

A Comparison of the Integration Experiences of Two African Immigrant Populations in a Rural Community

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Abstract: Most U.S. migration research compares very distinct groups, such as Mexicans and Asians, and virtually ignores the small, but growing number of African immigrants. In contrast, this study describes and compares the integration experiences of two Black, East African refugee populations in a small town in the Midwestern United States. We demonstrate that Muslim Somalis and Christians from southern Sudan encounter similar structural obstacles to social and economic integration, but that their religious affiliations lead to sharply different opportunities and cultural strategies. This paper ends with a discussion of the implications of these findings for social work practice and the potential role of social workers as cultural brokers between new immigrant groups and the general public.

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During the 1990s, more Africans came from Africa to the United States than had migrated between these two continents in the previous 180 years (Hume 2002). While 95% of first generation African immigrants live in U.S. cities (Wilson, 2003), a small but growing number are moving to rural towns. The choice of a rural versus urban setting influences integration processes (Gozdziak and Martin, 2004), and the ways in which immigrants reconstitute and adapt pre-migration cultural frameworks. Furthermore, the settlement of African immigrants in rural areas contradicts the predominant pattern of US migration in which immigrants migrate to ethnic enclaves in big cities, seek assistance from social networks of compatriots and urban, social services (e.g. interpreters in health centers, ESL classes), and begin family formation. Africans in rural areas diverge from this pattern in important ways. As refugees, they are unable to return to their countries of origin due to on-going civil conflict. They also have limited access to U.S.-based social networks because rural towns generally lack both established communities of co-ethnics, and the panoply of services available in cities. The arrival of African refugees in rural areas, therefore, introduces new challenges for social workers practicing in these settings.

Most U.S. migration research compares very distinct groups, such as Mexicans and Asians, and virtually ignores African immigrants.¹ In contrast, this study describes and compares the integration experiences of two Black, East African refugee populations in a small town in the Midwestern United States. Specifically, we compare the experiences of Somalis and southern Sudanese in a rural community, examine obstacles to their economic, social, and cultural integration, and discuss the implications for social work practice. We begin with an overview of the global and local forces pushing Somali and Sudanese refugees out of Africa and pulling them toward the United States. This is followed by a description of the research methods and setting

for the present study. Finally, we describe African migration to a small town in Minnesota, compare the factors that facilitate and inhibit what some authors call “integration,” and discuss the role social workers can play as cultural brokers between these new arrivals and the general public. Data on the rural Somali residents are compared with data in an urban probability sample from Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Background

Shifts in the Global Landscape

Lewellen (2002) notes that it is not migration in itself that is remarkable, but the fact that migrations in the current age of globalization exhibit different patterns from earlier migrations. From this perspective, even the relatively small stream of African migration to the United States is notable because of its dramatic increase from 0.3% of all immigrants in the 1990s to 2.8% in 2000 (Grieco, 2002). A convergence of disparate global forces helps to explain this increase. First, structural changes in U.S. immigration and refugee policy in the 1990s reduced some long-standing barriers to African immigration. These changes have their roots in the October 1965 amendments to the *1952 Immigration and Nationality Act*, abolishing nationality quotas in favor of preferences based on family reunification and occupational skills. The *Refugee Act of 1980* further widened the door for Africans by removing the requirement that refugees be individuals fleeing a communist country. In spite of these changes, Ethiopians and Eritreans were virtually the only Africans admitted to the United States as refugees in substantial numbers until 1991, when Sudanese and Somalis started arriving (Woldemikael, 1997:266). Other Africans gained entry when the *Immigration Act of 1990* established a diversity lottery that distributed 55,000 permanent resident visas annually to randomly-selected applicants from ‘low admission’ states—i.e. countries with fewer than 50,000 immigrants in the United States (Hume, 2002). These

immigration policy reforms, combined with improvements and cost reductions in communication and air travel, and continual violent conflicts in several African countries have contributed to a steady increase in the numbers of African immigrants entering the United States.

Global Forces Leading to African Emigration

To contextualize the experiences of Sudanese and Somali refugees in the United States, we present a brief overview of the impact of the wars on the populace of the two countries represented in this study. (For more detailed accounts see Besteman, 1999; Hutchinson, 1996; Johnson, 2003; Jok, 2001; Samatar, 2002.)

