

THEMATIC ARTICLES – MIGRANTS’ INTEGRATION IN HOST SOCIETIES

Socialisation strategies of African refugees in the United Kingdom

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Abstract. This article provides an account of socialisation strategies among two African communities, the Congolese and Somali, in Britain. It looks at the ways in which the refugees attempt to make sense of new social realities in the host country and rebuild lives. This involves a process of psychological healing which leads the African refugees to adopt various strategies with varying degree of success. Among such strategies, involvement in educational, community and religious activities as well as marrying and founding a family will take unprecedented importance.

Key words: *refugees, acculturation, socialisation, psychological healing, racism*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUNDS

The article examines the socialisation process of African refugees in the United Kingdom. The process of asylum seeking and subsequently life in exile that follows carry an important psychological and social dimension in terms of the disruption that it causes to the lives of individuals and groups. In ordinary life, leaving one’s family for a journey could be disruptive not only for the leaver but also for people left behind, e.g. relatives, friends, etc. The psychological and social disruption affecting people in exile or seeking asylum has been well documented. Gordon (1964) argues that there are three models of merging in the host that most refugees will experience. The Anglo conformity model (or host-conformity) is where the refugee is to resemble the indigenous people and accept their dominant culture; the melting pot model is where both the natives and immigrants merge to

form a new kind of social entity; cultural pluralism is where “refugees acculturate to the dominant culture for politics, play, education and work, but tend to keep their communal life and much of their culture”. However, the experience of the Congolese and Somali respondents interviewed points to their affiliation to the host-conformity model predominantly, although elements of the cultural pluralism may apply. The purpose of the article is to look in details at refugees’ strategies to achieve socialisation. The research found that education and training, dating and building a family, frequenting migrant organisations & social networks have been significant strategies.

Resettlement and adaption

The resettlement of refugees in a national and international context and the problems associated with it has attracted a number of examinations. A key theme is that refugees are faced with adaptational difficulties. The behaviour and mental health of refugees are deeply affected by these difficulties and culminates in intense stress. For the author seven specific factors are causing or exacerbating the level of stress in refugees. These factors are loss & grief, social isolation, status inconsistency, traumatic experiences, culture shock, acculturation stress, accelerated modernisation and minority status (Ghorashi, 2005; Lin, 1986). This catalogue of factors elucidates somehow a set of refugee experience. In leaving the native countries and societies, refugees lose not only belongings but also and more importantly family networks and friends. Having landed in an unknown social landscape, exiles may not necessarily enjoy the same status and social privilege as they may have had in their countries of origin. They struggle to come to term with past events and strive to adjust to new lifestyles and technologies. As strangers in the host societies either because of their physical appearance or other behavioural traits, refugees may be racialised and enter minority categories.

From a sociological perspective, these points are significant and most social scientists agree that people are part of a wider network on which they depend. The social network to which an individual belongs has strong affective effects on people in terms of the shared norms, cultural and religious beliefs. Research in forced migration (Zmegac, 2005; Ghorashi, 2005) evidenced the importance afforded to the study of exile in sociological inquiry. The mostly social causes to refugee stress lead to several socio-psychological implications that generate emotional and

behavioural problems of which the most serious are depression & anxiety, somatic preoccupation and complaints, material conflicts, intergenerational conflicts, substance misuse and sociopathic behaviour. Other research came to similar findings.

There is some consistency in the experience and behaviour of exiles. Sizeable amounts of the problems facing refugees are linked to a hostile social environment in which they are segregated and placed at the outskirts of the social world. If this is the case, then a view could be that most remedy to the psychological and social disruption in refugees should be sought and found in the reconstruction of the social environment that is the normal and natural place for social actors. To express this in metaphorical terms, constructing a social atmosphere for refugees would be just like returning a fish to its water after some time out of it. For Blackwell (1989:1) "the process of arrest, torture, release, flight and exile involves trauma at many levels. In so far as humans are social beings the trauma can be understood, not only as an assault on the individual person but as an assault on the links and connections between people and the patterns of relationships through which people define themselves and give meaning to their lives". The erosion of social networks which comprises the nuclear and extended family, friends, bosses, subordinates, etc. represent an important loss. These allow people to develop a sense of belonging to a community and a sense of 'sociality' and worthiness. The idea of social context affecting the individual's psyche is a reminder that refugee problems need interdisciplinary debate.

Homesickness in the host society

Moving away from home has always led people to feel homesick. Homesickness as a psychological state created by the prospect or the reality of social isolation has been under-researched. Hack-Polay (2007), Shibuya (2004), Leff *et al.* (1970), Weissman & Paykel (1973) and Ekblad (1993) found evidence to support the claim that homesickness affects health. Homesickness could be more pronounced in the refugee population. Indeed, the literature suggests that it is common in refugees and that it is an illness of socially disorientated and isolated people.

Fisher (1989), Baier & Welch (1992) found evidence to support this claim. Examining the cognitive symptoms of homesickness, Fisher (1989) reveals that

there is a feeling of “missing home, obsessed thoughts about home, negative thoughts about the new environment and absent mindedness” and there is a tendency to idealise home rather than revisiting the problems one encountered there before (quoted in Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets & Van Heck, 1996:903). The behavioural symptoms include “apathy, listlessness, lack of initiative and little interest in the new environment”.

