# Parenting in an Uncertain World: African Humanitarian Migrant Resettlement in Victoria, Australia

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Every year, Australia responds to global conflicts by resettling refugees and people with humanitarian needs (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013). These refugees and humanitarian migrants are often from societies whose child-rearing and parenting practices differ widely from that of Australian society.

Humanitarian migrants have experienced conflict, wars, and other traumatic events, which have forced them out of their countries of origin. These families have also experienced life in refugee camps or other provisional accommodations while awaiting a welcoming host country (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). These life-changing experiences have a direct impact on parenting strategies and child-rearing practices of families, which will undoubtedly differ from the strategies they had developed before being displaced and would inevitably change through their participation in the cultural practices of their new host country. Understanding how humanitarian migrants and refugees negotiate complex cultural norms, customs, policies, and laws framing culturally valued parenting and child-rearing practices in a host country is paramount to successful resettlement experiences of families. This chapter discusses the experiences of three families from the Sub-Saharan region of Africa (Sierra Leone and South Sudan) raising children in Australia. It highlights the modification to child-rearing practices of these families and the reasons guiding those decisions. It demonstrates that aspects that constitute good parenting in the host country may, at times, destabilize the parenting practices passed down from generation to generation and lead to conflict between children and parents.

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## Literature Review

Resettling in a new country after violent conflict and time in refugee camps brings hope of a peaceful and better life for families (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). However, research indicates that refugee parents experience a range of issues when resettling in a host country whose laws, regulations, and valued family practices differ from the ones that were valued in their home countries (de Haan, 2011). For refugees and humanitarian migrants, the traumatic experiences of war and life in refugee camps would have already affected their parenting practices (Betancourt et al., 2015). Further, refugees and humanitarian migrants are often troubled by memories of wars and the constant worry for the safety of loved ones who stayed behind. These feelings of incertitude do not disappear after resettlement, with families worrying for the safety of their children in their new and unfamiliar environment (Betancourt et al., 2015; Cook & Waite, 2016; Ramsden & Taket, 2013).

In fact, through social media and other means of communication, families remain closely connected to the hardship of family members back home. These ongoing connections add a layer of ongoing difficulty for refugee and humanitarian migrant families who are rebuilding their life in a new country (Marlowe, Harris, & Lyons, 2013). However, regular contact with family members who have stayed back home is also a source of comfort that mitigates the sense of isolation these families experience in their new environment (Robinson, 2013). Another area that the literature highlights as an issue is the loss of the traditional family structure as understood and valued by refugee and humanitarian migrants (Renzaho, McCabe, & Sainsbury, 2011). This loss of valued family structure with defined gender roles has negative effects on family functioning and parent–child interactions (Green, Mellor, & Swinburn, 2011; Renzaho et al., 2011).

In many communities worldwide, gender roles are well-defined and established, with the father as the head of the family and the mother caring for the children and home (Cook & Waite, 2016). After resettlement in a new country, these roles are, at times, challenged. Numerous studies have shown that fathers struggle more than mothers because they have difficulty providing for their family, weakening their position as the head of the family. They also struggle to understand the social expectations of being a father and husband in this new society (Cook & Waite, 2016; Ochala & Mungai, 2016; Ogbu, Brady, & Kinlen, 2014). Lack of resources means that, at times, families are barely surviving and are struggling to meet the basic needs of their children (Betancourt et al., 2015; Cook & Waite, 2016; Liamputtong, 2008). This situation has deep implications for the family structure, because parents are destabilized and feel that they have less control and authority over their children (Betancourt et al., 2015; Cook & Waite, 2016; Deng & Marlowe, 2013). They also fear that children are losing their language and culture, deepening the gap between parents and children in the home (Betancourt et al., 2015; Cook & Waite, 2016; Deng & Marlowe, 2013), and that educational institutions are partly responsible for the breakdown of families.

This feeling of being excluded and ignored by the educational and legal system of the host society compounds the difficulty families have in understanding the valued socialization, parenting, and disciplining practices in their new environment (Betancourt et al., 2015; Cook & Waite, 2016; Ramsden & Taket, 2013). Parents feel that their valued parenting practices are being eroded by the host society's values and understanding and, most importantly, by institutionalized racism, which keeps parents in fear of losing their children to child protective service (Ramsay, 2016). Despite ongoing difficulties and tension, parents draw strength that their children will have a better future in their new environment than in their country of origin. This feeling of hope justifies the hardship and sacrifice families endure (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). Parents place heightened emphasis on the role of education in helping their children be successful and have a better future in the new country (Ramsden & Taket, 2013).