Sudan is a Northeastern African country with 30 million inhabitants. The civil war that began there in 1983 is estimated to have claimed three million lives, and to have displaced five million individuals. The central conflict that divides Sudan is often described in geographic terms of “North versus South.” The majority population in the North identifies as Arab and Muslim, while a politically-marginalized population in the South identifies themselves as black Africans, and increasingly as Christians (Hutchinson, 1996; Deng, 1995). Beginning in 2003 events in the Western Sudan Darfur region have added another layer of complexity to this crisis.

The U.S. government has resettled nearly 20,000 Sudanese refugees in the United States since the early 1990s, when sizable numbers first started arriving (ORR, 2003). Before the 1990s permanent Sudanese migration to North America was limited to small numbers of people from northern Sudan (Abusharaf, 2002). Nuer people, one of anthropology’s most celebrated ethnographic case studies, reportedly represent the majority of southern Sudanese in the United States. Nuer are only one of about ten different ethnic populations, including Dinka, Anuak, Shilluk, Nuba, and Mahdi, who have arrived from Sudan. These communities are scattered across the United States in places like South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, Tennessee, California,

New York, Texas, and Minnesota. (See also Abusharaf, 2002; Holtzman, 2000; Shandy, 2001.) Peace accords signed in 2004 and 2005 hold promise for a viable peace settlement in Sudan.

Somalia is a country of about nine million inhabitants on the Horn of Africa, neighboring Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Civil war and factional fighting over the past decade have resulted in more than half a million deaths in Somalia, and 700,000 displaced persons. One could argue that the presence of Somali refugees in the United States is an example of “failed American foreign policy maneuvers” (Lamphere, Stepick, Grenier, 1994:3). Between 1992 and 1994, the United States headed a multi-national peacekeeping campaign and stationed thousands of troops in Somalia in an effort to facilitate peace between the warring clans, and to distribute relief supplies to the famine stricken areas. In 1994 U.S. and European troops withdrew, but the civil war remained unresolved (see Samatar 2002). In 2004, a new president was elected. Three hundred thousand Somali refugees and asylum seekers are scattered across twenty-four different countries (USCR, 2002). Between 1992 and 1999 the US Immigration Service reported that 29,065 Somali refugees arrived in the United States.

Africans in Minnesota

In the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, immigration to Minnesota was dominated by émigrés from Scandinavia, Ireland, and Germany. In recent years there has been an influx of economic migrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America. While total numbers of foreign-born residents pale next to those in the coastal and border states, Minnesota has a larger percentage of immigrants who are *refugees*² than the rest of the country (see Figure 1). In the 1990s this proportion ranged from 24-46% in Minnesota, as compared to 6-16% nation-wide (Fennelly 2004). Refugee settlements and subsequent family reunification

account for much of the in-migration of Hmong from Southeast Asia beginning in the mid 1970s and Russians, Eastern Europeans, Somalis, Sudanese, and other Africans in the 1990s.

FIGURE 1 HERE

There were an estimated 27,806 foreign-born Minnesotans from sub-Saharan Africa in 2000, a 513% increase since 1990. In 2000, three quarters of the primary refugee arrivals to Minnesota were from this region (Somalia 55%; Ethiopia 10%; Liberia 8%; Sierra Leone 3%). In addition to these primary refugee arrivals, many African refugees migrate to Minnesota from other U.S. states. One study of Sudanese secondary migration showed that three out of four Sudanese had lived in more than one state since their arrival in the United States (Shandy, 2001:19). Another study of Somalis in Minneapolis-St. Paul found that three out of five were likely to have lived elsewhere in the U.S. before moving to Minnesota (WRC, 2000). Figure 2 shows primary refugee arrivals from Somalia and Sudan to Minnesota between 1979 and 2002. Minnesota now has the fifth largest African population in the United States, after New York, DC, Los Angeles, and Atlanta (Wilson, 2003).

FIGURE 2 HERE

African Integration Experiences in Rural America

In its most general form, integration is the process through which newcomers become incorporated into the host community's economic and social fabric (Papademetriou 2003). A number of authors have contributed to the literature on integration (Fix and Laglagaron 2002; Fix, et al. 2001; Hernandez 1998; Jacobsen 2003; Lowell 1997; Papademetriou 2003; Penninx 2003; Ray 2002; Reinsch 2001; Spencer 2003). Much of the focus of the discourse has been upon socio-economic integration—particularly as measured by changes in English language proficiency, education, occupation, and income (Ray 2002); much less attention has been paid to

the larger process of formation of attachment to the new society, or to the factors that lead some immigrants to retain distinct characteristics and identities. Chavez (1992) suggests that barriers to socio-economic “links of incorporation” (i.e. secure employment, family formation, the establishment of credit, capital accumulation, competency in English, and so forth) prevent immigrants from becoming settlers and feeling part of the new society. He suggests that these barriers cause immigrants to remain ‘liminals,’ or outsiders who hope to return to their countries of origin after a relatively brief time (1992:5). For refugees, even if actual return to the country of origin is not realistic, the hope of returning endures.

