

Cultural Representations of Identity, Trauma, and Transnationalism among Dinka Refugees: Implications for Conflict Analysis and Resolution

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Abstract

This research, situated in a conflict, social construction, and social ecological theoretical framework, employed ethnographic semistructured interviews with 10 Dinka refugees to document social constructions of identity, trauma, and transnationalism, three influential variables in understanding conflict perceptions within this specific group. Findings and implications include the impact on cognitive structural features such as frames, beliefs, scripts, rules, and problem appraisals which allow for a deeper understanding of the construction and interpretation of interpersonal conflict analysis and resolution.

Keywords: Transnationalism, Conflict resolution, Dinka, Ethnographic interviews, Qualitative research, Refugees

We have the memory of yesterday. We have the reality of today and we hold the hope of tomorrow." Sudanese Dinka Elder, Jacksonville, Florida

Conflict analysis and communication professionals, including mediators, negotiators, peacekeepers, and mental health therapists, are in a distinctive role to assist eastern cultures through conflict analysis, resolution, and transformation approaches. Due to migration, protracted civil wars, and the increasing search by political refugees for safety outside of their country of origin, there is a rising necessity for the development of these unique cross-cultural techniques. Although culture frequently binds these groups through a shared history of trauma, family, and identity, culture is also considered dynamic and is significantly affected by the influence of the social constructions and contexts in which it exists. Moreover, culture and the verbal and non-verbal expression of conflict are deeply interconnected, further establishing an important role for innovative research in understanding the various approaches and realities among refugee groups who have resettled in the United States.

One of the more recurrent cross-cultural misunderstandings occurs between Africans and Americans with regard to communicating the meaning and expression of conflict. In addition to the differences between these collectivistic and individualistic cultures, there are also dramatic disparities in shared patterns and themes of communication, underlying beliefs, and traditional philosophies of life that serve to ultimately shape identity and ethnicity. Chung and Ting-Toomey (1999) explained that ethnic identity is frequently molded by the norms of the socialization process, creating diverse experiences and changes in communicative expression over a lifetime. Traumatic social events such as forced displacement and genocide throughout the history of Africa are among only a few of the issues which have impacted the development of various ethnic identities (Deng, 1995). For African political refugees, particularly the Sudanese Dinka resettling in the United States, these prior experiences as well as their transnational family status have undoubtedly been integral in creating their multiple perceptions and realities of conflict within the context of a new place and time.

Due to the presence of three government approved refugee resettlement agencies in the area, a few hundred Sudanese from several tribal groups began to resettle in 2001 in the Northeast Florida region, specifically Jacksonville (Hecht, 2005). At present, it is estimated that approximately 700 to 800 Sudanese refugees reside in Jacksonville, Florida. As a highly collectivistic culture, the norms, values, and the experience of trauma, have frequently shaped how Dinka tribal members communicate and approach conflict situations on a multitude of levels. The significant presence of this unique African community, the close physical proximity to Jacksonville, and the opportunity to learn about conflict from the Dinka perspective provided clear justification for conducting this original and important research.

1. Conceptual Framework and Review of the Literature

This research utilized three major frameworks to situate this research: conflict theory, social constructionist, and social ecology. These theories were integral in understanding and examining perceptions of identity, trauma, and transnationalism among the Sudanese Dinka refugees in Jacksonville, Florida. First and foremost, conflict theory was vital in this work. Collins (1975), with his roots in phenomenology and ethnomethodology, viewed Marxian theory as solely the starting point for a more integrative conflict theory. Collins argued that while many conflict theorists believed that social structures are external to, and coercive of, the actor, he was more inclined to see social structures as inseparable from the actors who construct them and whose interactions are their essence. In addition, Collins viewed the actor as constantly creating and re-creating social structures which resulted in interaction patterns.

Culture creates an additional layer of complexity in the study of conflict due to the differences in historical, political, and spiritual factors. The majority of research on intercultural and cross-cultural conflict behavior has utilized Western/individualistic styles in an etic manner (Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Gabrielidis, Stephen, Ybarra, Dos Santos Pearson & Villareal, 1997; Oetzel et al., 2001; Ohbuchi, Fukushima, & Tedeschi, 1999). However, Oetzel et al. (2006) argued that the use of the emic perspective is crucial to incorporate non-western perspectives for more effective resolution approaches. These authors (2006) further emphasized the identification of specific symbols and cultural attitudes that have been shaped by the variables of history, particularly if this involved violence, in order to move toward constructive conflict resolution.