Parents also draw comfort from their faith and religious community (Betancourt et al., 2015). Most humanitarian migrants and refugees have strong belief systems, and being able to rejoin a religious community in the host country provides families with links to a welcoming community (Betancourt et al., 2015). Engagement with religious communities acts as a buffer, providing a safe space to discuss difficulties experienced during the resettlement experience. Drawing on their understanding of the local context, religious communities support new migrants in accessing childcare and school and provide financial advice, but, most importantly, these religious communities provide hope to families (Betancourt et al., 2015).

## The Current Study

The three families discussed in this chapter were participants in a larger study (Rivalland, 2010) that investigated and described how new migrant families and Australian early childhood professionals reached cultural understanding on the education and care of children during transition times in childcare. Transition time in this study was understood as the processes involved in selecting and gaining access to a childcare institution after resettlement and as the discourses that families and early childhood professionals engaged in when discussing the education and care of children.

### *Theoretical Underpinnings*

The study drew on sociocultural theory to describe and understand how early childhood professionals negotiate childcare arrangements with new migrant families and refugee families. "The goal of a sociocultural approach is to explicate the relations between human action on one hand, and the cultural, institutional and historical situations in which the action occurs on the other" (Wertsch, Río, & Alvarez, 1995, p. 11). A sociocultural perspective considers knowledge and culture being actively built through the process of participation in the culture. This means culture is not static; rather, knowledge and culture are continuously developing through the combined efforts of people working together, altering and using materials and symbolic tools provided by previous generations. Simultaneously, people are constantly in the process of creating new symbols and artifacts (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotskiĭ, 1987; Wertsch et al., 1995). From this perspective, culture is understood as the social traditions and customs of communities, which are in constant flux, adapted and transformed from generation to generation through ongoing participation in activities and particular life conditions of communities in an ever-changing world.

**Data collection tools** Data were collected through several methods: observations in childcare centers (one day in each center), regular monthly home visits over a 1-year period, note-taking during home visits, and semi-structured interviews with all participants. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were returned to participants for memory checking. Data analyses elucidated the different child-rearing practices valued in the homes and in the childcare center settings and foregrounded the strategies used by participants to reach some form of cultural understanding on these practices during transition times. The study was granted ethical clearance from Monash University.

Data collected were analyzed using Rogoff's three "foci" of analysis (Rogoff, 1998, 2003): features of cultural negotiation that could be identified at the level of the individual (e.g., child-rearing practices valued by families), features evident at the interpersonal level (e.g., interactions observed between parents and directors in the centers), and features evident at the institutional level (e.g., the rules and regulations of different institutions). Although these foci could be isolated from each other, a sociocultural analysis understands them to be inseparable and mutual, providing holistic evidence of an individual's participation in his or her cultural context. As Rogoff (1998) explains, "using personal, interpersonal and community/institutional planes [foci] of analysis involves focusing on one plane, but still using background information from the other planes, as if with different lenses" (p. 688).

## *The Participants*

The wider study (Rivalland, 2010) considered seven early childhood professionals, four center directors, one social worker, and five new migrant families. The new migrant families comprised one Sierra Leonean and two Sudanese families, both humanitarian migrants, and two Chinese families who had migrated under spouse visas. All families had been in Australia for less than 3 years, and all had children in childcare and/or primary schools. All of the early childhood professionals and center directors were Australian-born, apart from one center director who migrated to Australia as a young child. In this chapter, the focus is on the three African families, because they experienced a similar range of challenges as regards negotiating their parenting practices in this new culture. Table 1 provides a snapshot of each of these three families.

**Table 1** Snapshot of three families

| Family | Country of origin | Family composition | Schooling | Religion | Employment status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| One | Sudan | Mother, father, uncle (father's younger sibling aged 17)<br>5 children<br>2 girls aged 9 and 8 years<br>3 boys aged 6, 5, and 2 years | Mother had no schooling, father completed primary schooling, and uncle did not complete primary schooling | Practicing Roman Catholic | Mother and father unemployed |
| Two | Sudan | Mother, father, aunts (mother's younger sisters aged 20 and 18 years)<br>4 children<br>3 boys aged 2, 3, and 6 years<br>1 girl aged 3 months | Mother and aunts did not finish primary school and were illiterate in their mother tongue; father finished primary school but did not attend secondary school | Practicing Roman Catholic | Mother and father unemployed |
| Three | Sierra Leone | Mother, father, mother's younger sister aged 15 years and father's younger brother aged 18 years<br>2 children<br>1 boy aged 5 years<br>1 girl aged 3 years | Mother did not finish primary school and illiterate in mother tongue, father left school at age 15 years, and uncle attended school sporadically in refugee camp | Practicing Christian | Mother unemployed, and father part-time employment in an old-age care facility |

