

The Lost Boys of Sudan: Ambiguous Loss, Search for Family, and Reestablishing Relationships With Family Members*

Tom Luster

Desiree B. Qin

Laura Bates

Deborah J. Johnson

Meenal Rana**

Abstract: The *Lost Boys of Sudan* were separated from their families by civil war and subsequently lived in 3 other countries—Ethiopia, Kenya, and the United States. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 refugees who located surviving family members in Sudan after an average separation of 13.7 years. The interviews probed their experiences of ambiguous loss, relationships in the refugee camps, the search for family, and reestablishing relationships with family members living on another continent. With guidance from elders, peer groups functioned as surrogate families until the youth reestablished relationships with surviving members of their biological families.

Key Words: ambiguous loss, family reunification, refugees, separated children, transnational families, unaccompanied minors.

The Sudanese refugee youth known in the media as the “Lost Boys of Sudan” are an extreme example of separation and ambiguous loss among children victimized by war. The purpose of this study was to better understand the Sudanese refugees’ experiences of separation and ambiguous loss and their efforts to reestablish relationships with surviving members of their families on another continent.

The *Lost Boys of Sudan* embarked on a perilous four-country odyssey after being separated from their parents during the civil war in Sudan. They walked to refugee camps in Ethiopia where they lived from the late 1980s to May 1991 before they were violently expelled following a regime change. They then returned to Sudan and lived in displacement camps for almost a year before attacks by the Sudanese

government military forced them to seek shelter in a refugee camp constructed in Kakuma, Kenya. In addition to dealing with multiple traumatic events and chronic hardships, most of the children also struggled with uncertainty regarding the fate of their parents and siblings. Interviews with 147 Lost Boys in 1993 revealed that 72% of the boys were uncertain that they would ever see their families again (Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005). Many of the 3,800 Lost Boys who were resettled in the United States in 2000 – 2001 were still struggling with ambiguous loss—that is, not knowing if their parents were dead or alive (Boss, 2004).

Although the move to the United States took them farther from their villages in Sudan, better communications technology enabled them to continue

*Support for this research was provided by the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, Families and Communities Together Coalition, and University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University. We would like to thank the Sudanese refugees who participated in this study and shared their very personal stories with us. In addition, we are grateful to the two resettlement agencies—Refugee Services of St. Vincent Catholic Charities, Inc. and Lutheran Social Services of Michigan—who were our community partners in this project. We would also like to acknowledge Dr. Karen Shirer, who first suggested that we look at the issue of ambiguous loss with this population.

**Tom Luster is a professor in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University, 13 Human Ecology, East Lansing, MI 48824-1030 (luster@msu.edu). Desiree B. Qin is an assistant professor of Human Development in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University, 103E Human Ecology, East Lansing, MI 48823 (dqin@msu.edu). Laura Bates is a research assistant in the University Outreach and Engagement at Michigan State University, 93 Kellogg Center, East Lansing, MI 48824 (bateslau@msu.edu). Deborah J. Johnson is a professor in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University, 7 Human Ecology Building, East Lansing, MI 48824 (john1442@msu.edu). Meenal Rana is a graduate assistant in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University, 911 Cherry Lane Apartments, B, East Lansing, MI 48823 (ranameen@msu.edu).

searching for their families. Some of the Sudanese refugees in the United States were successful in finding family members, and at the time of our study, they were reestablishing relationships with parents and siblings who live in Sudan and neighboring countries. These transnational families were the focus of this study, which addressed the following research questions: (a) How did the youth describe their experiences of separation and ambiguous loss? (b) What supports and relationships sustained them during the period of separation? (c) How did the Sudanese youth reestablish relationships with surviving members of their families and what was their experience of reunification like?

Ambiguous Loss

Boss (2004) defined ambiguous loss “as a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present” (p. 554). She described two types of ambiguous loss—the first type involves a family member who though physically absent remains psychologically present because it is unclear whether the person is still alive; the second type of ambiguous loss involves a person who is physically present but psychologically absent because of conditions such as dementia, addiction, or depression. After being separated from their families, many of the Lost Boys experienced the first type of loss as they tried for years to determine if anyone else in their family survived the carnage. It was this uncertainty that made this situation particularly stressful (Boss, 2006). In contrast, when a parent dies, there is the pain and the grief process that follows as offspring come to terms with the death. There are also rituals, such as funerals and memorial services, to provide comfort to those who are grieving; nevertheless, some degree of closure is usually achieved. However, in the case of ambiguous loss, closure cannot be achieved. Moreover, there are no traditional rituals to provide comfort to those who grieve or anxiously search for answers about the fate of their loved ones.

Although refugees, as a group, often must deal with ambiguous loss, there is surprisingly limited research on this topic with this population (Rousseau, Rufagari, Bagilishya, & Measham, 2004). Moreover, little is known about how children experience and manage situations in which they are uncertain whether their parents are alive or dead. Finally, the way that children cope with ambiguous loss may

differ from the adults who were studied by Boss (2006) in developing her theoretical framework.

Living Apart From Parents

In the past century alone, numerous wars and regime changes have resulted in large numbers of children being separated from parents (for a review, see Ressler, Boothby, & Steinbock, 1988). An early study of separation conducted by Freud and Burlingham (1943) concluded that children who were evacuated during the Nazi air raids on British cities fared worse if they were separated from their parents than children who stayed with their parents in cities being bombed. This and other studies of separated children influenced Bowlby’s (1973) thinking about attachment and the important role that primary caregivers play in helping their children feel secure, especially during stressful times.