Classic assimilation theory includes general assumptions about the absorption of ‘extrinsic’ cultural characteristics (such as language, dress and tastes for particular foods or music), but is less clear about adherence to more ‘intrinsic’ characteristics, such as religion (Alba 1997). In contrast, Nagel (1994) discusses the resilience of cultural, linguistic, and religious differences that should make us question assumptions about the inevitability of assimilation. She notes that ethnicity is a dynamic and socially constructed process, negotiated out of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, and region.

In the present study we discuss the factors that bring Sudanese and Somalis to small town America and compare the variables that facilitate and inhibit their integration into US communities.

Methods and Setting

Qualitative data for the study come from focus groups with Africans living in Faribault, Minnesota, a rural community of about 20,000 people 50 miles south of Minneapolis.³ Faribault is an historically White town that has had dramatic increases in the numbers of African and Latino immigrants in the past ten years. At the time of the 2000 census 85% of the residents

were non-Hispanic Whites, compared to 98% in 1990. These demographic changes correspond to the expansion of a large poultry processing plant (Fennelly and Leitner 2002). The location of the plant in a rural community is the result of the decentralization of the meat processing industry documented elsewhere (Griffith 1995; Lamphere 1994; Schlosser 2000; Stull 1995). The Faribault plant was closed in 1995, and re-opened under a different name, without union employees. In the following years, as the plant expanded, a number of immigrant workers were recruited, and the size of the African and Latino populations in the city increased dramatically.⁴ At the time of the study, there were an estimated 150 Sudanese and 250 Somali residents in Faribault.

In summer 2001, we conducted four focus groups (two each), with 16 Nuer-speaking Sudanese and 15 Somali residents of Faribault. The African focus groups were part of a larger study that included Cambodian, Vietnamese, Mexican, Central American, and native-born European-origin residents. All discussions were confidential and followed IRB informed consent protocol. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. Each focus group lasted about two hours, with topics including motives for coming to the town, work experiences, and perceptions and interactions with other foreign-born and U.S.-born groups in the community. In line with Gans' (2000) recommendation on the use of "cultural insiders" in research, we trained two Somali- and two Nuer-speaking facilitators to conduct the respective groups and take notes.

The focus group participants had been referred to us by contacts in the local poultry processing plant, the Sudanese ministry of the Lutheran church, and other community contacts. The groups were designed to include participants with varying background characteristics, and lengths of time in the community, but as Omidian (2000:43) notes, "it is nearly impossible to achieve truly random sampling in refugee communities." Most of the Sudanese residents had

moved to Faribault between 1999 and 2001, after first settling in other parts of the U.S. Almost all of the Sudanese focus group participants were born in Maiwut, Sudan, strongly suggesting that they are *Gaajak* Nuer or Eastern Jikany Nuer (see Hutchinson 1996). The majority of Somalis moved to Faribault between 1997 and 2000 from Minneapolis-St. Paul, or other U.S. states. All but five of the Somali focus group participants were born in Mogadishu, making it difficult to identify clan affiliation. According to one Somali informant who was not a focus group participant, the majority of Somalis in Faribault are *Hawiye*, but there are also some *Darood* clan members in the town.

The moderators prepared verbatim transcriptions from tape recordings of the sessions. Focus group transcripts, intake questionnaires, debriefing notes and observations were entered into the QSR NUD*ST 4.0 text analysis program, which was used to complement repeated close readings of the transcripts. Triangulation of the focus group data was achieved by additional fieldwork in Faribault by one of the authors, and a larger, separate ethnographic study of Sudanese refugees by the other author.

In addition, focus group data on Somalis in Minnesota were complemented by comparisons with survey data on this population in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area from 1999-2000 (Wilder Research Center 2000).⁵ The data on Somalis came from a probability sample of immigrants residing in the Twin Cities metropolitan area—home to 88% of Africans in the state. Bilingual interviewers conducted the interviews and recorded information on family and individual background variables, migration histories, language proficiency, employment, and use of community services. There were too few Sudanese residents in the Twin Cities for separate analysis, but the study included 218 Somali adults. The availability of data on urban Somalis from the WRC Study and rural Somalis in our focus groups constituted an opportunity

for multi-level analysis. This reduced one of the common limitations of ethnographic fieldwork, in which analysis is limited to the number of individuals a particular anthropologist can study (Foner 2000:50). Furthermore, our focus on recently arrived refugees in this exploratory study shortens the typical delay in academic responses to emerging refugee issues that Robinson (1993) has called “too little, too late.”

