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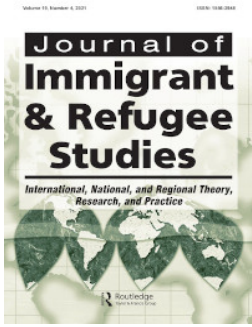
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African Youth Gangs: The Marginalization of South Sudanese Young People in Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

South Sudanese youth especially young male youth face racism and discrimination in Australia. This research was conducted with South Sudanese young people, and stakeholders within the South Sudanese community in Melbourne, Australia. The study explored how South Sudanese young people respond to the narrative in the media about 'African Gangs' and how this impacted their personal experiences of racism. The study used an exploratory, qualitative case study approach in a real-world setting, underpinned by the psychosocial conceptual framework. The analysis documented areas of concern, including the poor mental health arising from racism and racial profiling.

KEYWORDS

Refugee; media; police; youth gangs; racism; mental health; South Sudanese

Introduction

Global migration

The impacts of global migration are far reaching, with over 280 million people migrating world-wide in 2019 (Porter et al., 2019; UN, 2020). Over 80 million people are estimated to be seeking refuge having been forcibly displaced due to war or fear for their lives, resulting in the problem of resettlement and various challenges of acculturation for those vulnerable populations that are able to be resettled (Perugia, 2019; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020). With the COVID-19 Pandemic impacting the world since the end of 2019, immigrants, refugees and forced migrants, have been identified as vulnerable due to overcrowded conditions in refugee camps or detention centers, lower economic advantage, and difficulty in maintaining physical distancing and unable to seek refuge. This has led to migrants being up to twice more likely to contract COVID-19 than the populations in host countries (OECD, 2020). The next section provides an overview of Australia's humanitarian resettlement program.

Australia's humanitarian resettlement program

The Humanitarian resettlement program through UNHCR and the IOM resettles those seeking refuge in Australia. In total 17,112 refugees were resettled in Australia via the offshore pathway in 2018-19, including 2,947 vulnerable women and children (Department of Home Affairs, 2019). In the lead up to the 2019 election, the current Prime Minister of Australia, Scott Morrison, pledged to offer more refugee places to women and children, but capped the refugee intake annually at 18,750 places (Greene, 2019). In 2020 the Australian Federal Government announced it would reduce the annual refugee intake to 13,750 places as part of a COVID-19

Economic Recovery Plan (Dutton & Tudge, 2020). The 2021-2022 Budget maintained this cap on refugee intake of 13,750 (Refugee Council of Australia, 2021). There are over 6,000 refugees who have been granted visas to live in Australia through the humanitarian program in 2020, but have not been able to resettle in Australia due to COVID-19 (Department of Home Affairs, 2021).

Refugee resettlement to Australia

Australia's humanitarian program has accepted South Sudanese refugees from camps in the Horn of Africa (Kenya, Uganda and Egypt), since the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, resulting in large resettlement of South Sudanese in 2005 and then a gradual decrease in Sudanese refugees in recent years. This has resulted in South Sudanese representing the largest refugee group from Africa living in Australia (Kindersley, 2017). It is within this context that over 30,000 South Sudanese have migrated to Australia over the past 20 years (1995–2015), due to the ongoing and protracted conflict and instability in South Sudan (Losoncz, 2015).

The protracted civil wars led to displacement and migration of South Sudanese refugees together with their families, seeking safety and security in the neighboring countries of Uganda, Kenya and Egypt. Many spent years in refugee camps like Kakuma, north of Kenya, and Kitgum and Gulu in Uganda where life was extremely difficult (Thomas, 2017). Between 1997 and 2007 more than 20,000 South Sudanese were resettled in Australia. Among the total Sudanese including South Sudanese born in Australia at the 2011 Census, a further 14.6 percent arrived between 2007 and 2011 (Community Relations Section of DIAC, 2012, p. 3).

Most Sudanese migrants came to Australia through the Humanitarian Program (Stevenson, 2009). This category included the Refugee, In-country Special Humanitarian, Emergency Rescue and Woman at Risk visa subclasses (Department of Immigration & Citizenship, 2011). The 2016 Census, recorded 7,699 South Sudan-born people in Australia. Victoria had the largest number with 2,750 followed by Queensland (1,430), Western Australia (1,201) and New South Wales (977). The median age of the South Sudan born in 2016 was 33 years, however the labor force participation rate was 61.6 per cent and the unemployment rate was 26.4 percent compared to an unemployment rate of 6.4% in Australian population (ABS, Census of Population and Housing, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

In recent years Sudanese male youth have experienced racial profiling, negative media reports, and discrimination. Media reporting in Melbourne, Victoria has represented South Sudanese youth groups as 'African Gangs' leading to racism and discrimination of African youth. The 'African gang' title portrayed African youth as dangerous, unstable, and violent black refugees, and demonized the entire African refugee community in Melbourne (Majavu, 2020; Jimma, 2020; Roi, 2020). In the mid 2000s media talk show hosts, Andrew Bolt and Neil Mitchell wrote in the Herald Sun about the dangers of the South Sudanese refugees. Bolt wrote that 'Sudanese men come from a warlike culture and arc up more quickly than most when in a group', while Mitchell suggested 'an animal like quality amongst this group as there were groups of young men hunting in packs' (Windle, 2008, pp. 562).