In the process of immigration and refugee resettlement, parent-child separation occurs at very high rate (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). In some cases, when separation is short and well managed, it may not necessarily lead to problems in the family (Simpao, 1999). However, most research has shown that long parent-child separations have a negative impact on parent-child relations, often leading to detachment (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Falicov, 2004), communication problems, and conflicts over discipline between parents and children (Sewell-Coker, Hamilton-Collins, & Fein, 1985), and psychological problems including depression in children (Suarez-Orozco et al.).

Unaccompanied children of all ages showed distress reactions when they were observed following the separation from their families (Ressler et al., 1988). However, more recent work has argued that to understand the effect of children’s separations, one must consider the context of the child prior to and during the separation (Mann, 2004; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). The effects of separation are likely to be different if the child lived in a culture where parental care was provided almost exclusively by the mother than if the child is from a culture in which caregiving responsibilities are delegated to older siblings and cousins while the mother pursues subsistence tasks or provides care to a newborn (Mann). For example, mixed-age groups of boys in the Dinka tribe in Sudan experience separations from their parents as a normal part of development when they take cattle to pastures in the *Sudd*

(swampy areas near the Nile) during the dry season (Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005). Circumstances after the separation, such as whether or not the separated child continues to live with siblings or other relatives and whether or not the child establishes supportive relationships with other caring adults and peers, are other factors that are likely to influence children's experiences of separation. Thus, our investigation focused on whom the Sudanese youth lived with while separated from their families and the importance of these relationships.

Reunification With Family Members

After separation, the process of becoming reunited with long-lost family members, though presumably joyous, can also bring challenges. Previous research has documented that family members have adjustments to make when they reconnect after a long separation (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). This was evident in a group of Cuban unaccompanied minors who were sent to the United States by their parents when the Castro regime came to power. In the book *Operation Pedro Pan*, Conde (1999) devoted a chapter to the children's reunion with their parents. Conde reported that during the long period of separation, some of the youth had idealized their parents, and the parents had difficulty measuring up to the expectations of their children after reunification. Many problems surfaced after reunion, including overprotectiveness and infantilizing adult children. Other refugee youth resented having to deal with adultification (Burton, 2007) that included financially supporting their parents until they could learn the language and find jobs or teaching their parents about an unfamiliar culture (Conde).

Studies of children who fled or were evacuated from war zones during the past century have shown that a number of factors have a bearing on how well children adjust to reunification, including the age of the child at separation, the duration of separation, the quality of relationships the child had with substitute caregivers, children's assimilation to the host country (e.g., language, culture), and whether or not the child developed psychological disorders as a result of their war experiences (Ressler et al., 1988). Another factor is whether the reunification takes place in the child's natal country or adopted homeland, where the child knows the culture and language better than their parents. Moreover, children who are fostered into higher socioeconomic status (SES)

families in a country with more educational and economic opportunities may have reservations about returning home; this was the case for some Finnish children who were evacuated to Sweden during World War II (Ressler et al.).

The Sudanese youth were separated from their families for a much longer period of time than most other unaccompanied children who have been studied to date (Ressler et al., 1988, p. 123) and also lived in more host countries than is typical. Given the duration of separation, the adversity the Sudanese youth experienced along the way, and their exposure to varied cultures, what would it be like for them to reconnect with surviving members of their family once they found them?

Method

We have taken a modified grounded theory approach to the study of separation, loss, and reunification among Sudanese refugee youth with their parents. The 10 youth interviewed in this study were a subsample of participants in the larger research project with 73 Sudanese youth, which began in 2001, shortly after their arrival in the United States. The focus of the larger study was on risk, resilience, and adaptation to a new culture among refugee youth resettled without their parents (Bates et al., 2005; Luster, Bates, & Johnson, 2006). We were cautious about delving into their experiences in Africa because of the trauma they experienced on their sojourn through East Africa. However, during interviews and focus groups conducted over a 6-year period, many youth spontaneously shared their experiences of separation and loss. In this article, we describe how children in transnational families were separated, lived apart, and managed to reunite with family members. In a subsequent article, we intend to more closely examine how the Sudanese children coped with separation and ambiguous loss while living in the refugee camps.

Participants

Selection criteria for this study were (a) being part of the group known as the *Lost Boys of Sudan* who were resettled in the United States in 2000 – 2001 from the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, (b) having experienced separation from their parents and uncertainty regarding their fate while they lived in the refugee camps, and (c) subsequently having located

surviving members of their families and reestablished relationships. For this part of the study, we used a snowball sampling approach; one of the benefits of such an approach was that most of the youth had an opportunity to hear about the study from a Sudanese refugee before they decided to participate in interviews. Our first interviews were conducted with three youth who contacted us to let us know they had found their families. Those who participated in the early interviews put us in contact with others who had found their families. In addition, one of the resettlement agencies we collaborated with referred us to a youth who had just returned from visiting his family in Sudan. Everyone we spoke with about the study agreed to be interviewed. This approach resulted in a sample of 10 Sudanese male refugees who were separated from their parents at a very young age ($M = 7.4$ years, $SD = 2.62$). At the time of their separation, the children ranged in age from 3 to 12 years. It should be noted that some of the youth did not know their exact age, and in those cases, we used the age estimated by the United Nations (UN) that is based on their level of maturity when examined in the refugee camps. The year that the children were separated from their families ranged from 1985 to 1991.