The goal of this research was to examine the role and influence of identity, trauma, and transnational family status as mitigating variables in conflict among the Sudanese Dinka community. Sudanese Dinka refugees have typically experienced varying levels of significant trauma which have served to separate family members throughout the world and this has clearly impacted the social construction of identity upon entry into the United States. It was therefore essential to comprehensively examine these three factors from the lens or frame of the Dinka refugee with the use of ten ethnographic semistructured interviews. This study is highly significant in advancing the theoretical and practical literature on contextual cultural communication and cross-cultural conflict analysis and resolution practice, not only among Dinka refugees, but also with other African refugee groups located throughout the United States.

Oetzel et al (2006) argued that while some researchers do use situational features to frame their development of various conflict topics, the majority do not, leaving the need open for a different analytical lens to create a "bigger picture." In addition, Avruch and Black (1993) established that conflict resolution scholars have tended to ignore cultural differences in their attempts to develop universally applicable models of conflict resolution and to some degree this oversight may be attributed to a superficial view of culture as behavioral stereotypes, enacted by all members of a "different" ethnic group, which can be addressed by proper etiquette and tolerance. These scholars further argued that to be effective at conflict resolution in intercultural and cross-cultural settings, one must begin with conflict and cultural analysis, which is a primary focus of this research. History, trauma, identity, and transnationalism for the Sudanese Dinka refugees in Jacksonville, Florida have undoubtedly assisted in defining past, present and dynamic perceptions and social constructions of conflict, therefore, a brief historical overview of the Sudanese Civil war and current political climate is essential to present a more comprehensive foundation for this research.

2. The Sudanese Civil War

The history of the ongoing conflict in the Sudan region in Africa is highly complex and has been examined by numerous scholars. Deng (1995) highlighted the civil war and struggle between the many ethnic and religious identities in the Sudan from a historical perspective. Although the Sudan is extraordinarily culturally and ethnically diverse, the country has characteristically been divided into the North and South regions. In the Northern Sudan, Arab-Muslims have dominated the region for several decades through an elevation of status by the Sudanese government. Many of the non-Muslim groups living in the North soon assimilated within the

Arab-Muslim culture, mostly out of the basic need for survival and respect (Deng). In contrast, the Southern Sudan is comprised primarily of Nubian and Nilotic non-Muslim Black African groups who have been viewed by the Islamic North as inferior in their cultural and religious practices (Deng, 1995).

Conflict within the country of the Sudan has existed for centuries and continues despite Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed in 2005 between the government and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Johnson (2007) establishes that specific regions in the Sudan, such as the Blue Nile, the Nuba Mountains, and Abyei, the three main areas that connect the North with the South, are still at the center of a debate over tribal and governmental ownership, use, and boundary identification. Among many of the driving forces for increasing levels of conflict is the presence of active oil fields in the Abyei area, which could easily determine significant wealth through natural resources. The 2011 Referendum is expected to determine whether the North and the South will become independent, however, experts are predicting a potential lapse into violence and civil war.

While peace today in the country of the Sudan remains fragile, the more recent crisis has been focused on Darfur. The Darfur conflict, situated in western Sudan, primarily between the Janjaweed, a government-supported militia recruited from local Arab tribes, and the non-Arab Black African peoples. The conflict began in February 2003 and has consistently been characterized by torture, rape, and genocide. At the present time, the violence exists in and around large refugee camps established for thousands of displaced South Sudanese. The death toll for both civil wars and the Darfur crisis is estimated at approximately 2 million, with 4 million people, primarily Southern Sudanese, displaced (BBC News Africa, n.d.).