## *Contextual Information*

**Sierra Leone** This small African nation is located on the west coast of Africa and became independent from the United Kingdom in 1961. From 1991 to 2002, the country was torn by civil war. Rebels went on a rampage, killing, and mutilating the populations of entire villages (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). Sexual assault as a weapon of war was common. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2018) reported that Sierra Leone was still one of the poorest countries in the world. A large proportion of Sierra Leonean families who resettled in Australia have limited or no proficiency in English. Some are also illiterate or have low levels of literacy in their own language (UNICEF, 2018). The Sierra Leonean family who participated in this study witnessed the killing and mutilating of close family members before fleeing to neighboring countries. Their first child was born in a refugee camp, and the second child was born shortly after resettlement in Australia.

**Sudan and South Sudan** Prior to 2011, Sudan was the largest country on the African continent (Bureau of African Affairs, 2008). Since its independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced continuous political and religious conflict, civil war, famine, and drought, which led to displacement of the Sudanese population into neighboring countries (Bureau of African Affairs, 2008). On July 9, 2011, the Republic of South Sudan was created (UNICEF, 2012). This new country came into existence after five decades of civil war between the Muslim communities occupying northern Sudan and the mostly Christian communities occupying southern Sudan (UNICEF, 2012). Religion was also one of the main causes that led to civil war (UNICEF, 2012). The two Sudanese families who were part of this study are Catholic, and religion plays a very important part in their lives, both spiritually and in their day-to-day living and resettlement experience. Before resettlement, these two families spent several years in a refugee camp in countries bordering Sudan.

It is important to understand the general similarities and cultural understandings of these migrant families, with the caveat that there is no intention to claim that there are no cultural differences in parenting practices of these very different countries and families. Images of the child, the migrant, the early childhood professionals, and institutions are all social constructions (Rogoff, 1990, 1995, 1998, 2003) and hence are different from one society, culture, or family to another. However, the three families in this study referred to the position of family and child-rearing practices of their communities in some similar ways.

## Findings

### *The Importance of the Family*

The family is highly valued and considered the bedrock of society in most African countries (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). The family unit works as a collective whereby each member contributes to the group and community cohesion, and respect for elders and allegiance to the family is customary (Dei Wal, 2004; Zervides & Knowles, 2007). Extended family members, such as grandparents, uncles, and aunts, are part of the family unit and are involved in helping with child-rearing practices. Elders are particularly respected by the community. They play an essential role in enculturating the younger generation to the cultural norms and values of their communities (Dei Wal, 2004; Zervides & Knowles, 2007).

Traditional gender roles are still prominent in the majority of African countries (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). Men are considered the head of the family, and women have responsibility for domestic tasks, such as food preparation, household chores, and child-rearing. Men are usually community leaders, and because the schooling of boys is often prioritized, women are, on average, less educated and have lower levels of literacy (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). Children are not given special status, an authoritarian parenting style is valued, and children are to listen and respect adults. Chastising and corporal punishment are still prominent ways of disciplining children (Zervides & Knowles, 2007). Children may roam freely with peers, while older siblings take care of younger siblings.

## *Families' Disempowerment Through Support Services*

After resettlement, families are referred to many support services to help them familiarize themselves with their new environment and culture (Adult Migrant English Program, 2009). One of the most important supports provided to families is free access to English lessons:

> The Australian Government considers learning English to be one of the first and most important steps a new settler can take towards settling successfully in their new community and achieving their personal, social and economic goals. If your English is less than 'functional', you may be entitled to free English language lessons under the Adult Migrant English Programme. (AMEP hereafter; Adult Migrant English Program, 2009, p.39)

To meet their visa requirements, the three families discussed in this chapter attended English lessons at AMEP. This institution was responsible for organizing free childcare for clients with children under the legal school age, which was the case for these three families. However, as the following quotations indicate, the families did not feel that they had control over this process. They explained that they were not offered different options or even asked whether they had any needs or expectations for their children's education and care:

> **Family One**: My support worker chooses [the childcare service]. She tells me there is a place for your child. I go and drop my child. She tells me where to go.
>
> **Family Two:** Facility for migrant when you come [to Australia], you are under the 202 visa on the Centrelink, they provide childcare facility… We do not choose. They say where to go.
>
> **Family Three:** My support worker say, "Here is the address, you drop your child there." I do not choose.