Findings

Why do they come?

Why do African immigrants migrate to rural America? Why would they opt to distance themselves from social services made available as a part of their primary resettlement packages? Very few of the Sudanese and Somalis in our study came directly to Minnesota when they arrived in the United States. Their rural Midwestern destination differs from more general immigration trends in ways that merit closer scrutiny. Clearly, the availability of employment is a central contributing factor, but as Foner (1997) cautions, this migratory stream is not “reducible to rational economic calculations.” What is sometimes lost in analyses of survey data are factors such as the availability of social services, or other quality of life considerations that we discuss below.

Jobs

Meat and poultry processing jobs have a unique set of attributes attractive to immigrant populations (Lamphere et al., 1994). The work does not necessarily require knowledge of English or previous job skills, and the wages are attractive when compared to other available options for a population without U.S. job histories or high levels of English proficiency. Similarly, rural poultry processing plants offer longer-term employment than the jobs typically available in urban areas.

In our focus group study over half of the Somalis and three-quarters of the Sudanese were employed (Table 1); in both groups women were equally or more likely to be working. All of the Africans were working as laborers in blue collar occupations; 73% of the Somalis and over 56% of the Sudanese had worked in meat or poultry processing plants. While there are many businesses in Faribault, work opportunities for African immigrants are limited almost exclusively to employment in the meat packing and poultry processing industries, or to local vegetable canning and manufacturing plants. By way of contrast urban immigrants have more varied job opportunities. In the urban Wilder Study sample 42% of Somalis held blue collar jobs, as compared to 100% of the Somali and Sudanese focus group respondents in Faribault. One Sudanese man in Faribault commented: “There are only four companies to work for. If you cannot find a job with one of these four companies, it is difficult to find a job anywhere else.”

Sudanese and Somalis focus group participants reported almost identical wages—about \$8.90/hour (see Table 2). These wages were between \$1.32 and \$3.16 per hour lower than average 2001 wages for food processing and meatpacking jobs in Southern Minnesota as reported by the Minnesota Work Force Center (2003).

TABLE 1 HERE

Perhaps because they were aware of their limited opportunities, the Africans in the Faribault study sometimes complained about the hard work, but rarely complained about wages. A Somali woman stated, “I have no problem with my employers; I have no problem with the salary; I have no problem with my co-workers, but the job itself is difficult!”

TABLE 2 HERE

Low levels of English proficiency on the part of Africans and other immigrants in rural Minnesota communities are likely to be the result of self selection of low English ability

individuals who migrate out of the cities in search of jobs in meat packing and other low wage manufacturing plants. In Faribault only 14% of Somali focus group participants rated their English as “good” or “excellent” (Table 1), and both Sudanese and Somali men were more proficient in English than their female counterparts. This may be because the Sudanese in our focus groups had lived in the community longer than the Somalis, although the differences were not statistically significant. By contrast, the English ability of Somali residents in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area was much higher. There 70% of the Somali respondents in the probability sample stated that they could speak English well or very well.

Overall the Sudanese participants in Faribault were more proficient in English than the Somalis, though only four (25%) of the Nuer described their English ability as “excellent.” Nevertheless, lack of English skills was mentioned as a barrier to integration by both Nuer and Somali participants.

Education and Social Services

High on the list of factors attracting African immigrants to Faribault was the *perceived* availability of education and social services, including access to schools and health care. Education merits special mention, particularly for the Sudanese, who describe it as a motive for resettlement decisions. In Faribault the Nuer respondents repeatedly mentioned the availability of education and medical care as an attraction in the U.S. One Sudanese man commented, “Back in Sudan, many people come from rural areas where many have never gone to school and have not had the chance to get an education. [In] America there are many opportunities to have access to education and employment.” This sentiment support Shandy's (2001) observation that access to educational opportunities serves as a significant force propelling interstate migration among Southern Sudanese refugees in the United States.

On the other hand, the high cost of higher education places it beyond the reach of many immigrants. One Sudanese man observed: “Many young people who graduate from high school have difficulty going to college. We Sudanese are new to this country. Nobody has enough money to send their kids to college.”