Rationale, aim and objectives

There is limited research that adequately examines the complex and divisive issue of media representation of South Sudanese Youth as 'African Gangs'. This study has attempted to address this gap and the rationale for this study was based on the view that through understanding how South Sudanese youth coped with media portrayal and racism, appropriate policies, interventions, and programs, could be developed to address the issue and mitigate negative outcomes for these youth.

The main aim of this study was to examine how South Sudanese youth respond to the media and political narrative of 'African Gangs'. The objectives of our study were

1. to examine the personal experiences and perceptions of racism among South Sudanese youth;
2. to assess how the negative media narrative impacted the mental health of South Sudanese youth;
3. to propose policy and program recommendations that will assist the media, police and wider Australian community in their interactions with South Sudanese youth.

The complex history of South Sudan

South Sudan has a history of protracted conflict and has a population of over 12 million people. It is a complex, multi-cultural society that consists of over 50 different ethnic groups (Milton, et.al. 2017). The country has been in a state of protracted conflict since 1955 and gained independence from Britain, when it was part of Sudan. While there had been a brief period of peace in the 1970s, civil conflict ensued again in 1983, when the Southern Sudanese led a revolt against the imposition of Islamisation of the predominantly Christian South by the government. This led to protracted and violent conflict where whole communities permanently displaced. This was the beginning of the push toward the separation of Sudan and South Sudan that currently exists (Kindersley, 2017).

South Sudan became an independent and new country in July 2011. Peace, however lasted only 18 months before political tensions, led to internal fighting between the two largest tribes, the Dinka and the Nuer, resulting in civil war that began in December 2013. South Sudanese were forced to leave their homes and displaced to refugee camps to await entry into a humanitarian program for resettlement in the West. Many of these survivors of war lived for years in camps in Uganda and Kenya. Over 2.5 million South Sudanese sought refuge in the African region due to the recent civil conflicts (Milton et al., 2017).

The continued conflict and human rights impacts in 2018 & 2020

The government, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition (SPLA/IO), the National Democratic Front and non-signatory groups signed the 2018 peace deal. During 2020, South Sudan was again marked by conflict, along with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In February 2020, the parties to the 2018 peace deal formed a transitional government of national unity led by President Salva Kiir. However, the requirement that at least 35 percent of women at all levels of government was ignored. This ceasefire broke down in April 2020, and fighting resumed with abuses against civilians including unlawful killings, abductions, and sexual violence and recruitment of child soldiers resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries, displaced hundreds of thousands (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

UNMISS and international actors

In March 2020, the UN Security Council renewed UNMISS for another year and in June the UN Human Rights Council renewed the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan. Since mid-2020, the EU, France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, Canada and the UK, have condemned the high levels of sexual and gender-based violence affecting children and women in South Sudan (Human Rights Watch, 2020). On September 4 2020, UNMISS announced the beginning of a transition plan to for 180,000 displaced people under the protection of UN peacekeepers,

into conventional displaced persons' camps with government police rather than UN force protection. This decision sparked fears in the camp populations of potential abuses by government forces and the police (International Organization for Migration, 2020).

Impacts of COVID-19, resurgence of civil conflict and impacts on global migration

The Covid-19 pandemic slowed implementation of the peace deal and the delivery of much needed humanitarian and health aid to displaced populations. Health care facilities are poorly staffed and ill-equipped, Covid-19 testing and access to information is extremely limited. Schools closed for six months due to Covid-19 in 2020, forcing 2.2 million children out of school (Human Rights Watch, 2020). During 2020, at least 1,535 girls were subjected to child marriages, pregnancies, sexual violence or forced prostitution (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In May 2020, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) reported that inadequate medical response for sexual and gender-based violence survivors in South Sudan, due to underfunding (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Border closures had severely affected Australia's migrant programme. Australia's permanent migration program fell by more than 20% from 160,323 in 2018–19 to 140,366 in 2019–20. The figures for 2020–21 will undoubtedly be even lower (Lloyd & Hermant, 2021). The refugee and humanitarian program entry fell by almost 30% from 18,762 in 2018–19 to 13,171 in 2019–20 (Coyne, 2021). But since border restrictions took effect in March last year, just 708 refugees have been allowed to enter Australia, according to the Australian Border Force (Feng, 2021). Very few skilled, temporary and humanitarian migrants have been resettled in Australia in the last 20 months and these include South Sudanese humanitarian migrants. The next section is a short review of acculturation and racism and its impacts on the South Sudanese in Australia.