Seven of the participants were from the Dinka tribe, the largest tribe in southern Sudan, and the other three belonged to the Moru tribe from the Western Equatoria area of Sudan. The youth had differing resettlement experiences depending on whether they arrived in the United States as minors or adults. Three of the youth were minors at the time of resettlement and were placed in foster families, whereas those aged 18 years and older lived in peer groups and had to become economically self-sufficient after 4 months of welfare assistance. At the time of interview, the average age of the respondents was 25.8 years ($SD = 5.99$). The average time period between separation from the family and talking with a family member by phone was 13.7 years ($SD = 3.26$).

We did not attempt to include women in our sample for several reasons. Of the 3,800 Sudanese youth resettled in the United States, less than 100 were women (McKelvey, 2003), and only 13 were resettled in our area. In addition, the women often differed from the men in the circumstances of the separation and their living situations while separated. Fortunately, the experiences of women have been described in other publications (Bates et al., 2005; Luster et al., in press).

Procedure

The first author conducted 9 out of the 10 interviews (the third author conducted the 10th interview). The participants were given a choice regarding the location of the interview. Six of the interviews were conducted in the first interviewer's home and the other four were conducted in the homes of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of four parts: (a) who the youth lived with in Sudan and how they became separated from their families, (b) how they coped while they were separated from their families and their experiences of ambiguous loss, (c) how they were able to locate their families, and (d) their experiences of reconnecting with family members. The interviews were 2 – 2.5 hr long, conducted in English, and videotaped with participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that used both an established theoretical perspective and an emergent theory derived from the youth themselves. In particular, as with traditional grounded theory, this approach pays attention to the complexities of the participants' lived experiences embedded in unique social contexts (Fassinger, 2005). Our participants' unique experiences and cross-national contexts make this approach optimal; ultimately, we can expand our current understanding of separation and ambiguous loss among children and how they cope with this loss and try to reconnect with their families.

After all the responses to key research questions were transcribed, each author read through all the transcribed data and noted general impressions of the data in analytical memos (Maxwell, 1996). Next, we used a three-step coding procedure considered most appropriate by grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005): open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, four authors did "open coding," an "open" process whereby the researchers fracture the data into discrete unit of analysis, assign initial labels or codes that came from both the theory ascribed and the emergent areas of the data, and note themes emerging from the data, without making any prior assumptions about what may be discovered (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes were developed primarily inductively from the data and consisted of codes both constructed by the researcher during

analysis of on the data (e.g., “Refugee mentor support”) and using the words of the participants (e.g., “My friends were like family”; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To monitor for research bias, the four researchers frequently cross-checked their codes and wrote analytical memos that were shared within the group.

Second, we conducted “axial coding,” that is, grouping the codes and concepts into higher level conceptual categories, which deepens the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, codes such as “Refugee mentor support” and “My friends were like family” were grouped into the category of “External Support at the Refugee Camp.” Then, we indexed selected categories, codes, and linked quotations into a number of matrices arranged by research questions (e.g., “Separation,” “Contacts in the Refugee Camp,” “Searching for Family,” “Reconnection,” “Maintaining Transnational Families”). This served the dual function of data reduction and displaying the analyses in a format that allowed each theme to be grasped (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Finally, we conducted “selective coding,” a process in which the researchers integrate the categories to form a theoretical structure of the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) through making comparisons and contrasts and then selecting the stories that best illustrate the lived experiences of the participants (Fassinger, 2005). Accordingly, the research team held two meetings to discuss the key stories told by the participants and the most effective ways to represent these stories.

Results

The Results section is organized according to the sequence of events and processes experienced by the Sudanese youth: (a) separation, (b) the experience of ambiguous loss, (c) relationships in the refugee camps, (d) searching for families, (e) family reunification, and (f) reestablishing relationships with family members.

Separation: Becoming Transnational Families

In the first segment of the interviews, the Sudanese youth were asked about the circumstances that led to their separation from their families. Three types of family separation were identified by the youth: (a) most of the youth were separated when their villages

or cattle camps were attacked by armed forces of the Government of Sudan, (b) one youth was separated when the city in which he resided was counterattacked by the rebel army of the south—the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, and (c) two of the youth reported planned separations in which they were sent to displacement camps farther to the south presumably to keep them safe from attacks by government forces or government-sponsored militias. One of these youth said that although the separation was planned, he did not think his parents had a choice in the matter, “My family did not give me up saying something like we don’t love you. There was no choice. I have to go.” He went on to note that families who did not comply were penalized by having their livestock seized by southern Sudanese officials.

Most of the youth went to Ethiopian refugee camps. They recalled the many hardships they experienced on the way to Ethiopia including lack of food, water, and blankets. “We just survived on wild fruit and drinking stagnant water. We ate whatever meat that we found that was leftover from a lion” (uneaten meat from a kill), one youth reported. Other youth recalled lions preying on the children during the trek or peers dying of thirst as they crossed the desert in eastern Sudan. Many other children died from disease and malnutrition once they reached the refugee camps. One youth reflected on the toll taken by the group that he arrived with, “We were the first group in Ethiopia. We were like 500 children. And then around 300 of those children died.” Older children in the group had to bury their peers.