Roughly similar percentages of Somalis (40%) and Sudanese (50%) in the focus groups were high school graduates. In the cities, where there are better job opportunities for immigrants with higher levels of education and English proficiency, 66% of metropolitan Somalis had completed high school, and 22% had completed college (WRC 2000). (Sudanese were not identified separately in the WRC study). In Faribault low levels of education made it difficult for some of the individuals we interviewed to secure jobs. One Nuer man said: “Sometimes human services expect us to get jobs. Many of the Sudanese adults have not completed high school in the Sudan. It is difficult for them to find work...Welfare does not take this into consideration.”

Quality of Life

Like U.S.-born residents, African immigrants cite quality of life factors that attract them to rural communities. Their comments remind us that motives for relocating are complex, and cannot be reduced to simple economic calculations based on jobs and wages. One Somali woman echoed the comments of other focus group participants, as she described the variables that make life in rural Minnesota appealing: “What I like about living here is that it’s a calm place, and it’s walking distance to everything— for example schools and work. It is good for my children because there is no violence.”

What challenges do they encounter?

What obstacles do African immigrants encounter in the process of integrating into a rural Midwestern community? In other papers we have described anti-immigrant sentiments that are rife in rural Midwestern communities with large percentages of immigrants (Fennelly, 2005a, Fennelly, 2005b). Much of this animosity is directed at immigrants who are not fluent in English. We showed above that the availability of jobs that do not require high levels of English proficiency is one factor that attracts immigrants to Faribault; however, this does not lessen the fact that lack of English constitutes a formidable barrier to other forms of incorporation, such as social acceptance, finding housing, getting a driver's license, reading newspapers, and making friends. In the focus groups the moderators asked whether there were opportunities to form friendships in the workplace. One Somali woman responded " We don't speak the same language, we do not chat. We have nothing to do with one another...What is there to speak about if we cannot understand each other?" Another added: We cover [our bodies] while their women don't. They socialize by drinking alcohol and at parties, while we go to the mosque and worship Allah (God). They celebrate Christmas, Memorial Day and other holidays, which we don't..

A particular difficulty for African women is the challenge to find appropriate and affordable childcare. Like Latino and Asian immigrants in other meat processing towns (Benson 1999) African immigrants in Faribault struggle to combine work and child care, and the costs can be prohibitively expensive on low incomes. There is also resistance to childcare that is considered to be culturally inappropriate, especially for the Somalis, who seek Islamic educational settings for their children. One woman commented:

Life in Faribault is very tough. It's not like that in our country. Our country was Muslim, our children were sent to *Dugsi* [school, education, or shelter] to learn

the teachings of Islam. In Faribault we cannot send our children to a *Dugsi*. There is no place to teach them the Koran. Minneapolis is different and better than Faribault...because it has a big mosque. The kids are taught there; they are taught our religion, our customs, and many different things.

Child care was less of a problem for the Sudanese who belonged to the Lutheran church and received special help from them, including the establishment of a special Sudanese ministry daycare center.

Affordable housing

The decision to move to rural Minnesota is challenging in itself, but remaining and making a life requires additional initiative and perseverance. The expectation of affordable housing was a factor that first attracted African immigrants and refugees to Faribault, but its scarcity may force some to leave the community. One Nuer man reported that he was still living in a shelter after searching for housing for seven months.

In addition to the lack of affordable apartments, housing discrimination and exploitation by landlords have been recurring issues in Faribault. One Somali man described problems with an absentee landlord who refused to make needed repairs—a problem that was later corroborated by town officials. Another Somali added, “Personally I had problems finding housing. I left applications in several places. It is possible that they don't allow you to rent if you are black.” A similar suspicion of housing discrimination was mentioned in the Sudanese focus group.

After finding a place to live, African tenants may have difficulty retaining their apartments due to conflicts with their U.S.-born landlords over cultural concepts of space and family. Some of the Sudanese residents had problems with their landlords over friends or relatives who came to stay with them. As one Nuer man commented:

Landlords do not know our culture. Sometimes we welcome other people [to stay with us], but here it is often against the rules. Having many people stay at your apartment is not part of American culture. In the Sudan, you can invite many people to your apartment. The kids can play and shout, but it does not mean that we want to disturb other people in the building. If you tell your people to keep quiet and to talk quietly in the apartment, they may think that you are a mean or cruel person.

Other housing issues reflect cross-cultural differences in gender and family norms. Both Somalis and Sudanese come from patrilineal, patrilocal extended family residency systems. In the United States they are expected to conform to neolocal conjugal family norms. Six out of twelve men and none of the women in the Sudanese focus group were single. Of those who were married, most had spouses living in Faribault. There were three single Somali women in the groups and one single man; of the married individuals, only one Somali man and none of the women was living with a spouse.