Acculturation in a new country

Acculturation is the process that occurs when an immigrant learns the customs, language, mannerisms, and values of the new country they are living in and includes health, diet, exercise, and substance use (Mody, 2007; Alamilla et al., 2020). It is not uncommon for migrants to struggle with acculturation and adapting to the expected norms of their new country, leading to negative experiences, enhancing trauma and leading to poor psychosocial outcomes (Mody, 2007; Alamilla et al., 2020).

Research undertaken by Khawaja and Milner (2012), document there were several areas of acculturation stress for South Sudanese, that include, financial management, the lack of family and social support and cultural gender roles. Freedom provided to women in Australia caused tension among couples. The police were perceived as lacking cultural understanding and finally, the limited information provided to refugees pre and post migration also impacted acculturation. Research undertaken by Hebbani et al. (2012), document that both women and men face acculturation issues impacted by English language barriers, parenting issues and men faced with challenges to traditional gender roles as breadwinner.

Macaulay (2021) highlighted a series of unique challenges linked to youth and parent relationships in a new cultural setting. These relationships influence South Sudanese perspectives on the transition to adulthood. The various issues that this community faces in attempting to acculturate into Australian society results in intergenerational conflict, racism through targeting by the media and politicians, cultural expectations, educational difficulties, and the post and protracted conflict trauma associated (Losoncz, 2015; Majavu, 2020).

Impacts of racism

The Australian Human Rights Commission (2021) defines 'Racism' as the use of discrimination, prejudice or antagonism that can occur by either an individual, a community or a system, that

is directed at a marginalized person or group, and is based on ethnicity, culture and community. Australian society has a long history of systematic and institutional racism that values ‘whiteness’ as being superior and this dates back to the White Australia Policy that was abandoned in 1973 (Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020). The denial of sovereignty to Indigenous Australians has created a subversive narrative that elevates race as an important identifier of belonging in Australia (Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020).

A report by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2008) identified the alienation of Sudanese youth based on their race that limited their participation in the broader community, significantly contributed to disadvantage, and negatively impacted education, employment, housing and health outcomes, further burdening health, legal and welfare systems, contributing to social inclusion (Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, 2008)

The Center for Multicultural Youth (CMY) (2014), report revealed that racism was a clear indicator of negative outcomes for young migrants, affecting self-confidence, self-esteem, and cultural identity and increased poor mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and anger. There has also been a parallel discourse around blackness and criminality in Australia, within a wider view of anti-black rhetoric (Majavu, 2020). This anti-black discourse has been amplified through the media’s racialized and negative representations of South Sudanese youth as gang members reinforcing the notion of who ‘belongs’ and who ‘doesn’t belong’ in the Australian community (Macaulay & Deppeler, 2020). African men in particular have been referred to as intimidating, primitive, and dangerous. The label of ‘gang member’ then creates a picture of a group that invokes fear, distrust, and anger (Majavu, 2020). This negative media attention, along with a subversive cultural narrative, has a significant impact on the mental health and sense of worth of South Sudanese youth people (Burford-Rice et al., 2020).

The political history of African gangs in Australia and the media

The ‘African Gangs’ crisis unfolded in 2016, in the name of ‘Apex’, when a group of South Sudanese youth known to each other through Facebook got into a brawl at Melbourne’s Moomba festival (Majavu, 2020; Jimma, 2020). Despite the lack of any definitive characteristic of gang activity (uniformed attire, organization structure, code of conduct and selective membership) and the limited damage to the public outside of the African and Pacifica young people involved, there were 344 articles published by the Daily Mail and 320 written by the Herald Sun between 2013 and 2019, this doesn’t include the radio talkback shows and television media that were contributing to the narrative during this time, (Majavu, 2020; Roi, 2020).

The issue of African gangs, predominantly connected to South Sudanese young people, is a contentious and politically divisive issue. In 2007, Kevin Andrews, the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, reduced the humanitarian quota from 70% to 30% (Day, 2018) stating that the Sudanese refugees ‘don’t seem to be settling and adjusting into Australian life as quickly as we would hope’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 2018). Of particular concern to Mr Andrews were cultural issues and the formation of gangs of Sudanese young people (Sydney Morning Herald, 2018). Former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, and former Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, aggravated commentary with divisive media statements. Dutton, during a radio interview in 2018, stated, ‘The Victorian public are outraged by some of the goings on ... the reality is people are scared to go out to restaurants because of African violence’ (The Age, 2018). A belief that Sudanese youth are forming gangs is not a new phenomenon.