Not Knowing: The Experience of Ambiguous Loss

All the youth in our sample dealt with the hazards of the trek to the refugee camps, and most arrived in the camps in Ethiopia and Kenya without adult relatives and not knowing if their parents and siblings had survived the attacks on their villages. Those who knew that their parents were alive when they left wondered if they had survived the heavy fighting that continued through the decade of the 1990s. Each youth interviewed described the great distress they experienced struggling with the effects of ambiguous loss, especially feelings of sadness, loneliness, and depression in the period immediately following the separation. “It happened to me. I went through that. I was hospitalized because of depression and mental illness.” Although men were discouraged from displaying “nonmasculine” emotions,

many of the youth reported that they cried frequently, especially after arriving in Ethiopia. “It was really a nightmare . . . Some people become depressed. Some people would be calling their parent’s name at night.” We heard repeatedly that the children who could not cope with loss died, “I think the majority of people, they died in Ethiopia. Because they are thinking about their parents.” While they were separated, they also worried about their families in Sudan, “I was worried all the time. Sometimes I just lock myself in my room and all I do is cry.” Another youth succinctly described the experience of ambiguous loss: “The kids were most thinking—Are they alive or are they not alive?”

Many of the youth reported feeling frustrated by the perceived loss of emotional support from their parents, “The major problem of being a child without a parent is that you always feel that you are missing something . . . that parental love from the family is not there. To me I missed that parental care. It made me feel that I am lost.” One of the youth who was only 2 or 3 years old when he was separated, missed being comforted by his mother, “When you are a little kid, you need your mom so bad. You need something, you cry. So your mom, she is not there to hold you, to calm you down.” The participants reported missing their parents, especially during hard times when they thought their parents could have provided support and protection. One youth observed that the boys thought most often about their parents during difficult times, much like some people only pray when they are experiencing difficulties, “When you are in problems, you frequently call the name of God for help. When you are not in trouble, you may pay less attention to God (laughs).”

While the months turned to years in Ethiopia and Kenya, youth reported experiencing a great deal of frustration because they were unable to obtain any news about their families, “I did not know whether they were alive or not. They did not know if I was alive or not. Therefore this brings an issue of frustration.” With no end of the war in sight, the youth had to come to terms with their situation and try to put troubling thoughts about their missing parents out of their mind so they could get on with other tasks such as attending school. Illustrating Boss’ (2006) idea of tempering mastery, one youth reflected, “It happened. I did not have any control over it. I just think I wish it did not happen. But it did and I could not do anything about it.”

Relationships in the Refugee Camps

In the process of coping with the ambiguous loss and coming to terms with their situation, all the youth received emotional and instrumental support from various sources. This support helped them tremendously during the difficult journey. The youth reported that this support gave them a sense of community (sometimes family like) and, more importantly, hope during those dark years of life. Two of the youth mentioned living with temporary families along the way or in the refugee camps. One youth, for example, met a young couple with two children shortly after escaping from his village. He stayed with them for a while and felt very grateful for their help along the way. A number of youth also mentioned that people from their clan were very supportive and helpful in the refugee camps. For example, one Dinka boy mentioned that in his clan, “any child is everybody’s child.” Another youth met a man from the same clan who offered him a small garden plot and water for his plants. This enabled him to grow vegetables to sell to support himself in school.

One of the most crucial and consistent sources of support the youth mentioned was their peers. In the refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, the majority of the youth lived with the “minor group,” that is, other Lost Boys who were separated from their family. They formed their own family: “We decided to come together older boys and younger boys and those in the middle and stay together as a family . . . we played together and went to school together.” For the youth, the shared experiences, understanding, and emotional support of peers formed the most valuable community that enabled them to make it through. As one youth noted, “What helped me much was my friends.”

They also mentioned the vital emotional support their caretakers provided. Caretakers were adult community members living in the refugee camps who were assigned to assist the youth who lived in groups. Some youth also had informal mentors from their tribe. As one youth noted, “When I was crying, they would come and talk to me. And they would tell me a story of what happened and how I should deal with this. So they would give me advice, so that it would calm me down. Until I stop crying and forget about what was making me cry.” The mentors and caregivers also instilled a sense of hope in the youth: “They encourage you. They tell you, ‘You know, these things happen. You don’t know if your

parents are alive or dead. Don't worry. One day you are going to find your parents'." Besides emotional support, the caregivers and mentors also gave the youth suggestions for how to cope, for example, encouraging the youth to be strong physically and mentally, to forget about the past, and to focus on their education. The young men from the Moru tribe mentioned the same man, a deputy headmaster at an elementary school in Kakuma who was from their tribe. One youth remembered him fondly, "he understood me most . . . he was like an uncle." When this youth first arrived at the camp, he was too distressed to go to school or do anything. It was the deputy headmaster who sat down with him, listened to him, and encouraged him to make the best use of his time by going to school. The youth did and ended up becoming a teacher in the school.

Searching for Families

The Sudanese youth described using both formal and informal methods to try to obtain information about their families while they were still in the refugee camp. Some attempted the formal strategy of sending letters to their villages via the Red Cross; most of the youth who sent letters to their families received no reply and were left to wonder if their parents had left the village seeking safety elsewhere or if they had died. Two of the youth in our sample received replies to their Red Cross letters; one of the youth received a letter from his parents in 1996 and the other received a letter from his brother in 1997. It was interesting to note the differing reactions to the letter. One youth was skeptical regarding the authenticity of the letter and worried that someone sent him positive news (possibly fabricated) just to keep his hopes up; the other youth was much relieved to hear from his family, "When I found this letter I was very happy . . . After that one I tried to write a letter again to my brother. Then my father replied. He said some stuff, and my brother would like write it down." The second letter contained news that three of his siblings had died.