More realistic modes of interventions may be found in the “stress management” approach (Fisher, 1989). It is designed to help the affected people to accept the feeling of homesickness, to be involved in the new environment, to do physical activities (sports, games, visits), to eat and sleep well, to go onto training programmes (Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets & Van Heck, 1996). It can be seen that most remedies are social interventions and they turn around reconstructing the social context or what is regarded as home. However, in order to be effective, the artificial home needs much resemblance to the original one and this should be reflected in the resettlement strategies and the choice of resettlement areas for refugees.

Cultural struggle and acculturation

The reconstruction of a familiar social context needs to take account of culture because acculturation has often been another big problem for displaced people and refugees. Kovacev & Shute (2004) argue here that acculturation is a psychological and social phenomenon which happens both at the level of the individual and the group to which s/he belongs. The attack on two fronts considerably diminishes the survival chances of the alien culture.

Most specialists in the field would agree that acculturation has tremendous effects on refugees and displaced people; it is a painful experience. The change that refugees and displaced people go through is generally too fast and too profound to be smooth and conducive to rapid and/or successful integration. Lin (1986) has referred to refugees' struggle to adapt to the fast moving new environment as "accelerated modernisation". This is a forced process whereby refugees have to learn new cultural patterns including technology and cultures. The most difficult is left to refugees who had arrived from rural areas. For this category of exiles, the pace of change in the industrial world in which they have landed is barely sustainable. The difficulties in sustaining new modes of living in the new place have

been well documented in the United States (Wagner & Obermiller, 2004; Rumbaut & Rumbaut, 1976). The use of new transport systems such as trains, the underground, buses, etc., the need for one to find directions using maps and to queue at the Social Security benefits offices, are all part of the process of 'accelerated modernisation' because these social facts are often part of the sophisticated arena of the industrialised world which the refugee was not familiar with in the country of origin. It is therefore no surprise that the irreversibility and unsustainable character of such gigantic and systematic changes bring "culture shock" and "acculturation stress" (Lin, 1986) upon refugees. The big culture shock originates from the wide gap between refugees' original cultural spheres and the host ones. Probably the change is far beyond what the refugees may have expected and people in the new cultural milieu are bombarded with messages which are foreign to them.

Another key dimension of the acculturation process well noted in the literature is the crisis of identity that the affected groups and individuals go through. Berry (1986) introduces the term *deculturation*. In that the author sees a situation dominated by confusion and anxiety within the individual and his/her group. It is not only about a problem of social isolation or marginality. But it is about a deeper crisis whereby individuals and groups cannot find their marks, themselves and their identity. When the situation of powerlessness arises as a result of the heavy weight of the dominant society on the minority groups, then cultural identity dies out. This has led Berry (1986) to use the term "ethnocide" which presents two possible scenarios. The first scenario is one in which the newcomer may tend to associate themselves with the swamping majority or dominant host group (Brand, Ruiz and Padilla, 1974). This is a case of resignation where, perhaps, groups and individuals feel that the battle is lost and therefore resisting the assault from the new identity is a vain effort that leads nowhere. Thus, people let themselves carried away in the strong current of the cultural river of the new environment. The second scenario is where individuals and groups, if empowered, prefer to "opt out" (Hack-Polay, 2008; Berry 1986) in order to maintain and promote their traditional identity, at least for as long as they possibly can. However, sooner or later they may capitulate, being swallowed by the host society and its identity. This second scenario often occurs in societies with large numbers of ethnic minority communities but where the idea of multiculturalism is not translated into reality.

Identity

The question of identity in exile also involves loss of language and even personality. Here again, it is a forced choice. Refugees have to learn the language of the dominant group, English, and use it as survival tool. Failure to master the language - or to put it metaphorically - refusal to be linguistically colonised, leads to diminished chances of survival in the unknown social and cultural jungle. In terms of personality change, three tendencies have been identified which dominate the literature. Hack-Polay (2008) and Stonequist (1935) argue that there is a different tendency in personality change that affects displaced people; that is the one involving individuals who "swing about" and participate in both the dominant and minority groups as part time social actors on each side. The significance of the study of personality change that affects migrants and refugees lies in the fact that it helps to understand how and why many individuals will demarcate from *natural* behavioural patterns to adopt *artificial* ones. The problem of identity is best summarised in a case study of refugee children presented by MacFadyean (2001:34) giving the specific example of Salo who "feels he belongs in the United Kingdom; Worthing is his favourite place. But does the United Kingdom feel that Salo belongs? That is the heart of the story. Where do these (refugee) children belong?"

The experience of Salo exemplifies the refugee experience and leads to some fundamental questions. In fact, if the refugee experience is made up of so many psychological, physical and social difficulties, then how does this affect their cohabitation with their hosts in the new environment?

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to examine the strategies used by Africa refugees when seeking integration in the host country. A qualitative methodology was used with in-depth interviews with 30 refugees from Congo (DRC) and Somalia. The interviews explored such critical socialisation issues as education and training, social life, dating and marriage in the new socio-cultural context. The participants were interviewed in South London which has a large concentration of African immigrants and refugees. The choice of the nationalities was motivated by the interest in contrasting race and successful economic and social integration in exile

in view to establish the weight of factors such as race and ethnicity.