The concern was reaffirmed by both then Immigration now Home Affairs Minister, Hon Dutton, in January 2018 and the former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, in July 2018, when commenting on African gangs being out of control and terrorizing the streets of Melbourne (Sydney Morning Herald, 2018). It was a narrative supported by media with reporting of several high-profile public disturbances in Melbourne involving large groups of youth from many different cultures, including Sudanese young people. Often cited Victorian crime statistics indicated

a disproportionate number of violent offenses committed by Sudanese youth when compared to the total population (Day, 2018).

Misleading comments made by politicians undermine human rights, social justice and multi-culturalism, and promotes racism and intolerance. Mr Dutton, the current Home Affairs Minister, is an example. In a radio interview in 2018, Minister Dutton spoke about African gangs in Melbourne:

“It’s like some parallel universe going on down there at the moment where you’re not allowed to refer to these people as ‘in gangs’. I mean it’s fairyland stuff.... because I called people involved in home invasions African gang members, even though they’re of African descent and they’re involved in gang activity in Victoria.” (Cunningham, *The Age*, July 19, 2018)

The Victorian police & South Sudanese youth

A historical account of bias by Victoria police toward South Sudanese and African youth was uncovered in a 2013 ABC media report into a secret police operation called ‘Operation Molto’ that targeted Africa-Australians, (Waters, ABC News, 2013). The operation was designed to reduce crime around the Flemington estates, but only targeted male African youth. The operation began in 2006 and concluded in 2011, however the effects of this operation continued to be felt by many young people who were part of this research. The investigation into the operation revealed that there were 30 formal complaints to the police about bashings, abuse, harassment and dumping of teenagers after intimidation tactics. However, none of the complaints were addressed by the police nor did the police admit to racial profiling of a particular group, however the implications cast concern over Victoria Police’s interactions with South Sudanese youth (Waters, 2013). Two racially profiled young South Sudanese, Daniel Haile-Michael and Maki Issa lodged a complaint to Human Rights Commission and with the Deeral Court in 2010 claiming that the police breached the *Racial Discrimination Act* 1975 (Green, 2013). The complaint was settled out of court, and the police agreed to two inquiries into police profiling, cross-cultural training for the police and allowing the young men to engage with the media about the case (Green, 2013).

Methods

Study design

This study used qualitative methods and was undertaken with South Sudanese Australians located in southeast Melbourne and took place between 2014 and 2017. Using an exploratory, qualitative case study approach in a real-world setting, the intent of this study was to give ‘voice’ to South Sudanese youth. A qualitative exploratory design was suitable as it was the appropriate design to examine in depth an issue where there is limited information (Lumbus et al., 2021).

The qualitative research design also permitted for a rich understanding and in-depth exploration of issues as faced by the young (Jirojwong & Liamputtong, 2009, Liamputtong, 2019) A case study approach was the methodology of choice as it highlights the realities of the participants’ experiences and is a widely used multi-disciplinary method (Noor, 2008). There are several key components of a case study approach. First, it taps into the viewpoints of participants (South Sudanese youth and community members in Melbourne in this study); second, it allowed South Sudanese youth to share their experiences. It is the preferred methodology when there is a need to ‘closely examine contemporary events’ (Yin, 2014, p. 7). The relativist ontological approach was also used for the study, where a subjective experience is singularly associated with the individual, and there is an overlapping of reality, and human experience. As there are multiple individual experiences, so there are multiple realities for the South Sudanese youth in this study (Levers, 2013).

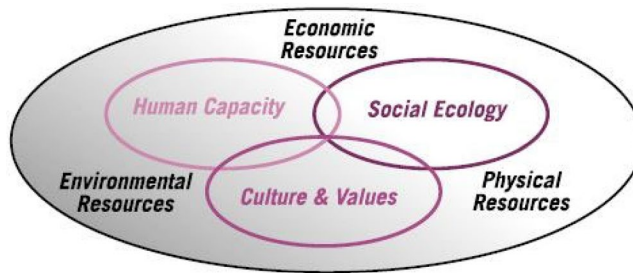


Figure 1. Psychosocial conceptual framework. (The Psychosocial Working Group, 2003).