Three youth heard news of their parents using an informal strategy—asking new arrivals in the refugee camps from their area if they had seen their family. In 1994, a new arrival told one of the youth that he had seen his mother by the Nile River recently. Similarly, in 1995, one of the youth met someone from his home area who reported that he had seen his parents. A relative who arrived in Kakuma told

a third youth that he thought his mother was dead. Neither those who received the letters nor those who heard news via new arrivals received any further information about their parents before leaving Kakuma for the United States in 2000 – 2001. However, two of the youth located siblings or half siblings in the camps; one youth found his brother in the Pochalla displacement camp in 1991 and the other youth reunited with three half siblings who arrived in Kakuma in 1999.

Once they reached the United States, the refugees explored new avenues for contacting their families. Their resourcefulness and social networks, which seemed so important to their survival in Africa, were evident again in their ability to track down surviving family members. Although scattered across the United States, the Lost Boys maintained contact with their peers via the phone and eventually through e-mail. They also used phone cards to stay in touch with friends and relatives who were still in Kenya or who moved to neighboring countries, such as Uganda. News traveled rapidly through both the United States and the African networks; thus, if a relative in Uganda was searching for someone in the United States, knowing the phone number of one Sudanese refugee was often enough information to locate the person he was looking for in another part of the country. Likewise, the Sudanese refugees in the United States sought news of family members from their contacts in Uganda and Kenya. (There was no phone or mail service in southern Sudan at the time.) Peace talks in 2003 – 2004 and a peace agreement in 2005 made it possible for people to enter southern Sudan and search for survivors. As an example of the chain of informal contacts used to locate family members, in 2005, one youth contacted an uncle in New York, the uncle had found his brother in Uganda, and the uncle then crossed the border with Sudan to find the father of the youth. Finally, the father came to Uganda to talk to his long-lost son by phone.

Family Reunification—First Conversations

When the Sudanese youth resettled in the United States in 2001, there was little hope of being reunited with their families. At the time, the civil war was still dragging on in southern Sudan, and there was no mail or phone service in that part of the country. How would they ever find each other? Moreover, if there was such a reunion, as joyful as

that would be, it was likely to be complicated by the years that had passed and the events that had changed the members of the family. It might also mean finding out that loved ones were among the more than 2 million people who died during the civil war in Sudan (Bixler, 2005). What would it be like for the Sudanese boys to reconnect with family members after struggling with ambiguous loss for more than a decade?

The Sudanese youth remembered vividly the first time they talked to a parent or sibling and provided very moving accounts of these conversations. In several cases, the first “conversations” with their mothers involved mothers and sons listening to each other cry over the phone, “She started crying. And then I started the same (crying) too. So we spent like 30 minutes with no communication, just crying on the phone.” When the mothers could talk, they often said a prayer of thanks that God had kept their child alive.

Given the long period of time that had passed, initially there was often some skepticism on the part of the Sudanese youth or the family member that the person on the phone line was actually who he or she claimed to be. One youth who first talked to his father in 2006 reported, “He say, ‘It’s not you!’ I say, ‘It’s me!’ Because my accent’s changed a little bit.” Moreover, the parents were hearing the voice of a man after last hearing that voice as a child’s voice. It took this youth 2 days to convince his father he was talking to his son. Sometimes, parents confirmed their identity by using a “pet” nickname for the youth that he had not heard in close to 15 years. Sometimes, the youth confirmed their identity by wiring money to a family member. Who else would send money to them from the United States?

In their first conversations, the relief and joy experienced by talking to a family member were often tempered by news of the death of loved ones. However, even bad news brought resolution of ambiguous loss. One youth, who found out from an aunt that his mother and three of his siblings had died, described his mixed feelings, “It was heavy to take it. But if she had not told me, I would not be able to find out who was alive and who was dead. Anyway, by knowing who is alive and who is dead, it gives me very big relief. Although I have not been able to see them, I feel much happier than before” (knowing that some of his siblings were alive). Another youth who talked to his brother initially found out his dad was dead, but they agreed to focus

their conversation on the good news rather than the bad news, “We are still alive. Our mom is still alive. Let us talk about the good news, that we met.” This youth later talked to his mother who revealed, “I can’t believe you are alive; I already made a funeral for you at the time your Dad passed” (10 years ago).

Although sometimes the youth had to bear the news of the death of multiple family members, the emotion that the youth remembered most when recalling those first conversations was happiness, “When we talked for the first time when she came to Kakuma, it was so great. I even cried. It was so great, yeah (big smile).” Another youth described the way he felt by saying, “I felt like a child to someone for the first time.”

Reestablishing Relationships

After first conversations, the youth maintained regular contact with their families, mostly through the phone, and were eager to reestablish relations with family members. Three youth also returned to visit their families in Africa. All the youth expressed great joy about reconnecting with their families. As one youth said, “It is really better now, even though I didn’t meet them physically. When I talked with them for the first time, I felt like I had met them physically. And when they sent me their photos, it was great to see them in the photos. It was the same thing, I felt like I met them physically. I can’t wait for the day that I will go there and see them.” For many youth, even after spending most of their life with other families, such as foster families and peers, the family bond remained strong. One youth thus compared his biological family and his peer group family, “My biological family is still my family and the group who lived with me all those years are my family too. Because most of them are my cousins, my brother, and my best friends, so we become one family too. So we are like a second family. Yeah, but I keep my biological family first because they are the people who born me and I am still their son, I am still their brother; so they are my first family.”