A snowball sampling method was used. The initial participants contacted through local forced migrant community organisations led the researcher to other refugees who were likely to meet the selection criteria. As the initial respondents led the researcher to others, the difficulties in trying to find suitable participants and to arrange interview time and location were minimised. In-depth interviews allowed participants freedom to provide detailed accounts of their stories and expand on particular aspects. The approach was interesting for studying the experiences of the African refugees whose racial background could be a factor influencing their degree of socialisation. The analysis assesses the extent to which the strategies used enabled the refugees to settle successfully.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Language and cultural acquisition as socialisation strategy

Language acquisition and awareness of the culture of the receiving country were of key importance in individual refugees' social integration strategy. Without language one may struggle in the re-socialisation process in the new country. Without an understanding of social norms and cultural values one runs the risk of living at the margin of society. Freire (1970) argues that "to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it" and this naming is possible through language and literacy. The Department for Education and Science (DfES, 2001) found that millions of people in Britain struggle with English, which impacts on their participation in society.

It is not clear whether over half a million who have some serious deficiencies in English language are refugees or foreign nationals but it could be inferred that a substantial number could be included in this proportion. However, Home Office statistics show that less than a quarter of refugees arrived in the UK with competent English and more than a quarter came in exile with no knowledge of English language at all. Language has been described as one of the most important barrier faced by refugees (Marshall, 1992). If this is the case, then, they face the disastrous consequences described by the DfES as being missed employment opportunities, poor health and housing, etc. Freire (1970) pursues similar lines with his ideas that human existence is possible through language and

literacy because human existence is also and mostly about acquiring culture and seeking and seizing economic opportunities. The refugees interviewed understood these constraints at an early stage after their arrival in the United Kingdom and a number of them acknowledged that not understanding English was like being deaf, blind and dumb, and disabling.

The metaphor associating illiteracy to deafness, blindness and dumbness was prominent among refugees from all two communities involved in the research, i.e. Somalia and Congo. The need to understand, to speak for self and participate in active communication has been at the heart of the refugees' willingness and devotion to learn the language and culture of their new country. Whether they went straight to work, for the few, or to study formally the language, the desire to come out of linguistic ignorance was widely shared. Such linguistic ignorance brought a sense of shame to some respondents like Charlotte who explained her frustration as she could not express herself but had to rely on other people to speak for her at the doctors, in shops and benefits offices.

By socialising predominantly with people from their ethnic origin and social conditions, the refugees sought to protect themselves from the shame they felt because of their inability to communicate using the language of the host society. However, there was at the same time realisation that the issue had to be faced and dealt with. As Kader, a refugee acknowledges that it is not possible to avoid contacts with indigenous people in the host society, hence the crucial need to learn at least the language.

Combating the social shame of not being able to use the language of the host country for social action and the desire to acquire the language for economic and psychological benefits have been the driving forces that led many of the refugee to the path of learning, whether in the formal framework of the school or the informal framework of the factory or the street. A Congolese refugee put that he wanted to learn English in order "to be one of them (the people of the new society)". To belong, to be part of a society was the aspiration for all and strategies put in place were to fulfil this aspiration. The British Refugee Council (2002) provides an example of how language acquisition was used by an eminent refugee in the UK both as a means to eradicate social exclusion but also as a means of economic betterment; the refugee agency interviewed Shappi Khorsandi, an Iranian refugee comedian and writer who explained that being able to make one point and reach across to the very people you now live with is essential.

Unfortunately they had diverse degree of success in terms of socialisation and inclusion although most would describe their experience of learning English as enjoyable and stimulating. As argued earlier, most refugees socialised with people from their own communities who shared some key social credentials with them, e.g. language, culture, legal and economic status, and alien-ness. The purpose of undertaking an educational course had more fundamental motivation than the mere acquisition of new qualification and literacy. It was a means of making contact with the outside world after being locked in their inner self and their local accommodation for some time.

The refugees overwhelmingly describe asylum as “a prison”, “hell” or “jungle” to translate the idea of loneliness and confinement to a locked space and self. Now that the education and training alibi presented itself, many took it as an opportunity to escape the imaginary prison, hell and jungle that seemed to suffocate them. Without specifically saying that they went to college or school to make friends and socialise, the analysis of the discourses actually shows that socialisation opportunities were also leading the refugees to go to college. Many, like Charlotte, argue that they met fellow country men and women at college, which gave them some comfort and helped them to realise that they were not alone.

Women particularly benefited from educational opportunities as social opportunities and alibis to set themselves free from the oppressive closure of their new world. The few women in the sample agreed on the education and training as a form of emancipation from the home in which they perform “female” role, i.e. looking after the children, cooking, cleaning, ironing and waiting for the man of the house as Henriette from Congo explained. For Henriette, finding work in exile was breaking away from traditional norms in her country of origin where it was very difficult for women to return to work at the same time as raising a family. This psychological relief that coming out to study represents has been therapeutic in many cases in terms of healing wounds left by war and torture at home but also by the separation from the extended family network which culturally, socially and psychologically a form of support. For women and other respondents in this situation, the metaphor of “exile as heaven and hell” may well apply. Heaven would be their salvation from torture, persecution and certain death for many; hell would be the psychological torture that isolation and loneliness bring to them in exile. The Home Office in the UK found evidence that some refugee women are not

permitted to occupy the same room as men in training or education and strong pressure (social control) is exerted to ensure that they conform. Education and training have been there to help the healing process and help rediscover a sense of worthiness and hope.

The motivation for many of the male refugees for attending college was not remote from the women's. Nine in ten of the men interviewed described their experience of idleness as extremely depressing. Many were used to doing something, a form of work in their country of origin. Among the refugees from African origin that were interviewed, the cultural assumption was that "a man who stays at home all day is lazy; he's not a man. A real man must work to support his dependents". This cultural prerequisite has meant that most men in Somalia and Congo would find some sorts of work to occupy themselves in order to show their manhood. The male refugees interviewed in the three nationalities had similar cultural conception of the male role vis-à-vis work and may explain why they felt so desperate to escape their 'home-prison' as they metaphorically described their flats or other accommodation they occupied in their UK exile.