The framework underpinning the study

The study was underpinned by the psychosocial conceptual framework (see Figure 1), as it has relevance to at risk groups (The Psychosocial Working Group, 2003). This framework has been extensively used since it was first developed in 2003, especially in post-conflict settings. In this study, the three domains of the psychosocial framework: 1) Human Capacity, 2) Culture and Values and 3) Social Ecology – together with the available Physical, Economic and Environmental resources, underpinned the alignment of themes identified by the interview analysis. By exploring the particular issues of culture and values, family and human capacity among the youth, we anticipate being able to inform future directions for policy, programs and interventions (Earnest et al., 2015). Due to uniqueness of the stressors and the coping strategies adopted by South Sudanese youth, this framework highlights an awareness of the destructive impacts on the community due to stigma and discrimination and allowed the dominant themes that emerged through the focus groups and interviews to be aligned to the domains of the psychosocial framework (Earnest et al., 2015).

Ethics approval

Approval for the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Curtin University (approval number HR 139/2012). All participants were provided with a plain language summary explaining the study, allowed to ask questions, and signed a consent form. The parents of participants under 18 years were approached by the first author with a community elder to discuss the research and parental or guardian consent was obtained. All participants were informed that they had the ability to withdraw their participation at any time. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Interviews were discontinued if a participant was distressed, and a protocol was established for support should the need arise.

Study setting

The study was conducted out of a local outreach center that was frequented by the participants.

All interviews, focus group discussions and community forums, took place at a community center familiar to the participants. The first author's previous position as a community services manager who had worked extensively within the South Sudanese community, with both the young people and the parents in various capacities prior to undertaking the research allowed access to the community. This connection allowed for an in-depth understanding of the complexities within the South Sudanese community.

Participant recruitment

Purposive sampling, the deliberate selection of cases to provide rich information on a topic (Liamputtong, 2019), was used to identify potential participants. For the youth interviews, focus

group discussions (FGDs) and community forums. The 23 youth participants were male (n=17) and female (n=6), aged between 14 and 21 years. The FGDs were conducted in 2013 and Community forums in 2017 and included community Elders and members. The first author has continued engagement and interaction with the community.

Methods of data collection

In-depth Interviews were the main methods of data collection for the interviews with a smaller number of FGDs and a Community Forum.

The interviews

The interview questions were developed by the researcher who consulted a youth social worker who worked within the South Sudanese community, and two elders of the South Sudanese community to confirm appropriateness of the questions. The interview schedule consisted of 15 open-ended questions using an interview guide. The questions examined participants' background history, experiences living in Australia, family dynamics, mental health and coping strategies. All interviews were an hour or longer and conducted by the first author at the local outreach center and were undertaken until data saturation was met (Kumar, 2005).

The focus groups discussions

The three focus groups consisted of 1) six female participants were in a female only group, 2) 17 male participants in a male only group and 3) the third focus group of 11 parents and elders who were invited through established community connections. A focus group of five community elders and an interview with a local youth worker who worked exclusively with South Sudanese youth, were conducted to confirm and validate the themes from the interview analysis.

Data analysis

The interviews, FGDs were audio recorded, and were transcribed verbatim. Using the process described by Braun and Clarke (2013), the data was analyzed using an approach, that identified and examined underlying ideas, and meanings of the interview data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Thematic analysis of interviews was used and enabled identification of patterns drawn from the interviews. The process commenced with the verbatim transcription of interview and focus group audio files. The transcripts were read and re-read, notes were made, and initial codes were ascribed to meanings identified from the interviews (Hinton & Earnest, 2010). This technique allowed themes to emerge from the data and it was important that participants' voices were the dominant source of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Lumbus et al., 2021). The data were coded using the NVivo 9 software and were then aligned to the three domains of the psychosocial framework.

Presentation of results at community forums

The results and themes were presented at two forums consisting of South Sudanese community elders and parents, who provided feedback. These forums were conducted with the support of the local South Sudanese community and were attended by community stakeholders Elders, youth, social workers, and parents. The forums were used as part of member checking to share the results and inform research recommendations.

Rigor and quality criteria of the study

The trustworthiness of the study was considered through dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the study. This was undertaken through pilot testing of interview questions for refinement and finalization (Rogers et al., 2019). There was constant review and interpretation of the data by the authors, as recommended by Cohen and Crabtree (2008) and Graneheim and Lundman (2004). An audit trail documented the study design, methods and analysis to allow for replication of the study (Malterud, 2001; Birt et al., 2016). Member checking allowed the authors to share findings and enhanced validity and credibility of the findings.

Results and themes from the analysis

Demographic details of the participants (Table 1)

Table 1 outlines a more detailed description of the participants, including age, gender and ethnicity. Majority of the participants (15) were in the age group of 14 to 17 years and had experienced conflict, loss, and significant displacement in South Sudan. The youth had spent time in refugee camps in Kenya (10), Egypt (8) and Uganda (3). Most belonged to the Nuer tribe and lived in households of nine to 11 members in Melbourne. The majority of the participants were in high school.