Along with feelings of joy at reunification, youth faced new challenges in their process of reestablishing transnational family relations. First, for the majority of the youth, having lived in different cultures has changed them and influenced their interactions with their families. One youth, for example, described his culture as diffuse because he had lived in four countries, and while in Kakuma, he

interacted with refugees from many different cultures. So he was no longer certain what proper Sudanese culture was or how close he was to the central tenets and ritual knowledge. He was more of a hybrid. Sometimes, he made mistakes by saying things that were not exactly proper in his original culture. He had to look to his younger brother to help him know what was culturally appropriate, such as how to give a funeral for his mother: "He knows culture more than I do." A couple of the youth mentioned that their family did not understand them as well as their friends, who went through similar experiences with them. Language barriers were also an issue for some youth, particularly those who left home at a young age. When one youth talked with his mother on the phone, for example, it was hard for him to catch the meaning of the idioms she used in their conversations. It was difficult for the youth to learn about a culture when they were not living in it. Second, for the majority of the youth, connection was more difficult because they have not yet been able to talk with family members face to face. They could not see what was communicated by facial expressions when they talked with each other on the phone. For example, one youth who was separated from his parents at age 5 felt frustrated that he had only talked with his family on the phone without seeing them after all these years: "I never meet them. You know when I was separated from them until now I never see them. And I just talk to them on the phone."

After reconnecting with their long-lost children, most parents tried to take up their role as a parent by providing their sons with advice about life. In one of the conversations with his mom, for example, one youth mentioned that people had different colored skin in America. His mom told him that people are people. It doesn't matter if they look different than you. God created people alike: "I am just saying this because I never had a chance to teach you anything. It is late, but I am still your Mom, and I can do that." Similarly, another youth mentioned that his mother started to give him advice. She wanted him to work hard and make a future for himself and not to get into trouble or do anything that would "humble his future." The majority of youth also mentioned that their parents encouraged them to go to school and finish their education. For example, one youth's mother reminded him of his uncle who had an education and that he was respected everywhere he went. She told him if he

goes to school, he will be somebody "because it is the only thing you have. You can learn and become somebody."

After reconnecting with their families, all the youth took on new family roles, particularly provider roles, given their better financial status (relative to their other family members) and access to resources in the United States. This was the case even in families where the father was alive or the youth was not the oldest son in the family. Some youth worked at multiple jobs to support themselves here as well as their family members in Sudan. They frequently sent remittances back to their Sudanese family for a variety of purposes, including medical needs, transportation, food, housing, and education for family members. One youth purchased equipment and hired labor for the family farm. Those who went home for a visit brought cash with them. One youth, for example, brought back \$3,000 for his family on his return trip to Sudan. Often, the Sudanese youth had to meet the financial needs of family members in different countries (e.g., Sudan, Kenya, Uganda). Some of the Sudanese youth had another brother in the United States who could help support the family. For others, the pressure was on them alone. As one youth said, "For my family it is only me alone who lives in the U.S. and everything is under my hand, in my care. Every sick person, it is me to pay the bill. Everybody to travel, it is me to pay the fare for the bus or the plane."

The youth considered supporting their families financially to be their responsibility. There was little sentiment of resentment or ambivalence. For example, one youth said that it was not only the father's job to provide for the family, it was the son's role as well: "It is my responsibility too. I know that I am the only strong person who can help people. That is why I do it. It could be embarrassed and shameful to me if I let any of my relatives die because of sickness that I can afford to treat or to send her to the hospital and pay her bill. I can't neglect them although life is hard here too. I need to go to school and work and pay all bills here and so forth. I know it is hard but there is nothing I can do because it is my goal, it is my responsibility."

However, in some cases, the youth did feel the pressure to balance their work and their education. Three of the youth mentioned that their schooling suffered because of their financial responsibilities. They constantly had to balance the pressure to work to send money back with their own need to go to

school and pay tuition. One youth mentioned that he has kept upgrading his job/pay in order to send more money back to Africa. He sends back everything that he can afford and sometimes has to decide between sending money and going to school. His financial responsibilities take time away from schoolwork, which makes it more difficult to be successful in school. "I am a person who always wants to get good grades, but sometimes it does not happen because of work. You don't put a full-time focus on education."

In terms of future plans, most of the youth mentioned that they want to get their U.S. citizenship, finish their degrees, and then go back to Sudan to be with their family and also help rebuild their country. Three youth hoped to bring their mothers over to the United States.

Discussion

This study examined the Sudanese refugees' experiences of (a) separation and ambiguous loss, (b) their relationships and support system while separated, and (c) their efforts to reestablish family relationships. Interviews with the 10 Sudanese youth showed that all experienced separation and ambiguous loss at an early age. They continued to live with the uncertainty of the fate of their families through their journeys in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, where they received the vital support from community elders, peers, and camp caregivers. After arrival in the United States, the youth started their transcontinental efforts to locate family members through extended families, friends, and acquaintances. All the youth we interviewed for the study had reconnected with their families, though the majority had yet to meet their families face to face.

Participants' description of the emotions they experienced supports Boss' (2004) conclusion regarding the stress and strong emotions associated with the uncertainty of ambiguous loss. Some youth reported being immobilized by these strong emotions at times. As difficult as it was, living with ambiguous loss may have been preferable to knowing that parents were dead. The children could at least hold on to hope that they would see their parents again, and many of the youth reported that hope of eventually being reunited with their parents helped them find the strength to get through the most difficult parts of their journey. The importance

of hope is found in other accounts of coping with extraordinary circumstances (Frankl, 2006), and Boss (2006) linked hope to resilient outcomes in adults struggling with ambiguous loss.