Academic and professional re-qualification

Beyond finding some human beings out there to talk to, so as to feel their own humanity again, many of the refugees in the research sought education and training as a way of re-qualifying. In many instances, the qualifications that refugees held from their country of origin have not been recognised in the UK. An overwhelming majority of the refugees had qualifications from their native educational systems prior to becoming refugees. In fact, eight in ten had qualifications between school leaving certificates and postgraduate, with a sizeable proportion (two in five) possessing degrees or postgraduate degrees. The qualification level in the respondents' native countries reflects findings by Home Office (1995) research based on a sample of 263 refugees which reported that 33 per cent had degrees or equivalent professional qualifications. Many studies of refugees' educational background in the native country have been consistent in terms of the forced migrants' level of academic and professional credentials prior to becoming refugees, e.g. Hack-Polay, 2006; Clark, 1992; Marshall, 1992.

There are numerous examples from the respondents that portray the situation where their qualifications from the native land have been considerably

downgraded. In many cases the qualifications seen in the refugees' countries as degrees or postgraduate awards were downgraded in the UK to A level or lower standards. The non-recognition of refugees' qualifications has long been one of several key factors that hindered refugee training and employment, thus integration. The case is well documented in the literature. Marshall (1992), Clark (1992), Bloch (2002) found evidence that in a large number of cases the devaluation of refugees' qualifications hindered their personal but also institutional integration strategies. Refugees spend a long time learning English before aspiring to undertake academic education or professional training. In some cases, it could take years.

Respondents who took this route adopted a strategy to minimise the time spent in the re-qualification process. Charlotte, a Congolese refugee, undertook an English course, combined with basic Information Technology. Charlotte spent six years to obtain a *licence*, bachelor's degree in Congo. However, in the UK, her academic labour was equated to between A level and an ordinary undergraduate degree. That meant that to obtain a British Bachelor's degree, Charlotte had to undertake higher education for up to three years, excluding an initial three years she had to learn English to an acceptable standard. Charlotte did not want to undertake such lengthy studies, particularly with uncertainties over her immigration status, i.e. whether she would be allowed to remain as a refugee or not; this respondent was thus happy with her basic ESOL with I.T. qualification. Another refugee undertook an English course with a health and social care combination. Thus, within the two to three years they spent learning English, they also learned about a professional area in which they would pursue the search for employment. However, this in itself is part of the devaluation process. Usually the professional element of the English course is very basic covering skills and knowledge below or up to GCSE level. Such a qualification could only land refugees a job in the manual field or in the low status grades. Charlotte, after her course entered employment as a data entry person, work which is not professional; the Somali refugee entered employment as a care assistant, a job which until recently required no qualification and is low paid.

Education and training as a way of re-qualifying is an important stage in the lives of the refugees. It provides them with the language tool to communicate. It also provides the refugees with some skills in order to get starter jobs in exile in the UK. However, in order to respond more fully to the aspirations of refugees, that is

to gain similar status to what they had prior to fleeing, education and training needs to be available at higher levels than what it offered. But, often, refugees cannot afford the cost of such higher level education due to a number of factors including cost, legal status and lack of information (Bloch, 2002).

Migrant organisations and social networks

Migrant organisations are not separable from the life and concentration of people from different cultures who try to settle in an alien society. Migrant organisations represent a way of establishing or maintaining norms and values within a population of newcomers that share similar characteristics. Such organisations are important factors in the integrations of migrants. Omi & Winant (1986:22) explain that “the key factor in explaining the success that an ethnic group will have in becoming incorporated into a majority society ... is the values or norms it possesses”. The assumption in Omi & Winant research that a group is incorporable only if they have particular values and norms could be disputable. In fact in the context of migration, many migrants may not have the opportunity to be affiliated with a group close to their original culture but through individual struggle integration is possible, alongside the struggle of other migrants with whom they may share little or no cultural ties.

Furthermore, evidence from other research namely Park (1950) suggests that other characteristics such as skin colour, physical appearance, etc., are likely to impact on the level and speed of integration of minorities in a dominant society. Park writes that “where races are distinguished by certain external marks these furnish a permanent stratum upon which and around which the irritations and animosities, incidental to all human intercourse, tend to accumulate and so to gain strength”. Research in the integration of refugees in Britain showed varying levels and degrees of integration of groups of refugees, which may have some racial foundations (Brennan & McGeevor, 1990; Clark, 1992). However, a key remark in Omi & Winant’s point is applicable to sizeable groups that have the capability to erect themselves as a distinct category which they want to perpetuate. This is the case of Irish immigrants in the USA whose integration Park (1950) has described as successful and rapid compared to that of black people.

In other cases, migrant organisations aim to represent a support group, a self-help initiative in order to support economic prosperity and welfare. These

therefore do not necessarily strive to perpetuate or identifiable norms. It can thus, be established that migrant organisations may have two different aims: either to perpetuate particular norms and values or act as a brokerage for economic and social success and integration of its members who may be or may not be from the same cultural origin. Wagner & Obermiller’s (2004:100) found four types of functions fulfilled by migrant ethnic organisations among American immigrants. These four types comprised organisations founded for social purposes, “to affirm their identity, to remain connected to their roots, and preserve their heritage”. However, from the experience of the Congolese and Somali refugees, a classification can be established that identifies three types of refugee community organisations, fulfilling various functions including some of the roles described by Wagner & Obermiller. Table 1 shows the typology of community organisations favoured by respondents.