Each of the themes is presented below and supported by quotes from the South-Sudanese youth themselves to highlight youth voices. See Table 2 for the themes and sub-themes.

Table 1. Demographic details of participants.

<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>	<i>Participant Number</i>
<i>Age (Years)</i>	
14–17	15
18–21	8
<i>Country Education Started</i>	
Australia	1
Kenya	10
Egypt	8
Uganda	3
Sudan	1
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	16
Female	7
<i>Location Prior to Arrival in Australia</i>	
South Sudan	2
Kenya: refugee camp	10
Egypt: urban refugee	8
Uganda: urban refugee	3
<i>Education & Employment</i>	
High School student	15
TAFE student	5
University student	2
Unemployed	1
<i>Living Arrangements (Number of residents per House)</i>	
6–8	7
9–11	13
12 or more	3
<i>Tribal Identity</i>	
Nuer	18
Dinka	1
Shilluk	1
Bari	2
Murle	1

Table 2. Themes underpinned by the psychosocial framework.

Human Capacity	<i>Experience with Racism</i>
Social Ecology	<i>Negative Police Interaction</i>
	<i>African Gangs & Discrimination</i>
Culture and Values	<i>Distrust of Authorities</i>
	<i>Cultural Understanding of Mental Health</i>

Human capacity

Experiences with racism

The portrayal of South Sudanese young people by the media promotes a feeling of being constantly observed by the general community in a suspicious way. Many of the young people interviewed were aware of what was being said about them in the media and by the politicians. They expressed feelings of racism as evidenced in the quotes below:

A lot of people are racist to us, but I think it's the media's fault to bring the bad idea about us to the people. Cause most people watch the media and the media is attacking us. Like once we were walking down the street and this white girl, she saw me and she made a U turn. I was like she doesn't know me; she doesn't need to be afraid of me it's all media's fault to bring the bad focus onto all of Sudanese people. We are, just trying to live a life, (Doboul)

'People (the wider community) are not treating you like you are a person, like equals.' (Shine)

On many occasions, groups of young Sudanese walking home after playing basketball as they had no transport nor the means to pay for transport, would have police stop them and ask what they were doing and where they were going. This occurred routinely to and many of the participants had come to accept it as a part of their lived experience in Australia because of their blackness:

'Yeah, like in primary school in the first week, kids looked at me weird, like why your skin is black? Do you have a shower? They asked me questions why your face look like that, why you don't have long hair. I felt weird and left out. I was like we all human and the same.'(Nyachol)

Social ecology

Negative police interactions including racism

Almost all of the p participants, highlighted ongoing racism as a daily occurrence. Many had been verbally abused in Australia, some physically assaulted for no other reason than being African. Outward occurrences of racism were always accompanied by subtler institutional racism they faced from police and other service providers, such as the department of human services and the department of child protection. It was not uncommon for participants to talk about being picked out of a group of young people by police at a party, despite not doing anything, as they were the only black person in the group.

'Yeah police are always stopping me, if I'm by myself or with a group it don't matter, we could just be walking home, and they stop and search you and stuff just for no reason. You can't say anything to anyone because your parents assume you did something wrong for the police to stop you in the first place, who cares about me, the media says I'm bad, the Prime Minister says I'm bad, it's easy for police to do what they want. I don't say they are all bad just some of them. (Ran)

'Oh, I don't get afraid by the gangs or whatever, but when I walk around I'm actually scared of cops and stuff, because when they see me they might think I'm in a gang so they could attack me at any moment, throw me around and put me on the ground and look through my stuff, just cause I'm Sudanese'. (Siet)

African gangs, racism and discrimination

The link made between Sudanese young people and gang activity and violence is the fundamental driving force for discrimination. The Sudanese youth who gather together and youth who commit

crimes has unfortunately presented the fallacy that there must be some link between young Africans gathering together socially in groups and youth crime and gang formation. Our research did not find such a link. The gathering of Sudanese young people in groups is not an act of rebellion or intimidation but just young people spending time with their friends.