Our findings also echo previous research regarding separated children in how they adapt to new families and less structured family forms (Mann, 2004; Ressler et al., 1988). The elders in the refugee camp played an important role in their adaptation by encouraging the youth to focus on the present and future rather than on what they had lost. In particular, they stressed the importance of getting an education for themselves and their family and to help rebuild Sudan once the war ended. They also encouraged the youth to stay hopeful about finding their parents. For the youth in our study, the peer groups functioned much like surrogate families as they helped each other complete the tasks of daily living. They also provided emotional support and engaged in leisure activities together that served as distractions from troubling thoughts.

This article makes three contributions to current research on ambiguous loss, separation, and reunification with families. First, this article examines the experiences of ambiguous loss among children and provides detailed accounts of the contexts of loss and separation. Most of the past research on ambiguous loss deals with how adults cope with this type of loss. In general, children are rarely in the position of not knowing whether their parents are dead or alive. Thus, it is not surprising that there is a dearth of research on children's experience of this type of ambiguous loss. Examining the experiences of ambiguous loss among children can provide important developmental insights into the impact that suffering from ambiguous loss and coping with the loss may have on children as they grow into adulthood.

Second, this article highlights the important role of cultural contexts in coping with ambiguous loss (Mann, 2004). In her work, Boss (2006) noted that those who are resilient manage to move on with their lives even though they have unanswered questions about their loved ones. One factor that has been linked to resilience in those coping with ambiguous loss is tempering the need for mastery (Boss, 2006)—one must learn to live with ambiguity. The Sudanese youth in our study described the cultural notion of control in life—many things in life, such as war and separation, were beyond their control. Our findings show that the cultural notion of mastery in the Sudanese culture helps the youth cope

with ambiguous loss. Further, a striking theme in the findings was the Sudanese youth's ability to maintain a sense of family through the support of elders and peers in a situation of ambiguous loss. Our analyses show that this was aided by their cultural context of the tribes. The Dinka tribe, from which 70% of our sample came, has an economy that is based on cattle herding, which raises boys to be self-reliant from an early age, to endure hardship, and to depend on other boys and a few adult traditional leaders for social support and guidance (Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005). The influence of positive peer groups for boys has also been noted in Somali cattle herding societies (Mann; Rousseau, Said, Gagne, & Bibeau, 1998). Boys separated from families by war in Somalia were viewed as coping successfully in part because of their experience tending cattle away from parents starting at about age 6. The Sudanese cultural imperative to respect their elders also primed the youth to be receptive to the advice of their elders in foreign refugee camps.

Third, our study contributes to current research on reconnection with families after separation. Several of the youth noted cultural, experiential, and language differences between them and their families. The loss of language and culture they have experienced is common to other immigrant groups (Falicov, 2004). Unlike most immigrant groups, the Sudanese refugees are not just bicultural or binational; their cultural identity is a fusion of all the cultures they experienced on their four-country odyssey. Although these young men have strong identity with their cultures of origin, studies conducted while they were still in refugee camps noted the strong influence of Western nongovernmental organizations on their development. As one Dinka representative said, "These boys don't belong to the Dinkas any more, their culture is UNICEF" (Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005, p. 78). Youth newly reconnected with family face multilayered responsibilities that place almost impossible demands on them: get an education, financially support the family, and help the nation. The parents in these new transnational families can provide affective support but are unlikely to be able to offer instrumental support. Role reversals occur in many immigrant families when children take on parentified role after migration (e.g., translating for parents, filling out forms; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Sluzki, 1979). However, in most cases, these new responsibilities involve providing cultural or language assistance only. The young men have accepted these new roles

without complaint or resentment sometimes expressed by other reconnected children (Conde, 1999). Their strong sense of family is consonant with values of the Dinka and other African cultures. For example, the Dinka concept of "Cieng," meaning to live together in harmony and to look after (Deng, 1972), is a central concept in their culture.

Limitations of This Study

For this research on transnational families, we wanted to identify only those youth who had reconnected with close family members in Africa. Thus, we decided to use a snowball sampling technique to identify youth who had found their families and were willing to talk with us about their personal stories. As a result, these youth may not be representative of the larger group and may overrepresent those who have more connections within the Sudanese community.

Social Justice

At roughly the same time that many Sudanese children were fleeing to Ethiopia in the late 1980s, the UN drafted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention on the Rights of the Child describes the childhood the Lost Boys did not have. Among the rights of the Sudanese children not upheld at various times were the right to life, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents, protection from violence, access to quality health care, adequate nutrition, and clean drinking water, and the right to profess and practice their religion (United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, 1990). The story of the Lost Boys draws attention to the social injustices experienced by children in war zones and those fleeing from conflict. According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (2001), the proportion of war victims who are civilians rather than combatants has increased from 5% to more than 90% in recent decades. It is important that greater efforts be made to protect the rights and welfare of children and other civilians caught in these conflicts.

It is also important to help them rebuild their lives and communities once the fighting stops. All the youth in our sample who returned to Sudan were disturbed by the ongoing plight of the people struggling to survive in southern Sudan. The world's attention has shifted to the genocide occurring in

Darfur, as well it should; however, it is important not to forget southern Sudan where people continue to die because of lack of medical treatment and inadequate food and clean water.

Our research with the Sudanese refugees has also raised some social justice issues regarding policies in the areas of refugee resettlement and immigration/family reunification. Because financial support for parents and siblings is a cultural rather than a legal obligation for the Sudanese, it is not considered in determination of eligibility for some kinds of assistance, such as financial aid for education. Refugee resettlement policy should recognize the unique situation of this group, respect cultural definitions of family, and provide sufficient support to maximize their prospects for success.