Table 1 Typology of community organisations frequented by participants

Type of organisation	Key function	Level of involvement by nationality
Social community organisation	- welfare solidarity – assistance with employment- education guidance- social events (wedding, religious, dancing parties)	- Somali (high) -Congolese (high)
Cultural survival community organisation	- affirm identity -retain connection with roots -preserve heritage preserve language and religion	-Somali (high) -Congolese (moderate)
Political community organisation	Political mobilisation- national government in exile – lobbying of foreign powers	- Somali (low) -Congolese (high)

The two groups of refugees studied fall within these three categories. However, they differ from the degree of involvement in a particular type. For example, Somali community organisations in Greenwich fulfilled mainly social and cultural survival functions but they had lower level interest in political mobilisation. However, the Congolese community organisation existed mainly as a social support network and for political reflections. The models followed by the refugees studied

can be said to fall in the Immigrant-host framework of which Patterson (1965) is a strong advocate. She argues that the process of integration of an immigrant community involves both the host community and the newcomers to adapt to and accommodate a changing social and racial geography, although the immigrant group had more of the adaptation to do.

The support element centres around two broad themes: employment and social life. Members of migrant groups are aware of the difficulties that they face in those areas. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1995) stress the fact that migrants face various forms of exclusion and discrimination in employment. This justifies to a certain extent the flow of migrants within those community structures which can provide advice and some practical assistance to newcomers wanting to enter the job market. It was established in the previous chapter that one of the key routes into employment for refugees was through friends.

Many refugee groups in the United Kingdom are referred to as refugee community organisations (RCO). The role of the refugee community organisation is vital as a social tool contributing to the healing and the integration processes. Community organisations fulfil many different functions. Such structures represent a focal point for new arrivals, as these are the places or milieus where they encounter the first humanly contacts, the first contacts that are meaningful, reassuring and hopeful. Many refugees in the sample told their experiences of the encounter of a local community organisation. For Pfister-Ammende (1960) and Gordon (1964), the ethnic community reduces the shock suffered by immigrants as a result of sudden landing in the new society because it reduces disorientation while enabling a sense of identity. Many refugee community groups operate in the three boroughs and serve the interests of exiles from particular nationalities or ethnic origins. The name of the groups or organisations usually includes the name of the nationality or ethnic category it covers. However, there are some generic refugee community organisations in the boroughs which are cross-nationalities, serving one or more or all refugee groups.

In Greenwich, the Somalis have set up several community organisations to meet the community. The Somali community organisations provide essential, culturally and religiously appropriate care services for elderly and disabled Somalis in the area. Other Somali organisations, the Somali Community Centre, Somali Community Education & Employment Support and the Somali Refugee Action Group aim to provide welfare, educational, training, employment, health, cultural

and religious support to their members. When asked about any political activities the organisations may be pursuing, none of the community leaders would admit to undertaking political activities. However, they acknowledged that some members used the premises for political meetings that discussed the socio-political situation in Somalia.

Congolese refugees frequented the Lewisham Refugee Network, a cross-nationality and cross-ethnic refugee organisation concerned with welfare advice, educational and training support and the provision of practical help such as the distribution of food and clothing, household furniture and small grants to newcomers and those experiencing hardship. Three Congolese refugees used other refugee organisations that catered specifically for the needs of refugees from Congo and/ or French-speaking exiles. The motivation for these refugees to use nationality-specific refugee organisations was that they were culturally and linguistically close but they also disseminated accurate and timely information about cultural, religious, social and political events relevant to the people from their country of origin. There was also a higher level of trust.

The importance of refugee community organisations has been stressed by many authorities in the field. The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture (1994) argues that such organisations have a therapeutic role. Refugees who have affiliations to similar groups tend to get better quicker and integrate more rapidly. This echoes Parsons' (1951) analysis of the psychological dimension of the healing process. Studying a number of patients in hospitals, he argued that those with confidence and a positive view of the future tended to overcome their ills and recover prompter than those with low moral. Comparing these findings to the Medical Foundation's examination, the refugee role can sometimes be likened to the sick role. Like in the case of Jean-Baptiste above, gaining a smile and being able to engage in 'normal' human interactions are socio-psychological dimensions that help refugees to get away from the perceived 'abnormal' nature of their new conditions, i.e. loneliness, isolation, speechlessness, depression, etc.

In total two in three refugees felt a sense of comfort and safety when they made contacts with community organisations dealing with people from their culture, nationality or ethnic origins. This finding is consistent across the boards, from the Congolese to the Somalis. Metaphorically, it could be said that the refugees felt like in heaven when they came in close contact with a recognisable community organisation and within reach of rediscovering their humanity again.

Many refugees who use community and voluntary organisations' services do so due to warm welcome friendship that helps them feel a sense of family.

However, the role of the community organisation could be viewed from a different perspective which may not always be in the line of inclusion. In fact, instead of freeing the individual, the community organisation could alienate them, confining them to dealing only with people that look like them, speak their languages and dance their rhythms.