'The police like... .. if they see a group of Sudanese, they follow them and everyone is calling them a gang cause they are afraid of them cause they are Africans, blacks. Yeah, but it's not a gang, it's a couple of friends. In our culture we do everything together, we don't want to go by ourselves, but in Australia its different, individuals do stuff by themselves. I don't think we are used to that, and they aren't used to us.' (Ruol)

'If you are near a group of bad people or there's someone in your group that does something they assume you are bad or when you are watching people that are fighting, at a party or something, not even involved, they assume that you are fighting with them and even though you are trying to get away, and they want to arrest you or put you on the ground.' (Dothout)

The participants were aware of how they were perceived by the public due to their skin color and their physical stature as many teenage South Sudanese are over 6 feet tall. This factor, combined with plus as groups of friends can lead to them being stigmatized as an African gang:

'No, they don't call it gang, they are all like brothers and brothers and all this is and they are a rapping crew, but everyone is calling them a gang cause they are afraid of them cause they are Africans, blacks.' (Chakuan)

Culture and values

Distrust of authorities and impacts of systemic racism

The youth had a deep suspicion of authority, passed on to them from their parents' own lived experience with protracted conflict, and the young people's own experience of being singled out only because of their appearance, meant that any interaction with the police started from a position of distrust:

'These young people are faced with the stereotypes of gang members and all that kind of stuff and even teachers when they're at school saying completely inappropriate racial things in class, having low expectations of them because of the color of their skin, being heavy handed in their punishment. I think across the board a lot of the south Sudanese youth are facing racism wherever they go, I have not yet met a young person who has not had multiple experiences of racism in their personal life.' (Outreach worker)

Cultural understanding of mental health

Community elders related how within Nuer culture in Sudan, if a young person had a mental illness, then it was believed that they had been cursed because of the bad actions of a family member. The word used to describe this condition was 'Yong', colloquially loosely translated as crazy or insane. All mental health concerns amongst the community members were understood within this context.

Mental health is considered as either a family curse or a deliberate act by the police to change the affected young person, this creates an environment in which the parents fear what police and paramedics can do. The Parents and youth distrust any support agency that tries to help, making it hard to implement interventions that implemented by parents. The notion that mental health problems in young people are due to an outside force, has created the situation where help is not sought for South Sudanese young people with poor mental health.

Despite the cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues, it is a very real concern for the young people in this study. Many made comments about feeling 'sad', 'depressed', 'down', 'tired' or full of 'anxiety'. With the cultural barriers to seeking mental health treatment and the compounding factors of racism, receiving negative media representations and having difficult experiences with police, the impacts of mental health are highly prevalent.

'It makes me angry, sad and feel so depressed all the time, because they say Sudanese kids are bad, they are fighting, but when we apply for a job they don't hire us. For me when I was doing modelling, I always had to work ten times more than the white girl or they say Sudanese are bad, and for one bad person they blame the whole community. I wish they punished you for the right reason not just because you are Sudanese and you are trying to get home from your friend's home and they (police) hit you (Nyak).

'Makes me feel a bit angry cause it's just like I'm a normal person but they think I'm different just because my colour is different. Playing basketball helps, you're all equal on the court, in fact I'm better then equal, I stand out but because I'm good, I'm making people scream and yell with my moves, but when I'm at home or school or out, I feel sick in my stomach, anxious, I think. I try to put it behind me just do me, but it's so constant it grinds you down man'. (Tot)

Just because I am black...like my mom works two jobs and she give me money to buy these things and I don't steal them. They just try to get into your head, and I hate that. I feel so sad and depressed and anxious all the time, I'm judged as soon as I leave my house. I'm tired.'(Nyak)

Discussion

This paper reported the findings on how South Sudanese youth respond to the media and political narrative of 'African Gangs', their perceptions on how the negative media narrative impacted South Sudanese young people's mental health outcomes, and the youth shared personal experiences of racism. The participants shared the negative interactions they have with police due to race and the mental health impacts of coping with racism and racial profiling. The respondents revealed that there was a profound sense of disconnect between many of the young people and the wider community, due to distrust and daily lived experiences of racism. There are significant consequences of racism and discrimination, which include not going out into public due to the perceive threat of being targeted (Abur & Mphande, 2020). These feelings of targeting by the police and community racism creates increased and leads to poor mental health and feelings of shame and worthlessness (Abur & Mphande, 2020).

The racism from the police that South Sudanese young people face is an ongoing issue where the notion that these young people come from a land of war and therefore must be treated with caution based solely on their appearance is promoted (Nunn, 2010; Pittaway & Dantas, 2021). In 2008, the then Assistant Police Commissioner, described South Sudanese as having a 'tribe mentality', and that they were from a culture of violence due to some of them having been child soldiers (Nunn, 2010). This highlights a long history of racial profiling by the police, which echo the lived experiences of the South Sudanese youth from the current study who spoke in depth about their negative and racist interactions with police.

The label of 'African gangs' has meant that any group of young people who are of African appearance are targeted and this has created a sense of isolation and insecurity with the realization that they are different and judged purely by their appearance. South Sudanese youth are visibly different due to their physical appearance of being tall and black, they are identified as 'third world people' from poor backgrounds and potentially posing a criminal threat (Nunn, 2010; Majavu, 2020; Pittaway & Dantas, 2021), with the police regularly stopping them randomly without cause (Windle, 2008).