3. Implications for Dinka Culture and Conflict

It is critical to examine the cultural changes faced by the Dinka tribe as well as the potential causal effects on conflict. Deng (1972) described the Dinka as a tribe who places critical value on unity, harmony, loyalty, and the overall continuation of the culture and lineage. Mutual cooperation and collectivism have been traditionally emphasized in order to provide the basic needs, including food and shelter, for all of the members of the tribe (Deng). The Dinka view the concept of "*ceing*" (or the act of "living together") as the foundation for human relationships and all actions, both positive and negative, are guided through this important principle. Cultural differences between tribal life and Western perspectives often result in a great divergence of values, ideologies, and conflict. For many of the Sudanese refugees who initially arrived in the United States, the choice of settlement location was not under their control and therefore immediate family support was unavailable (Holtzman, 2000). This loss of a large and collectivistic family structure has created significant barriers for many of the Dinka refugees in Jacksonville, and their assimilation into the individualistic U.S. context has been complicated at best. Upon arrival in the United States, political refugees carry with them not only their perceptions of culture and ethnicity, but also their experiences with past traumatic events.

Violence, torture, murder, rape, persecution, and genocide are among just some of these events. Suarez-Orozco and Robben (2000) defined the importance of an ongoing interdisciplinary discussion on refugees and trauma due to the fact that large-scale and collective violence occurs in complex contexts which often intertwine psychic, social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions; and the resulting consequences of trauma affects not only individuals but also social groups and cultural formations. Luhrmann (2000) further explained that trauma can assist in the creation of a new sense of self and identity which can affect the full realm of one's life. The refugee family as a social group is also prone to psychological stress from the demands and trauma of exile, migration, and resettlement. Violence and war is often categorized as a complex disaster which creates profound social changes in family composition and customs, and in patterns of labor between men and women (Rosenfeld et al., 2005). Furthermore, this stress associated with premigration and postmigration trauma can influence the potential for family conflict and disrupt the overall equilibrium of the family unit itself (Ayalon, 1997). As the second major mitigating variable impacting conflict communication, it is important to address the following research question: How is trauma socially constructed among the Sudanese Dinka refugees who have resettled in Jacksonville, Florida?

Many Dinka refugee families residing in the United States can be presently described as transnational, rather than collective, in nature due to the process and impact of cultural change in the migration movement (Olwig, 2003). Ong (1999) explained that transnationality frequently creates the basis for the sharing of culture across space and time and has been increased with globalization. It is also essential to examine in this study the individual representations of family and conflict, as the third mitigating variable, in the following research question: How is transnationalism socially constructed among the Sudanese Dinka refugees who have resettled in Jacksonville, Florida?

4. Study Participants and Method

The study participants for included 10 men and women with the following demographics: 4 married women, ages 20, 27, 38, and 51; 1 single woman, age 23; 2 married men, ages 24 and 31; and 3 single men, ages 19, 24, and 28; refugees who originated from the Dinka tribe of the Southern Sudan in Africa; and all possessed the proficiency and capacity to speak and comprehend English in order to comprehend and consent to interviews. In addition, all are designated as political refugees who have been granted asylum in the United States and have resettled in Jacksonville, Florida. Names and significant identifiers have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

5. Analyses of Findings

5.1 Identity and Conflict

According to Deng (1972), the Dinka have experienced conflict with their identity and will continue to struggle for many years to come as they have been consistently redefined by culture, by tradition, by war, and more recently, by migration and their refugee status. Their lives and identities are undoubtedly in constant transition, however, the Dinka are survivors, frequently ingrained with these skills from years of hardship.

At the heart of their identity lies the importance of ethnicity for the Dinka and the desire to return to Sudan to help their people. The first interview question asked the informants to share their life stories and anything they felt comfortable discussing with me. It became apparent in several of the life stories that Dinka ethnicity, customs, and elder lineage served to define their own self-identity, as well as their perspective in how others should be treated, as described by the following narrative:

(Manute) First, ethnicity is a very important among the Dinka and other tribes in Sudan. Dinka tribe, we don't neglect other people by race. But we have the same traditions. Another thing also, culture is a main one among Dinka people. Everyone follow the same customs through older people. Right now, I have a dream to finish 2 years college successful and go to the next level. Also, I hope I will get my bachelor degree very soon as I wish to help my people.

Another aspect of traditional Dinka identity which has changed considerably with forced displacement and through the process of becoming a refugee is the transformation in the role as farmers and cattle herders, which also served as an evaluation of status and respect within the tribe. For centuries, wealth among the Dinka has been defined by the numbers of cattle a man or family owned and is viewed as the foundation of the Dinka economic system, including delineation of customs for marriage, as noted in this interview excerpt.