The fact that some migrants feel that they do not require English to live in the host society highlights to a large extent the alienation that community or ethnic based groups could place their members in (Hack-Polay, 2008). Stein (1986) sees contradiction in the role of the ethnic organisation; while on the one hand, it smoothens the transition between being a citizen in the homeland and becoming refugees, the community organisation can be "dysfunctional, as a barrier that keeps the refugee in an ambivalent position – midway to nowhere between the lost homeland and the new society" (Stein, 1986:17). Such practices help maintain the status of a divided society, which is not always the sole making of the indigenous population but, as Castles & Kosack (1973) found, could be a more complex problem that involves the deliberate subordination of migrant communities in labour, housing, education as well as discrimination against minorities. Usually, the first generations, and maybe the second, would almost be confined to similar micro-social groupings and only later generations could start to see openings through education, work and leisure attendance together with the indigenous young people. In the current research those among the refugee respondents who had friends from other communities, particularly from the local population, viewed having an 'English friend' as a significant step towards successful integration.

When the perpetuation has been the making of the indigenous population, the refugees have perceived it as a manifestation of racism through which some of the hosts distance themselves from newcomers. Although only one in five of the respondents saw racism is the isolation and rejection they faced from the locals, this proportion is significant enough to attract some analysis. The nature of the part of London in which the respondents have been selected could help explain why the proportion is small. Lewisham and Greenwich are London Boroughs with large pockets or minority communities and refugees. In Greenwich for instance, there are around 25 per cent of ethnic minorities and over 10,000 refugees. The

largest minority group is the Black Africans. The make up of Lewisham is very similar. With a very diverse population, the degree of tolerance of other cultures could be greater. However diversity could be problematic. In some cases, the worst 'hell' that experienced by the refugees has been the result of racism.

Dating, marriage and founding a family scored high on the respondents' agenda in exile. All but one of the respondents were either officially married or had a long term partner. The age of the participants could explain this high proportion of married refugees or those having a partner. Several reasons were given by the respondents to support their tendency to seek a relationship in the early period of coming into exile but in general these reasons are essentially social and psychological. As Lin (1986:65) point out "refugees who live with their spouses have the good fortune of retaining a most important source of emotional support". The Congolese and Somali refugees agreed with Stein and put forward numerous other ways in which dating, marriage and founding a family have been key social factors in their lives as exiles.

Dating: a daring enterprise

Dating in exile was seen as a daring enterprise and a test one's skills for integration. A figurative comparison given by Joseph, a Congolese refugee is enlightening in this respect. Joseph explained that he went nightclubs most nights, looking for someone to meet. It was a way of combating boredom but also a way of showing that he is a member of the new society. After many disappointing attempts, he finally met a woman from his country who he later married.

In the above experience, the respondent was clearly testing his skills of integration. He attempts to liken life in exile to life in his country of origin to see how well he could do. There is a feeling of being effeminate if one does not have a companion, a partner. Capability of engaging in a positive relationship is vital to survival. But in psychological term, dating and marriage proved to be significant too. In many other instances, the refugees used dating and marriage as a coping strategy. In their grieving situation, there would be someone to comfort them. If the partner is from a refugee background as well, then they would comfort each other from the loss of belonging, relatives, status and sometimes from the loss of physical strength and health. Refugees from Somalia particularly fell within this category. Mohammed argued that meeting his partner helped deal with loneliness

and isolation. Mohammed's story reflects the way in which many other respondents met their partners. A number started dating within community organisations where people go for advice on welfare, immigration, training and employment. There migrants met migrants. This could explain why over half of the respondents were either married or in a relationship with someone from their country of origin or from a refugee background. But in over 80 per cent of cases people from the same country married. Another place of encounters was religious institutions. The case of Mohammed above is not isolated. For the Congolese, dating and marriage followed similar example. Most of the Congolese interviewed either attend a Black African church in Lewisham or congregate at the French Sunday service in Central London; however, the congregation is made up of a greater number of black African French speakers than their white counterparts.

The analogy of fishing in the new sea by Joseph, as explored above, still present some interest, when looking at the places where people usually met. Joseph likened the new society to a sea, a vast unknown where the lost refugee has to strive for survival. In that sea (the new society), the fisherman (the refugee) identifies pockets (nightclubs, pubs, religious places) which are rich in 'fishes' (potential partners) and therefore make a catch more likely. The refugee who provided the 'sea' metaphors frequented such diverse places as nightclubs, pubs, public places and churches in the hope of meeting someone who could be a partners and perhaps a future wife. This is far from being a mere game, a simple equation about going out to kill boredom. It denotes a structured mental exercise that is part of the wider coping strategy. Keeping the mind busy so as to forget the past and one's current conditions is part of the hidden agenda, which also encompasses the idea of making up for the loss which was being grieved for. Mohammed's statement that "you can go mental if you don't have anyone to talk to" is eloquent.

Given the circumstances that led to their exile, the presence of kinship for the three societies of refugees studied, was almost non-existent. Most of the refugees do not have families in the country of exile and in many cases they may have lost their immediate families in wars or other disasters which led them to flee. The situation of the respondents in this research closely follows research findings by Stein (1986:13) which concluded that refugees "are likely to lack kin, potential support groups, in the country of resettlement". This explains the need to establish what was referred to earlier as parents by alliance, and crucially start an early dating process, marry and found a family.

Marriage and the family: a micro-social network

For the refugees, marrying and founding a family in exile bears more meaning and symbolism than in any other circumstances they would have imagined. The family in exile represents a real micro-society within which the refugees perform a wide range of normal social functions. Wagner & Obermiller (2004:32), describing the conditions of Black African miners in a coal town, found that “family solidarity was reinforced by the living conditions”. In the case of refugees, the family is a support network; it has a leisure function, a competition function, financial function, a reflection of idealised family units in the country of origin. This plurality of functions of the family is reflected in the narratives of a large number of refugees. A refugee noted that the birth of her child in exile was an occasion to celebrate in the family and have people around and be at the centre of an event.