Despite the media reporting and the political narrative, there is no evidence of widespread African youth gangs violently targeting the community (Vedelago & Millar, 2021). There are some Sudanese youth who commit small crimes, just as there are in all cultural groups. There are also times where at South Sudanese social gatherings, there is some alcohol fueled anti-social behavior (Shepherd et al., 2018). However, these are not criminal gangs but the formation of social groups, to overcome social isolation in their adopted country (Pittaway & Dantas, 2021).

Most South Sudanese youth living in Australia have experienced life in a war-torn country. To understand the behavior and outcomes impacting these young people, particularly the negative outcomes, we must acknowledge the trauma of war, forced displacement, life in a refugee camp, cultural expectations of their family and the new reality of Western life. The experience of many

of these young people is often marked with dispossession from their home and culture, leading to ongoing vulnerability, and racial targeting (Juang et al., 2018).

Despite the negative portrayal of these young people, research has consistently shown that young refugees who have been relocated to Australia have high levels of resilience, hope and determination (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2017; Pittaway & Dantas, 2021). There is a clear need to propose and implement interventions that can heal the rift between the Sudanese community and their adopted country. It is an indicator of the failure of government policy that the recommendations outlined in the 2008 Human Rights report in Victoria are still as valid today as they the report was released (Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission, 2008). Many of the recommendations have not been implemented and many of the issues remain. Those recommendations respond to an essential and overlooked need to resolve many of these community's concerns.

Recommendations for policy & practice

Cultural training for police around awareness of the Sudanese culture and other refugee cultures is urgently needed. We acknowledge that cultural training and awareness is a multi-dimensional area, and propose that certain behaviors, if understood and approached with a level of care, can create better relationships between the police and Sudanese youth. A response to discrimination identified within the police force needs to be addressed through educational workshops and cultural sensitivity training.

There are significant consequences when the media targets young people from these backgrounds, and the media has an ethical obligation to not expose these communities especially young people to more harm but display responsible journalism. Emerging evidence suggests that sport programmes for marginalized youth can enhance social skills and improve community connectedness (Pittaway & Dantas, 2021). These social and emotional skills include cognitive, emotional, and interactive skills, including personal life skills such as the ability to self-regulate emotions, improved self-esteem, character development and feeling empowerment (Gary & Rubin, 2016).

There is also an urgent need for more research into gang activity to be undertaken, as this is a recurring narrative that has impacted the Sudanese community for over 10 years (Vedelago & Millar, 2021). Without clear research that presents evidence to inform policy to support refugee communities especially refugee youth, the negative community perceptions will continue and continue ongoing discrimination.

Research strengths & limitations

A strength of this research was the connection that the first author had to the South Sudanese community, allowing for community access. The South Sudanese community of South-East Melbourne was highly supportive of the research. A limitation was the lack of diversity of South Sudanese tribes in the research. The largest tribe in South Sudan is the Dinka, and the vast majority of the participants were Nuer, who represent the second largest tribe. The transferability of this research is that the recommendations can be applied to refugees and asylum seeker youth as they experience similar acculturation stressors, racism and who feel alienated from the general community.

Conclusion

The findings of this study document that the African gang crisis in Melbourne is a misconstruction of complex factors impacting a visible group of young people and a divisive attempt by politicians and the media to influence inaccurate public discourse. The label of 'gang' does

not apply to most South Sudanese young people who gather in social groups as they feel safe when they go out in public. There are, however, divisions within the Sudanese community, due to poor educational outcomes, an entrenched distrust of police, and a breakdown of family due to acculturation stressors and ongoing discrimination.

Our study highlights that positive changes will take place when South Sudanese youth themselves begin to create and apply knowledge consciously to improve their lives and when they are empowered to make meaningful choices about the way they would like to contribute to life in Australia. Accurate portrayal of refugees and migrants by the media, will improve well-being and achieve long-term desirable and sustainable outcomes for South Sudanese youth. We acknowledge that there are gaps in our understanding but by respecting and listening to the voices of South Sudanese youth and their community elders we can set realistic policies and interventions that respect culture and lead to implementation of inclusive strategies.

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Ethics approval

Ethics approval was obtained from the first authors University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Consent for publication

All data was obtained with the consent of the participants involved in the study with ethics-approved consent forms.

Disclosure statement

The corresponding author worked as a program manager of a community organization which engaged in outreach work with some of the participants.

Authors' contributions

The authors made contributions to the design and conception of the study. The first author undertook data collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. The first author designed and drafted the manuscript. The second author contributed to the critical revision of the content of the research, analysis, drafts of the article and gave final approval for review.

Availability of data and material

The data used for this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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