As a nation that values the family as the basic unit of society, U.S. immigration policy as it relates to unaccompanied refugee youth should promote family reunification as a social benefit to both the youth and the society. Several youth who have attempted to bring family members to the United States have encountered financial and policy barriers. Because we have provided them with a home, we should create policies that will support them in their families and thus help them become more productive participants in our society.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

The Lost Boys are an extreme example of separation and ambiguous loss. However, given the increasing numbers of family separations resulting from conflicts or planned immigration, practitioners are likely to encounter family members who are struggling with losses as well as the stress of reunification. Findings from this study suggest some implications for family practitioners.

First, their peer group functions as an essential support system for these youth during their long separation. As Mann (2004) noted, children living in peer groups replicate the roles of various family members. Alternate family ties should be respected because they continue to be an important source of support for the Sudanese in their adjustment. Second, in the context of family reunification, many youth have taken on the role of primary provider. Although these family obligations must be respected, such responsibilities may not be realistic initially. Practitioners may counsel youth that balancing current support with long-term goals (i.e., education)

will benefit all. Third, estrangement from newly reunited families resulting from their exposure to different cultures, along with the effects of long separation and changed family roles, may lead to additional stress for the youth and family members.

Around the world, an estimated 1 million children are separated from their families because of war and political violence (Mann, 2004). Moreover, in a large study of adolescents from new immigrant families in the United States, Suarez-Orozco et al. (2002) reported that 85% of the youth were separated from one or both parents for a significant period of time during the immigration process. Given that a substantial number of youth who resettle in the United States have experienced separation from parents, it is important to further our understanding of how these experiences affect family processes and children's development.

References

- Bates, L., Baird, D., Johnson, D. J., Lee, R. E., Luster, T., & Rehagen, C. (2005). Sudanese refugee youth in foster care: The "Lost Boys" in America. *Child Welfare, 84*, 631–648.
- Bixler, M. (2005). *The Lost Boys of Sudan*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Boss, P. (2004). Ambiguous loss research, theory, and practice: Reflections after 9/11. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*, 551–566.
- Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, trauma, and resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Separation, anxiety and anger*. New York: Basic Books.
- Burton, L. (2007). Childhood adultification in economically disadvantaged families: A conceptual model. *Family Relations, 56*, 329–345.
- Conde, Y. M. (1999). *Operation Pedro Pan*. New York: Routledge.
- Deng, F. M. (1972). *The Dinka of Sudan*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Falicov, C. J. (2004). The family migration experience: Loss and resilience. In M. Suarez-Orozco & M. Paez (Eds.), *Latinos: The research agenda* (pp. 274–288). Berkeley: California University Press.
- Fassinger, R. E. (2005). Paradigms, praxis, problems, and promise: Grounded theory in counseling psychology research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*, 156–166.
- Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Freud, A., & Burlingham, D. T. (1943). *War and children*. New York: Medical War Books.
- Jeppsson, O., & Hjern, A. (2005). Traumatic stress in context: A study of unaccompanied minors from southern Sudan. In D. Ingleby (Ed.), *Force migration and mental health: Rethinking the care of refugees and displaced persons* (pp. 67–80). New York: Springer.
- Luster, T., Bates, L., & Johnson, D. J. (2006). Risk and resilience. In F. Villarruel & T. Luster (Eds.) & H. E. Fitzgerald, R. Zucker, & K. Fearark (Series Eds.), *The crisis in youth mental health: Vol. 2. Disorders in adolescence* (Vol. 2, pp. 27–52). Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Luster, T., Johnson, D. J., & Bates, L. (in press). Lost Boys finding their way: Challenges, changes, and small victories of young Sudanese refugees in the United States. In R. Dalla, J. DeFrain, J. M. Johnson, & D. A. Abbott (Eds.), *Immigrant family strengths*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Mann, G. (2004). Separated children: Care and support in context. In J. Boyden & J. de Berry (Eds.), *Children and youth on the frontline:*

- Ethnography, armed conflict and displacement* (pp. 3–22). New York: Berghahn Books.
- Maxwell, J. (1996). *Qualitative research design*. London: Sage Publications.
- McKelvey, T. (2003). Where are the “Lost Girls”? *Slate*. Retrieved January 17, 2008, from <http://www.slate.com/id/2089225/>
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the second generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ressler, E. M., Boothby, N., & Steinbock, D. (1988). *Unaccompanied children: Care and protection in wars, natural disasters, and refugee movements*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rousseau, C., Rufagari, M., Bagilishya, D., & Measham, T. (2004). Remaking family life: Strategies for re-establishing continuity among Congolese refugees during the family reunification process. *Social Science and Medicine*, 59, 1095–1108.
- Rousseau, C., Said, T. M., Gagne, M. J., & Bibeau, C. (1998). Resilience in unaccompanied minors from the north of Somalia. *Psychoanalytic Review*, 85, 615–637.
- Sewell-Coker, B., Hamilton-Collins, J., & Fein, E. (1985). West Indian immigrants. *Social Casework*, 60, 563–568.
- Simpao, E. B. (1999). *Parent-child separation and family cohesion amongst immigrants: Impact on object relations, intimacy, and story themes*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Long Island University.
- Sluzki, C. (1979). Migration and family context. *Family Process*, 18, 379–390.
- Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage Publications.
- Suarez-Orozco, C., Todorova, I., & Louie, J. (2002). Making up for lost time: The experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families. *Family Process*, 41, 625–643.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1990). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved March 14, 2008, from <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2001). The world of children at a glance. *Refugees*, 1(122), 7.