(Monnyak) Agriculture practicing and animal rearing is the core of Dinka's economic system. The wealth of an individual in the Dinka community is measured by the number of cows, goats, and sheep one own. Bride wealth is an important source of income among the Dinkas. Before the couples marry their families agree on number of cows the bridegroom and his family must give to the bride's family as dowry. This agreement usually involves serious negotiations between the family members of the two sides, including extended and intermediate, it sometimes drags on for months. The number of cows paid as dowry ranges from 50 to 200; however, it sometimes depends on the agreement made by the two families

Although bridewealth has changed in form, the process stills remains closely tied to family hierarchy and influence. In Equatoria, the conversion of bride-wealth into cash and the opportunities for income-earning have long enabled some young men to pay their own bride-wealth. But they still remain dependent on parents and uncles to negotiate and bless their marriages and to contribute symbolically. One young man in Juba, seeking proper marriage to the mother of his four-year-old child, and with independent means of paying the bridewealth, nevertheless remained outside the prolonged negotiations among older relatives as to whether the couple were in fact distantly related and thus unable to marry. He accepted this process passively; his potential wife was more fervently afraid of the curse of the elders or ancestors (Leonardi, 2007).

Although the Dinka who have resettled in Jacksonville have been required to abandon this customary practice for mostly blue-collar jobs in order to financially survive, one of the aspects of their identity that has not significantly changed is the pride they express in their Dinka origins and the homesickness they feel to return to their country. The following informant shared these thoughts openly in this quote.

(Mading) My ethnic group is Dinka. The Dinka people have culture that is full of pride and self dignity. Since 1987 up to day I am now in Jacksonville and I am comfortable but my heart and soul are still in Sudan because people are still suffering a lot. But I keep hope there will be more freedom and I hope that God will free Sudan like America.

It was also essential in this part of the study to assess specifically how the Dinka culture has changed for these informants. The second interview question asked “how has individual and/or family culture changed since your arrival in the United States?” One of the recurring themes identified in the responses was the ability to effectively adapt and assimilate into the American culture, yet some expressed internal conflict with a few of the values of a Western society. Moreover, there appears to be conflict between those individuals who have assimilated, yet have remained respectful of their Dinka culture, and those who have abandoned these traditions for American rules of behavior. The following two interview excerpts are indicative of this perspective.

(Manute) My culture has changed abruptly after my arrival in the United States. Although I am more cautious to adjust to the America’s cultures, especially the negative part of the America’s cultures, most of my Sudanese’s friends have abandoned our culture and completely assimilated into American cultures. They wore like American fashions and speak street language.

In order to present a comprehensive overview of how the Dinka define, and ultimately approach conflict, it was vital to ask the informants to share their own social constructions and meanings of conflict. These issues were clearly expressed in the following interview quotes.

(Dol) When I think of conflict, I think of war in my country and this was very bad. Conflict happens when two people see each other in bad ways and do not understand and accept differences. The Arabs did this a lot with us.

(Elizabeth) I define conflict as two people or groups not getting along, as one does not recognize the other as important. I have seen this here in Jacksonville a lot.

One of the essential aspects in the analysis of conflict, and ultimately in the development of resolution techniques, in the establishment of how an individual/group approaches and manages conflict. In the previous question, the Dinka informants provided insight into the meanings and causes of conflict in their lives. In the next interview question, they were asked the following: How do you approach conflict? Can you please provide examples?

There is an understandable connection for the Dinka in these interviews in how they defined conflict and their approach to resolution. Because several of the informants identified conflict as based in identity needs, I was not surprised that they also attempt to manage conflict in their lives through addressing the acceptance of others, although difficult at times. One of the noteworthy barriers in Jacksonville that can serve to prevent conflict resolution for the Dinka is the presence of racism and misunderstanding. In addition, the following interview quotes are indicative of the Dinka concept of “ceing” (or the act of “living together”) as the foundation for human relationships and all actions, both positive and negative (Deng, 1972).

(Avchan) I approach conflict by asking what is wrong and I try to make it right. I do this with my brothers and sisters but it does not always work. But it is the Dinka way to be in unity and harmony with others.

The frustrations and hurdles for the Dinka informants in these interviews become more transparent when they were asked to address the individual and family conflicts they have faced since arriving in the United States. This quote below more clearly pinpoints these constructions of family conflicts.

(Elham) The type of the family conflicts I have experienced since I came into the United States was the new family. In this type of the new family, most people are not ready to give up the grouping of words into masculine and feminine. Also, there are high rates of divorce, birth rates and limits on marriage.