In both Sudanese and Somali communities, cross-cultural differences related to gender and family norms are a function of adaptation to a new environment. High rates of female labor force participation among Somali women in the U.S. are one example. As one woman noted, "Allah knows that our religion does not condone this. We do the same work as the men; we do whatever they do. If I am ever able to leave this job, I'll never work again in my life."

On the other hand, some women enjoy role changes that ease gender restrictions. This may be the source of apparent differences between Somali men and women in the focus groups in their reactions to questions about whether they could imagine staying in Faribault. Some of

the women commented that many Somalis would stay if their needs were met, but the men tended to disagree.

Future Trends

Ultimately, it is the availability of work and affordable housing that will determine whether African immigrants remain in towns like Faribault. Some immigrants may already be contemplating leaving the community because of the difficulty of obtaining or keeping employment. A Sudanese woman observed:

Now I am seeing many people have problems with work. They are unable to find jobs. Many people move to Faribault to work because they think that it is easy to find work here, but this has become more difficult. This problem might lead some of us to move to a bigger place like Minneapolis or St. Paul, where there are more job opportunities.

A Somali man voiced a similar sentiment:

In the name of God, if we could find jobs other than in the Turkey Store....we could stay here. Wherever you go in the United States, it's the same, it doesn't matter to us—although there is a difference between a big city and a small town—a small town is better than a big city.

Religion as an Integrative Force for Sudanese Christians and an Isolating Force for Somali Muslims

At first glance, and to many white Faribault residents, Sudanese and Somali immigrants in Faribault have much in common. Both populations are fleeing civil conflict in East Africa. Both are 'Blacks' in a predominantly white U.S. town. They have similar education levels and jobs, and may appear to have similar options for integration. However, religious differences

produce important distinctions between the two. All of the Somalis (and none of the Sudanese) in our study were Muslims,⁶ while 69% of the Sudanese professed to be Lutherans.⁷ Religion is a key variable influencing Sudanese and Somali interactions with each other, and with the Faribault community at large, and religious differences have important implications for their resettlement and integration into U.S. society. Unlike other immigrant populations (e.g. Haitians studied by Stepick, 1998; or Mexicans studied by Chavez, 1992), many African refugees do not have extended family in the United States. Those who do have family ties still have kin networks that are truncated compared to what they experienced in Africa. In these situations churches and mosques serve as important institutions helping immigrants to meet basic needs. For the Somalis this means finding ways to hold Islamic services and to follow practices that separate them from their Christian neighbors. Many Somalis are religiously observant, and this is reflected in food taboos (only eating *halal*, religiously sanctioned, meat), women's clothing (*hejab* or veiling), and periodic prayers throughout the day. These practices, and the fact that Somalis in Faribault share a common language, serve to strengthen the cohesion of their community. They also limit opportunities for Somalis to interact with Americans and result in greater segregation from other U.S.-and foreign-born residents of the community. One Somali woman described the reasons for what she perceives as closer relations between non-Somali immigrants and native-born residents in Faribault: "They have the same religion, and they are the same. They wear the same kind of clothes; they go to church together...We are Muslims though, and we don't go to a [Christian] church." Other Somalis commented that they were prevented from forming friendships because of their inability or disinterest in going to bars, drinking alcohol, or eating food that is not *halal*.

What keeps us apart is the fact that we belong to a different culture. For example, we do not go to parties, churches, bars, or restaurants. Thus, [...] we don't become friends because they want to lead that kind of life, but we do not. They want to go to those places, but we don't believe in that kind of thing.

There is no Islamic mosque in Faribault, and Somali residents there congregate for prayer in locally rented spaces, or travel 50 miles to attend mosques in Minneapolis. This difference further reduces the attachment of Somalis to the local community. In contrast, a majority of the Nuer in our study were Lutherans who belonged to the local Lutheran Church with a 'Sudanese Ministry' that sponsored missions to Sudanese refugee camps in Kenya and special Nuer services in the Faribault church.

For the reasons described above, the effect of religion on cross-cultural relations is quite different for the Somalis and Sudanese in our study. For many Sudanese, Christianity serves as a *bond* with the larger European-origin community, and a source of distance from Somali Muslims. This is particularly true for Nuer refugees who have fled persecution by an Islamic Fundamentalist government in Sudan. When asked whether there were things that made them feel welcomed in Faribault, one Sudanese woman noted that the way the church treated her family made them like the town.