This lack of control led to a feeling of isolation and disempowerment with far-reaching effects on the families' engagement or lack of engagement with the centers and educators. This resulted in educators having a negative view of the families and of these families' aims and expectations for their child's education and care.

> **Educator:** I don't know what they are doing over there [AMEP] with them [African migrants], but a lot of them come in here and don't know what the rules are and things like that… Then, the families are coming in at 1 or 2 o'clock in the afternoon…They [AMEP] are not paying for [the parents] to go shopping or seeing [their] friends afterwards, only the time [they] are at school should [their] child be here.
>
> **Educator:** I actually don't think they have any expectations. From my experiences, I get an impression that they think we are just a babysitting service. Do you know what I mean? They just drop off their children and go, a lot of them, because they can't communicate. Well they don't communicate to us.

Feeling excluded and ignored by the educational and legal system of the host society negatively affected the families' child-rearing practices in this new environment (Betancourt et al., 2015; Cook & Waite, 2016; Ramsden & Taket, 2013). As Rogoff (2003) posits, culture is always in flux through our interactions with institutions, people, and artifacts. In this study, the interactions between institutions and the three families could not be considered one of mutual respect and shared understanding. This situation resulted in the families being confused regarding the cultural expectations of raising children to succeed in Australian society. Another aspect that complicated the interactions between the families and the centers was the fact that the three mothers were illiterate in their own language and knew very little English. The three mothers relied on their husbands or children to negotiate the transition between home and childcare center.

## *The Language of Power*

As highlighted in the literature, fathers are the ones who struggled the most after resettlement and positioning in the host society (Cook & Waite, 2016; Ochala & Mungai, 2016; Ogbu et al., 2014). The fathers, who shared stories of how they had protected their families through the ordeal of wars, explained how they needed to first identify the dangers to plan their safe escape. In Australia, there were no physical threats to the family; however, these fathers struggled to make ends meet and felt that their ability to protect their families was diminished, leading to a feeling of inadequacy (Cook & Waite, 2016; Liamputtong, 2008). They did not understand the social expectations of this new society and unanimously identified that the only way to survive and become successful in the Australian context was to master the English language. Roberts-Holmes states, "[l]anguage is a significant marker of identity, and identity is inextricably linked to the ways in which we understand ourselves" (2006, p. 107). The process of communicating through one language and the dismissal of other languages placed migrants with little English in an asymmetrical power relationship (Robinson, 2013). After one and a half years in Australia, these families understood the power of the English language:

> **Father Three:** Only speaking English is most important, speaking and writing, …In this country, if you cannot read and write you find life difficult. Everything is written, you have to read signs, if you can't read it's difficult for you in any school….
>
> **Father Two:** My children need to learn English to be successful in this country. This is very important, very important.
>
> **Father One**: If you cannot read and write in this country, you die.

## *Altering Parenting Style*

All three families altered their parenting practices to prioritize the acquisition of the language that would give them an entry point in the host society. Considering that all three families had low levels of literacy or were illiterate in their own language, this task was all-consuming. In the extracts quoted in this section, it is clear that these families, under the fathers' guidance, developed strategies to break the institutional codes of the host society in the hope of achieving better social positioning for their children. Valenta (2008) posits that "the status of an immigrant impacts on his/her ability to reproduce positivities, as well as to engage in relations with the hosts [early childhood professionals]" (p. 206). In this study, families remained at the periphery of the centers with no meaningful interactions with the educators, while their children were slowly being homogenized to the dominant cultural norms. Gutierrez and Correa-Chavez (2006) argue that these types of engagements are a form of cultural silencing, which is reinforced through a new form of segregation via language dominance:

> **Family One:** I leave my child at the center for the longest hours possible. This is the only way they will master how to read and write in this country. We expect them [educators] to teach them [children] things that can change their life because they can't be in a center for that long, and when they come out, they are not any different compared to when they came in
>
> **Family Two:** My children and my wife need to sit and watch the TV programs. The teacher said, "watch TV, is good for learning English." So, they do not play outside a lot; now they need to watch the TV to improve their English
>
> **Family Three:** The teacher said that I should listen to him [son, 5 years old] and see that he pronounces the words correctly. Last week, I took my son to the library, my wife too. We looked at books that they can read and we took 10 books each for my wife and my son so that they can improve on their English. They need to read these books, and then, I read questions, so each book I ask them questions, I want to know if they can answer the questions and write it so that they can improve with their English.