In such circumstances refugees feel significant because they capture some attention and interest. They are at the centre of something, an event which in the home country would have gathered a number of relatives and acquaintances. Although, the number invited may be no near what it would have been in the refugees’ country of origin, psychologically it is galvanising and socially it is overwhelming. The leisure or entertainment function of the family continues in later years, as the children grow up. They and the refugee parents become an integrated team that could challenge a lot of social deficiencies, such as boredom, neglect, depression, etc. Hassan, a refugee with three children in exile, stresses the importance of the family for refugees in terms of having company and a social unit that helps make sense of a potentially lonely existence.

Cases such as Hassan’s have been highlighted by a few other refugees in the sample. The reliance on the children to play a role in the family unit in order for it to mime the wider social context was unveiled either blatantly or in a hidden way in many narratives. The children were given a significant and primary role in the working of the family. Such allocation of roles on an almost equal basis revealed a necessary partnership between children and parents. The idea of the family as a team introduced the in the paragraph above is not an exaggeration of its function. A team is a social unit which acts in a coordinated way in pursuance of a common goal. In the case of the refugee families, the defined common goal was happiness,

social integration in the new society and the division of a strategy for the future. In fact, Margaret Thatcher, a former British prime minister, saw this wholesome aspect of the family when she once stated that the family is “a nursery, a school, a hospital, a leisure place, a place of refuge and a place of rest” (quoted in Abbot & Wallace, 1992). A refugee revealed another key function of the refugee family in exile; this is to create an atmosphere that looks like ‘back home’.

Such a discourse is an exemplification of the fact that refugees are often successful at re-creating social and cultural lives, whatever artificial they may be. There is, however, a great missing link, relatives, grand-parents and close friends who may have been able to share the joy of the refugees in a more natural way. Doing with ‘new people you meet here’, is consistent with the metaphor of new beginning which was well used by many refugees at the end of their narratives. The idea of making things look like “back home” in Paolo’s statement is further evidence to support the extensive use of the metaphor of exile as nostalgia. The refugees, in almost all they do or enterprise to do, rely on the idealised model of the country of origin. It was argued that many refugees had lost their parents and other relatives; they have also lost touch with their childhood friends and even their culture. Reconstructing those psycho-social realities and entities, from scratch, amounts to a new beginning. Al-Rasheed (1993) and Hirschon (1989) also argues that such reconstruction represents an attempt “to establish familiar patterns and maintain continuity with their past in an attempt to overcome personal alienation and social disintegration” (Hirschon, 1993:92).

The sophistication of the asylum family has another latent dimension. The family has an economic function which is manifest in the decision making within the family. Jerome pointed out that he discusses every aspect of financial life with his partner, from paying the rent, to shopping bill and potential future investment in their country of origin. The financial function of the family was evident in other narratives where the exiles nourish plans to buy land or build family houses for their return home, if they were ever able to. Jerome made the point that, because of their language abilities, they did not feel confident speaking to people outside. The issue of trust in the new society led the asylum families to become their own financial advisers and sometimes their own mini-financial centres.

As it could be appreciated from the examples above, the asylum families have multiple dimensions and functions. They do not only fulfil the individual’s needs but moreover take a wholesome approach to looking after the social and

psychological well-being of the members of the unit. The refugee family, through its many attributes, is a therapeutic unit. People have perhaps a greater sense of a common purpose than 'normal' indigenous families. The refugee family is a unit striving to maintain a certain originality of families from the country where they came from; but there was also the demand for adaptation and integration to new realities. However, a hidden meaning of marriage in exile, beyond the open discourses, is one of security. In his *Marriage in Exile*, Al-Rasheed (1993) elaborates on the examples of Iraqi women he interviewed. The women viewed marriage as "a natural and inevitable" life event which a security element associated to it, as they were taught from their childhood. Although the study was carried out on a female sample, the findings reflect the views of the predominantly male sample in the current thesis. The respondents general stressed various elements such as financial benefits, psychological, social benefits which could amount to psycho-social assurance. In their study of African American miners and migrants, Wagner and Obermiller (2004:33) see marriage among those displaced for the purpose of their employment in artificial mining towns as a means of stability. They write that "the presence of wives and children acted as a stabilising force, discouraging absenteeism and high employment turnover". With that in mind, employers in the mine towns often sought African American workers who were married because they saw them as assets for their businesses. In exile, the refugees predominantly sought to make use of the healing and stabilising force of marriage, confirming a widely accepted thought among social scientists that "it is almost axiomatic that the family is a universally necessary social institution" (Moore, quoted in Morgan, 1973:3).

Religious activities in exile

Religion plays an important role in human and social organisations. It has both psychological and social functions. While socially, it could be seen as a means for social control, on the psychological and individual levels, religious beliefs help relieve people from mental oppression. These functions have been highlighted by Durkheim (1961) who argues that religious practice is a form of recognition of the social because members of a religious community get together to express their faith and belief in one common sacred entity; often this gives them hope in a better future, if their current conditions are below their expectations. The idea of hope in a

better future is an important and a recurrent feature in refugee narratives and metaphors provided by the refugees interviewed in the present research. The metaphor of “asylum as a new beginning” was mentioned by at least two members in each of the groups of respondents; those using such a metaphor were often the ones who had strong religious affiliations, e.g. Muslims, Christians. Some refugees believe that going regularly to church, God will help them win asylum cases. The message was no different for a Muslim exile who explains that it is Allah (God) that helped him escape alive and attending the Mosque is synonymous of thankfulness and not doing so could attract a curse.