When I moved to Faribault, we first went to church and the church treated us well. They gave us cooking materials, tables, chairs, and other things we needed to settle in Faribault. I like they way they treated us. Every time we asked for something they gave it to us. The members of the church congregation are the people we know.

This last comment illustrates the cross-cultural integrative function of the church in this rural community, where White church members regularly interact with the Sudanese Lutherans in their congregation. The church also functions as an important safety net when work and welfare don't meet basic needs. One Sudanese man described going to the church for assistance after being unemployed for four months, at the same time that his welfare money was cut off.

In contrast, Somali Muslims are segregated from both native-born and foreign-born Christians. Some of this is self-determined; throughout the Somali transcripts there are multiple examples of pride in Somali separateness, and—in some cases—distaste at the notion of interacting with non-Muslim neighbors. A Somali woman said:

People who believe in Islam and these [other] people are not the same at all ...
Even if they have ten different beliefs, it all comes down to Christianity. They all belong to one another whether they agree or disagree, but we are different from them. We are Muslim people, followers of Muhammed—Peace and Blessings Upon his Soul.

At the same time, social distance between Somali and European residents is strongly reinforced by some Christian rural residents who view Muslims as “unchurched” (in the words of one rural pastor). Since 9/11/01 negative perceptions of followers of Islam are even more charged.

Concluding Observations

While there is a sizeable body of literature on other established refugee populations in the United States, there is little published research on Africans,⁸ and virtually none that pertains to service delivery to these populations. This exploratory study is one of the few to give voice to a group of African immigrants themselves, and to describe their perceptions of life in a non-metropolitan community in the United States.

These perceptions need to be viewed from multiple perspectives. When the participants in our study express general satisfaction with life as low wage, segregated workers in a predominantly White community, their attitudes may say less about their American experience than about the circumstances that forced them to flee their native countries. Because Somalis and Sudanese are such recent immigrants, many have vivid memories of their war-torn homelands. The devastation that has engulfed Somalia and the Sudan over the past decades and disrupted the most basic elements of life stands in stark contrast to material aspects of life in the United States such as work opportunities, access to schooling for children, and the availability of food and health care. The peace and tranquility of rural life are highly valued as well. The contrast with his community in the Sudan is described vividly by one focus group participant, “In Sudan there are no hospitals because everything was destroyed by the on-going war. There is no medication that people can use to treat their sickness. Education is not available there. Here, I see people go to work and school—people can find stability in their lives here. There is also enough food to survive.”⁹

Somali and Sudanese perceptions of life in the U.S. are affected similarly by emigration from war zones, but in another sense their experiences in the U.S. are dramatically different. For Nuer refugees the United States represents respite from religious persecution and the freedom to practice their religion. Sponsorship by Christian churches offers the Nuer an important opportunity for integration into local communities. In contrast, for Somalis life in a predominantly Christian community restricts their freedom to practice Islam or to educate their children in a religiously prescribed manner. For them religion is not an integrative force, but a barrier to acceptance by their Christian European-origin neighbors.

Our conclusions regarding the significance of religion in integration experiences has direct implications for social work practice and the delivery of services to immigrants in rural areas. In many American communities Christian churches are centers of social and cultural activities, from bingo nights to ‘ice cream socials’. Churches are also often the locus of supposedly secular activities, such as community board meetings or election polls. Off church grounds, it is not uncommon for civic groups to begin meetings with Christian prayers.

Little attention is given to the pervasive symbolism and the exclusionary nature of these practices. Two summers ago one of the authors invited African, Asian, and Hispanic school children to speak to a group of teachers and community leaders who had been invited to a training workshop by the Faribault School District. Two Somali parents refused to grant their children permission to attend the workshop because it was held in the meeting room of a Lutheran church. The implication that Christianity is normative, or even the ‘state religion’ is reinforced by recent federal legislation that has expanded the role of religious institutions in providing social services. Social workers can play a role in advocating for the importance of sensitivity towards the needs of non-Christian communities.

Another implication of our study for social work practice is to highlight the problems inherent in the failure to distinguish between Africans and African Americans in education and service programs. Minnesota school enrollment data, for example, do not make this distinction, making it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of services for immigrant populations or to identify areas of special need. This methodological confusion is an artifact of American views of race in which ethnicity is only defined in relation to Whites, and non-Whites of multiple ethnicities are relegated to the racialized category of ‘Blacks’. Waters (1999) has described the identity confusion that this engenders in her work on Afro-Caribbean residents in the United

States. In this study, we demonstrate the importance of recognizing that categories of “Africans” (and, by extension, Asians, Latinos, etc.) are actually extremely heterogeneous groupings of national origin or ethnic groups with vastly different socioeconomic, historical, linguistic, cultural and religious practices and characteristics.