5.2 Trauma and Conflict

Trauma has the distinct ability to create internal and external conflict that ultimately shapes our identity, memories, culture, survival mechanisms, and deeply impacts our mental health. As part of the process of granting of refugee status, many of the Dinka in this study has shared the experience some level of trauma through civil war, death of a family member(s), and torture. Moreover, trauma and the dislocation that characterizes the refugee experience affects people as individuals, as families, and in terms of their immediate reference groups, as well as their relationship with their immediate community and the community at large (Aroche & Coello, 2004).

According to Tempny (2009), Sudan has long been one of the world's chief refugee-producing nations. Many researchers and practitioners have developed considerable interest in culturally-specific information on the mental health and wellbeing of Sudanese refugees. In this selective review of studies with Sudanese refugees, on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, coping strategies and interventions, most quantitative studies found

high rates of psychopathology, particularly PTSD and depression. However, some studies using mixed methods cautioned that while many Sudanese refugees have symptoms of traumatic stress, their functioning was not necessarily reduced, and they themselves often reported more concern with current stressors such as family problems than with past trauma. Some qualitative studies suggest that many Sudanese refugees use coping strategies such as silence, stoicism, and suppression. Few studies were available regarding appropriate interventions for Sudanese refugees and it remains unclear which aspects of standard treatments used by western-trained mental health practitioners may be beneficial for members of this population (Tempny, 2009).

One of the central elements and patterns identified among the informants' interviews is the familiarity of traumatic experiences as a child in the Sudan. Many described the fleeing of their villages as children due to civil war and violence. Within the psychology and social work fields, it is common knowledge that this type of forced migration and displacement have been identified as causes for unknown physical illnesses as well as depression, posttraumatic stress, sleep disorders, and intrusive thoughts that prevent adequate daily coping (Summerfield, 2005). These issues with coping also typically have a direct impact on effective strategies to resolve conflict. The informants were asked the following questions: Please share with me your experience(s) with trauma, anything you feel comfortable with telling me. How has the experience of trauma affected how you view and approach conflict? These following interview quotes serve to validate the powerful impact of traumatic experiences.

(Manute) When I was little, while I was riding a horse with my grandfather, the Arabic army followed us into the play ground. The Arabic army shot my grandfather to death. Meanwhile, I was watching as the Arabic army then tried to capture me but I ran away by horse. From that day, I haven't forgotten it at all. Even now, I am still dreaming about it. I don't think I will forget it. It's the day I will never forget.

(Deng) In 1987 the Arabs' militiamen attacked our village of Jalle, Sudan, killing vast numbers of Jalle residents (including my father in a bloody chilling terror), taking cattle, and devastating the area to the last atom. Seeing and experiencing all these atrocities of war forced me to run away from my beloved community to seek refugee in a neighboring country, Ethiopia, which was bordering Sudan. Being at the age of 7 years old at the time made me vulnerable to depression because I had never led a life of my own before.

In the next section, the findings regarding the third major variable of transnationalism is presented and discussed in relation to its impact and influence on the perception and management of conflict in the lives of Dinka in Jacksonville.

5.3 Transnationalism and Conflict

Another important mitigating variable in the lives of Dinka refugees is their transnational status and the conflict this can create. Due to the Sudanese civil war, countless Dinka tribes and families were dispersed throughout the country and the world, yet the customary familial responsibilities did not cease. Likewise, the concept of family identity transitioned to one that spanned both real and imaginary borders. According to Bryceson and Vuorella (2002), "Transnational families have multiple community identities related to all places where their members are resident who have been resident in the past. A transnational family's community identification is inextricably linked to its extra-familial network" (p. 19). Therefore, the following three questions were designed to describe the social constructions of transnationalism in the lives of the 10 Dinka participants: Do you have family members living in other countries? If so, where? What does it mean to you to have family living in other countries? Has being separated from your family affected how you view and approach conflict?

It was apparent in the informants' responses for the question regarding the geographical location of family members that many still remained in the Sudan, however, some did not know if they were still living while others were very specific about their location. In addition, while some of the informant's identified family members living in the United States, others shared that they have none. With the advent of email and other types of technology, some of the Dinka have been able to establish communication with their family members, thus allowing for the reduction of uncertainty and the maintenance of traditional Dinka familial responsibilities such as collective financial support. The following interview excerpts are indicative of the impact of being separated from family, regardless of location.

