off your scarf. I don't feel comfortable taking off the scarf. I can take it off in front of you [the female interviewer] easily because you are [a] woman. But, when you go to work, where there're men there, you [are] going to use it. (Interview with Sudanese refugee Della, Midwestern U.S., October 2008, p. 6)

The comments of Curtis and Della illustrate that, while communication from and with the organizations did help them to integrate into a new culture, it also simultaneously prompted refugees to seek to maintain separation between themselves and that new culture.

As a result, participants valued communication from and with organizations that helped them integrate into their new communities, but they simultaneously protected their right to keep separate their unique ethnic or religious identities.

Discussion

First, four dialectical tensions emerged from participants' stories about their communication from and with mediating organizations: (a) dissemination and dialogue, (b) emancipation and control, (c) empowerment and oppression, and (d) integration and separation. Taken as a totality, these challenges both replicate and extend existing organizational empowerment research.

Three of these four tensions mirrored tensions found by Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) in social change organizations as they attempted to empower disenfranchised communities and generate social change in places with great income inequality. This makes sense because both sets of organizations are working to provide empowerment and self-sufficiency through communication to a non-dominant segment of society. However, one important difference between the Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) typology and this study arose. The three authors found a fourth dialectical tension — fragmentation and unity — that deals with organizations' abilities to link together disempowered groups. However, there is no evidence in this study's interviews to indicate that mediating organizations were trying to help link together either various refugee groups with one another, or refugees with other disempowered groups. Instead, refugees spoke of experiencing a relational tension between using communication with mediating organizations to integrate with American society and to simultaneously remain separate from it. It is possible that the communicative tensions between integration/separation are more pronounced in this intercultural communication situation than they are in organizations in which those who empower and those being empowered are of the same cultural background. These results suggest that mediating organizations share some dialectical challenges in common with social change organizations, yet they are also potentially unique in their experiences of cultural integration and separation.

Next, in this study, I present an initial picture of the types of communicative tensions that Ngai and Koehn (2005) posit will plague refugee organizations, thus providing empirical evidence for their arguments. Throughout the interviews, the refugee participants continually emphasized both their reliance on mediating organizations to facilitate their resettlement process and their frustration when organizational communication complicated that process. First, the tension between dissemination and dialogue dilutes the mediating organization's assumed expertise in the refugee resettlement process. Though these organizations are often positioned as expert on the culture in which they mediate (and refugees expect authoritative descriptions of "how things work here"), refugees simultaneously feel that they are not given credence for being experts on how American customs and cultures play out in their day-to-day lives. Thus, the question of expertise will continue to play a complicating role in refugee

organizations. Additionally, the dialectical tensions between both emancipation and control and empowerment and oppression demonstrate that systems designed to create economic self-sufficiency or to provide rights often have unintended negative consequences. Thus, the role of bureaucratic structures and rules will need to be problematized in refugee organizations to develop true emancipation and empowerment. Finally, the dialectical tension between integration and separation is similar to Baxter's (1993) description of interpersonal relationships, in which individuals in a relationship have to negotiate the degree to which they want to be integrated into a relationship and still maintain their separate identities. As refugees resettle, their acculturation will largely be defined by a series of interpersonal negotiations between integration and separation. This means that organizational scholars might turn to interpersonal dialectical research to help generate new perspectives on community building in resettlement communities.

Certainly, this study points to important directions for future research. Due to the difficulty of recruiting refugee participants, the sample for this study was quite small and homogenous. Nevertheless, I believe it provides an important access point into the communicative tensions refugees might experience in mediating organizations. Future researchers should focus on expanding the sample size with the objective of gaining regional and ethnic diversity in elaborating upon the dialectical tensions refugees experience in mediating organizations.

Finally, future researchers should focus on identifying the strategies used by both refugees and by organizational workers to manage these communicative tensions to generate practical prescriptions for improving the mediation process for the growing number of refugees worldwide. By continuing scholarship along these lines, researchers should be better able to understand accounts of the communicative tensions that both refugees and organizational workers face during the resettlement process. The more that can be learned about these communicative tensions and the strategies used to manage them, the more likely it is that the refugee resettlement process will benefit refugees, the nonprofit organizational members who interact with them, and the host communities.

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