## *The Erosion of Culture*

The three families discussed in this chapter faced a wide range of parenting challenges owing to their history of dislocation and experiences of violence and loss. These traumatic events destabilized the traditional parenting practices, which were originally passed down from generation to generation. As observed in the quotations in this section, the families were all struggling with the erosion of their cultural norms (Betancourt et al., 2015;Cook & Waite, 2016 ; Deng & Marlowe, 2013). They viewed the family, home, and community as sites of cultural practices, where they could impart their traditions, values, and cultural knowledge to their children. However, the families understood that with cultural contact, cultural changes occur.

They understood that their children's engagement with educational institutions was eroding their cultural values (Cook & Waite, 2016; Deng & Marlowe, 2013). As observed in the following transcripts, all three families articulated that the maintenance of their cultural practices might result in the rejection of some cultural practices of the host community and the maintenance of their own cultural values. The maintenance of one's values, religion, and culture is a right that new migrant families have when migrating to Australia (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2019).

> **Family One:** It will be very difficult …. it will be very difficult, now the children are very young, it is now that we have to shape them because it is now that…you can shape it, you can shape them, as they move along they drop some (of their cultural values) and adapt some; you must adapt some, but if you don't tell them that this is not good they go on with the system; then, I become trouble for you; it would be very difficult to change them, but now they are small and young they have to accept our culture.

> **Family Three:** Lots of things I saw in Australia. We saw that the kids keep doing things that are not part of our culture. Yes, we like our kids to respect their elders. They need to know when not to speak and have respect for everybody because as for me I always put myself down to everybody. I do that, and people say you shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do this because of my religion. I always want to send to my kids the message that I do not say that they shouldn't adopt the culture of this country [Australia], but they should know our culture, which is very good for them. Therefore, at school, they learn the Australian way, but at home, we maintain our culture because this is what we want.

> **Family Two:** I want to pass our cultural values on to my little girl, but I think I will face some difficulties because she is growing up in a society where it is all normal and when I start telling her, "No look, this is not normal" but she needs to learn our ways, she needs to understand our culture.

While children were being slowly assimilated in the childcare context and in the valued Australian ways of *being a child*, these values were not always welcome in the home environment. At childcare centers, children learned to become independent and assertive in their wants and needs. Girls were encouraged to speak up and question when they did not understand something. These new ways of being caused friction within the home environment because parents considered that their children were becoming rude and disrespectful toward the elders. This viewpoint has deep implications for the family structure, because parents felt destabilized, had less control and authority over their children, and considered educational institutions partly responsible for the breakdown of their family structure (Betancourt et al., 2015; Cook & Waite, 2016; Deng & Marlowe, 2013).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrated that families, through their resettlement experiences, identified the skill set needed for their children and family to be successful in their new environment. Children and mothers were encouraged to watched television programs and read English books; children were left in childcare for the longest hours possible to master the English language and be successful in the Australian community. These were, from the parents' perspectives, good parenting practices. However, spending long hours in childcare and/or school had the unintended consequence of children being enculturated into *becoming an Australian child* at the expense of the more traditional gender norms and cultural practices valued in their home and community contexts. This situation led to a weakening of the traditional family structure, and parents felt that they were losing their authority over their children, deepening the gap between children and parents in the home environment. This situation could be mitigated by creating conditions of supports which would enhance communication between new migrant families and centers.

This study demonstrates that it is essential that early childhood professionals working in institutions, such as childcare centers, understand the home environment of children including those of humanitarian migrant and refugee families. The three families discussed in this chapter did not have the social capital necessary to interact with educators at the childcare centers. This lack of meaningful communication resulted in conflicting expectations between the home and center settings. While there were inconsistencies across home and center, the three families showed a willingness and desire to do what was necessary for them adapt to new cultural norms and environments. The current findings suggest that there is a need for educators to reach out to families specifically those who came to Australia as refugees and/or on humanitarian visa in order to alleviate the negative impact on parenting practices due to lack of meaningful communication between home and center.

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**Corine's** research focus addresses alternative theories of child development, equity, and social justice. Her work aims to contribute to the early childhood educational research with the view of implementing more equitable and socially just early childhood teaching and learning practices.