(Mading) I do not have much relatives living with me here in America. But in Sudan, I have six brothers and five sisters. My father has four wives. We are 22 children in our families.

(Elham) I have not seen my family for about 14 years because of the civil war that has been going on for 29 years in the Sudan; especially in the South. They are all still there but I do not know who is alive.

Likewise, the separation from their families of origin has led many of the Dinka informants to seek new structures of emotional and financial support, typically Americans who have befriended them in Jacksonville. However, regardless of these developing relationships, several continue to honor their cultural obligations to provide support to their families throughout the world. The following three quotes are representative of the financial, cultural, and emotional conflict that can occur for the Dinka who are considered a part of a transnational family.

(Monyak) Well, it is not easy to support two families. I spend a lot of money away on rent and rest of bills. I can't have a single dollar to save because I am supporting my families here and over there in Sudan.

(Mading) It is disastrous to have families living in two different worlds. I have not taken advantage of the good caring my parents would have offered me if I were raised by them. On the hand, my parents missed my help, especial my mother who is now in her late 60s. It is a Dinka tradition for the children to take care of their elderly. Because there are no social security benefits for the seniors in the Dinka economic system, their children are the source of their income. I try to help when I can because I do not want conflict with my family and I want my parents to be okay.

Lastly, it is crucial to examine how the transnational family status of the Dinka informants has affected their view and approach to conflict. The pattern for this interview question indicated that separation has indeed had a significant and lasting impact on the perception of conflict as well as the methods of management, as seen in the example below.

(Sittina) Yes, being separated from my family has changed how I view and approach conflict. I do not take anybody for granted now as I never know when they will die or leave.

6. Summary of the Findings

In order to gain an overall understanding of the impact of culture on identity, trauma, and transnationalism, a discussion of the main categories and examples of the findings is included below.

6.1 Identity and Conflict

(Manute) First, ethnicity is a very important among the Dinka and other tribes in Sudan. Dinka tribe, we don't neglect other people by race. But we have the same traditions. Another thing also, culture is a main one among Dinka people. Everyone follow the same customs through older people. Right now, I have a dream to finish 2 years college successful and go to the next level. Also, I hope I will get my bachelor degree very soon as I wish to help my people.

(Monnyak) Agriculture practicing and animal rearing is the core of Dinka's economic system. The wealth of an individual in the Dinka community is measured by the number of cows, goats, and sheep one own. Bride wealth is an important source of income among the Dinkas. Before the couples marry their families agree on number of cows the bridegroom and his family must give to the bride's family as dowry. This agreement usually involves serious negotiations between the family members of the two sides, including extended and intermediate, it sometimes drags on for months. The number of cows paid as dowry ranges from 50 to 200; however, it sometimes depends on the agreement made by the two families

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6.2 Trauma and Conflict

(Manute) When I was little, while I was riding a horse with my grandfather, the Arabic army followed us into the play ground. The Arabic army shot my grandfather to death. Meanwhile, I was watching as the Arabic army then tried to capture me but I ran away by horse. From that day, I haven't forgotten it at all. Even now, I am still dreaming about it. I don't think I will forget it. It's the day I will never forget.

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6.3 Transnationalism and Conflict

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7. Implications for Conflict Analysis and Resolution

7.1 Interpersonal Conflict

Conflict is conceptually defined as “a form of intense interpersonal and/or intrapersonal dissonance (tension or antagonism) between two or more interdependent parties based on incompatible goals, needs, desires, values, beliefs, or attitudes (Ting- Toomey, 1985, p. 72). Many aspects of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict are created though the presence of social knowledge, which is frequently gained though past and present life experiences. In addition, social cognition researchers identified cognitive structural features such as frames, beliefs, scripts, rules, and problem appraisals which have allowed for a deeper understanding of the construction and interpretation of conflict communication (Roloff & Miller, 2006). The research findings further enhance the need for the inclusion of five essential cognitive structures in the analysis of conflict among the Dinka, as well as other African refugee groups in the United States. Each is discussed separately in more detail.