Escaping alive from persecution and finding a safe haven in Britain is “the hand of God”. The refugees’ religious belief is largely strengthened by events of massacres, deaths and starvation from which they see escape as miraculously executed by God. Dislocation, isolation and the possible death of loved ones perhaps leads the refugee to find in the religious community some form of comfort. This leads to question whether religious refugees use their belief and community for purely religious purposes or for socialising and meeting other. From Malinowski’s (1954) and Hack-Polay’s (2008) perspective both answers are valid because “religion promotes social solidarity by dealing with situations of emotional stress”. The social isolation, the death of loved ones and the loss of one’s homeland, are dramatic events that are susceptible to cause great anxiety which medicine may not always have the answer. Some of the refugees at the time of the interviews were attending churches which some researchers classify as sect nowadays, which have also proliferated in Britain in the past decade. Many recruit their members among African communities. The proliferation of sect is not a new social phenomenon. For Wilson (1970), sects arise within marginalised social strata during periods of rapid social change, with important disruption in social mechanisms. In the case of the refugees, much of the evidence put forward in the preceding chapters make a case for their dramatic change that they have gone through: spatial dislocation, social and psychological disruption, loss and grief (Stein, 1986). The refugees therefore seem to have a lot of questions about the world, themselves, their past and their future, which they would like see answered. The refugees believe that only God could re-establish their status in the human society, hence their regular church attendance to invoke his mercy.

It seems as though many refugees would join religious organisations because religion appears to provide answers to the unanswerable questions exiles pose. Besides the social, adhering to a religious community brings psychological healing to the mind and represents a remedy for crisis (Parsons 1965) as well as a means for adjusting and

coming to terms (Malinowski, 1954) with loss and grief.

However, religion is in some cases both a dividing and uniting factor. A Somali Muslim refugee who married a White English woman and converted to Christianity was excluded in his community due to his new beliefs. Mohammed could not attend the Mosque's community events and the community organisation. The refugee, therefore, became a devoted Christian who attended church services regularly to build links and forge a new social network. Similarly some refugees, who were persecuted by religious movements back home, were reluctant to join any religious community in exile. On the contrary, they wanted to stay away from such milieus because of their past experience. A Congolese refugee remembered that some of those who pursued him were part of his local church congregation. Consequently, refugees in this situation reject the assumption that attending a place of worship would make any difference; on the contrary the religious institution in exile is perceived by some refugees as undesirable and hazardous because of the recurrent fear encountering the very people who persecuted them and who might still seek to assassinate the exile. Religion plays a big role in the healing process for many refugees. The church or the Mosque becomes more than a place where the refugees congregate to meet and worship God. These were places where they went to meet people and socialise; these were also places of psychological healing and rediscovery of cultural values from their country of origin. Hack-Polay (2008) speaks of instruments of socio-cultural conservatism.

CONCLUSION

Refugees can very be enterprising in seeking socialisation into the host society. In attempting to attain this, they employ several strategies. Language acquisition, education and training were the primary strategies because those are vital if the refugees were to be able to come out and participate in society; they are equally crucial if refugees were to re-qualify or update their professional skills and experience. The forced migrants then sought to join migrant community organisations that would provide some friendship and means of coming out of social isolation. Coming out of such isolation is critical for the refugees who used other forms strategies to combat it. Dating, marrying and founding a family as well as frequenting a religious place were all part of struggle.

The lives and socialisation process of the African refugees fit Hall's (1993) view that "modern people of all sorts of conditions have had as a condition of survival to be members, simultaneously, of several overlapping 'imagined communities'" The

dislocation suffered by the refugees is echoed by Mutiso's (1979) assertion that "refugees suddenly find themselves virtual (cultural) highlands in a strange and sometimes hostile sea". This supports the refugees' use of the metaphors 'exile as a strange place' and 'exile as a desert' in which one could easily be lost and be at the mercy of cultural predators. Such dislocation imposed a natural struggle and resistance against cultural alienation and social isolation. That is a dilemma facing the refugees who do not want to capitulate at the first cultural assaults but also want to root themselves into the host society. In many instances, such resistance though not in vain ends up in defeat because, as Berry (1986:31) argues, "refugees may have fewer cultural resources available to help them avoid assimilation". Similarly, Castells (1997:68-69) argues that with "reduced networks of primary identity and individual survival, people will have to muddle through the reconstruction of their collective identity, in the midst of a world where the flow of power and money are trying to render piecemeal the emerging economic and social institutions before they come into being, in order to swallow them in their global networks".

The uprooting of the African exiles in the new society and their striving to find meaning to alien social realities suggest that the refugees are living an artificial social existence in the new country. Evidence from research, supplemented by the behaviour of the respondents in this study, point to a positive answer. Life with new friends as adults and the construction of parenthood by alliance is not the natural milieu for most refugees interviewed. The idea earlier explored of wanting to do things like back home itself is an analogy that is meaningful in this analysis. It shows that much of what is presented to the newcomers is a fabricated replica of the real social and psychological reality that they may have naturally lived if they were let to evolve in their natural or, rather, original milieu. In Al-Rasheed's (1993) study of Iraqi women and marriage in exile, the author found that "the women are involved in a process of reconstruction of meaning simulated by a crisis whereby their old assumptions seem to be irrelevant to their present reality".

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