7.2 Frames

Pinkley (1990) argued that as a result of personal experiences, individuals have formed frames that reflect their own impressions of how conflict differs. For some individuals, the conflict is viewed as serious and destructive while for others, it is seen as constructive and even playful at times. These differences in frame can be attributed to culture, history, identity, trauma, and familial relationships and it becomes essential in cross cultural analysis to assess frame from each individual’s own view. For Dinka, the context in which the conflict actually occurred played an integral role in defining frame, as demonstrated by this research. In addition, given that Dinka individuals are consistently in transition in terms of identity, frame can also evolve and change dramatically as they assimilate into American or Western society, therefore, assessment should be considered an ongoing process in conflict analysis.

7.3 Beliefs

Assumptions are “beliefs about the ways that relationships actually operate, as well as what men, women, and one’s partner are like” (Baucom et al., 1996, p. 72). In the assessment of causes and potential resolution techniques in interpersonal relationships, a comprehensive understanding of one’s beliefs and belief systems is crucial. In the Dinka culture, beliefs are central in how conflict is viewed between men and women and in marital relationships. There have traditionally been distinct expectations for men and women and as the Dinka, women in particular, have become socialized to American customs and expectations, the conflict within marriages and interpersonal relationships has substantially risen.

7.4 Scripts

Shank and Abelson (1977) defined a script as “a structure that that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context....Thus, a script is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation” (p. 41). Scripts are central in the Dinka culture, particularly as they relate to expectations for men and women and did vary depending on the context. Consequently, effective analysis must include the defining of both traditional and present sex and gender scripts in order gain an in-depth understanding of the issues within the conflict.

7.5 Rules

Argyle and Henderson (1985) defined a rule as “behavior that most people, such as most members of a group, neighborhood or subculture, think or believe should be performed or should not be performed” (p. 63). Conflict appeared apparent if these cultural rules were broken, therefore, evaluating their role and importance in interpersonal relationships is vital in analysis and determination of appropriate resolution techniques and approaches.

7.6 Problem Appraisals

Witteman (1988) noted that “an interpersonal problem exists when an individual perceives a difference between a present state involving another person and a goal state involving that person” (p. 337). Witteman (1992) also

argued that there are cognitive problem structures that are used mentally to represent the problematic situation and influence how individuals manage conflict. One of the central issues for the Dinka in effective problem appraisal is the lasting effects of trauma many experienced as children during the civil war in the Sudan, thus emphasizing the need for a detailed analysis process of this cognitive structure. In addition, Jeppsson and Hjern (2005) specifically examined the traumatic stress of unaccompanied minors in the Sudan and found the significant presence of a depressive worldview which affected outlook and the ability to cope long term.

7.7 Practice Implications

This study provides additional insight into the utilization of certain types of mediation practice to manage or resolve interpersonal conflict. Given the importance and powerful impact of the life stories, as well as the “multiple realities,” of the Dinka, the use of narrative mediation to encourage disputants

to share their experiences may be key in the discovery and uncovering of interpersonal and/or relational issues that need to be addressed. Winslade and Monk (2000) further described the importance of narrative mediation to allow individuals to understand, visualize, and deconstruct their life stories in order to find a path to resolution for their conflicts. At the heart of this form of mediation is the identification of disparate realities which serve to maintain the conflict. Additionally, Cobb (1994) argued that narrative mediation helps disputants to deconstruct stories by allowing them to highlight the paradoxical features of the mediation process and of the dispute itself. Moreover, Cobb explained that narrative mediation invoked a poststructural perspective in that the stories operate as a description of the evolving and reflexive relationship between the story content and the story telling, which would be beneficial for refugees.

The contribution of this research for future research involves opportunities to understand other community groups who are involved with transnationalism. Most notably future researchers may translate the methodological process in the current study to understand phenomena of trauma, transnationalism and identity for other communities around the world. The ethnographic semi-structured interview with special attention to how Dinka members spoke about their experiences of conflict resolution across contexts and relationships provided a unique lens into discovering the multiple realities and changes that emerge with transnationalism. The significance of this study points to a dynamic relationship between human conditions, relationships, identity, and trauma and conflict resolution in relation to transnationalism. The greater understanding professionals have about co-cultural groups within a culture, the better they can assist groups in adapting and living in a new context. Also, the findings may assist cultural groups understand their own complexities and issues by seeking out support groups, professional resources, and religious affiliations. This discovery by current community members may benefit future community members who may face similar challenges.

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