A number of other forces have special impacts on African immigrants. Many have entered the US as refugees, fleeing war zones, being separated from their families and living in refugee camps. Once in the country they are less likely than other immigrants to settle in communities with large numbers of their compatriots. However, like other immigrants they often face housing and employment discrimination, the stresses of menial and low wage employment and underemployment because of the barriers to recognition of foreign professional credentials. These stresses are exacerbated by reductions in eligibility for social service and health programs under the 1996 Welfare Reform legislation.

Social workers can play an important role in helping other providers and the general public understand the implications of these pressures, but this presupposes a level of cultural competence on their part that is not always present. Park (2004) describes the ways in which immigrants have historically been problematized in social work discourse as ‘the alien problem’, ‘the refugee problem’, ‘the border problem’, etc. Potocky (1997) argues that even the current emphasis on culturally sensitive social work practice ignores the need to respond to rising racism and ‘neoassimilation ideology.’ Nevertheless, social workers who work with immigrants have the potential to play important educational and advocacy roles, fulfilling what Fras (2000) describes as a new profile of social workers with ‘intercultural competence’. Sherraden and Martin (1994) further define this role as one in which social workers take into account the context of immigrants’ earlier lives including their previous social welfare arrangements,

migration experiences and patterns and the circumstances surrounding their immigration.

Schmitz et al. (2003) discuss similar roles for social workers. As professionals committed to social and economic justice they must understand the obstacles facing immigrants and refugees and empower them in their struggle for healthy adjustment to the new society.

Notes

1. Ong's (1996) comparison of two Asian American populations--Cambodian refugees and "affluent Chinese cosmopolitans"--is a notable exception.
2. An immigrant is any person who leaves his or her own country to settle elsewhere. A refugee is a particular category of immigrant, defined by The Immigration and Nationality Act in Sec. 101(a)(42) as: any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.
3. We use the Office of Management and Budget definition of rural communities as those outside of federally designated metropolitan statistical areas. By other definitions Faribault could be considered a large town or small, non-metropolitan city. As the county seat and the site of several state institutions, it is also an important regional center.
4. Between 1994/1995 and the year of our study (2001) Hispanic school enrollments in Faribault increased by 357%. The much smaller number of African students (categorized as 'Black' students) more than tripled. During the same period Asian and White student enrollments

declined by 8% and 16% respectively. There were also 1852 Latinos and 434 Asians (predominantly Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Chinese) (US Census Bureau, 2000).

5. In late 1999 and early 2000 the Wilder Research Center and the St. Paul Pioneer Press conducted 1,119 multi-lingual telephone interviews with adults selected randomly from households in neighborhoods likely to have a high concentration of immigrants. (The latter determination was made based upon 1990 census data and 1999 school district enrollment data). Interviewers screened over 12,000 randomly selected households and identified 4,415 immigrants eligible for the study. Of these 1,512 were invited to participate, and telephone interviews were completed with 1,119 adults (74%).

6. It is often assumed that all Somalis in the Midwest are Muslims, but in the Wilder Research Center Study (2003) interviewers asked in English or Somali: “You are Muslim, correct?” and only 81% said yes. They reportedly revised this question to the present wording after receiving negative reactions from Somali respondents to a more neutral wording.

7. The latter is likely to be an overrepresentation of the percentage of Lutheran Sudanese in the community as a whole, resulting from focus group recruitment assistance by the Lutheran Church. A white assistant pastor in the church estimated that about 50 (36%) of the estimated 140 Sudanese residents were members of his church (Hogan, 2001).

8. Exceptions include Abusharaf, 2002; Fennelly and Palasz, 2003; Heldenbrand, (1996); Holtzman, (2000); McSpadden, (1999); Shandy, (2001, 2002); Woldemikael, (1997).

9. Another implication of the recent nature of migration from war-torn countries is that, in the short-term, the point of reference for African immigrants is the life they left behind in Africa, rather than their current disadvantage relative to more privileged Americans. In other words, there may be issues that did not surface in the focus group sessions because they are not yet

salient to new immigrants. This may change with time, particularly in the current environment of severe cuts in social programs and anti-immigrant backlash.

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Figure 1

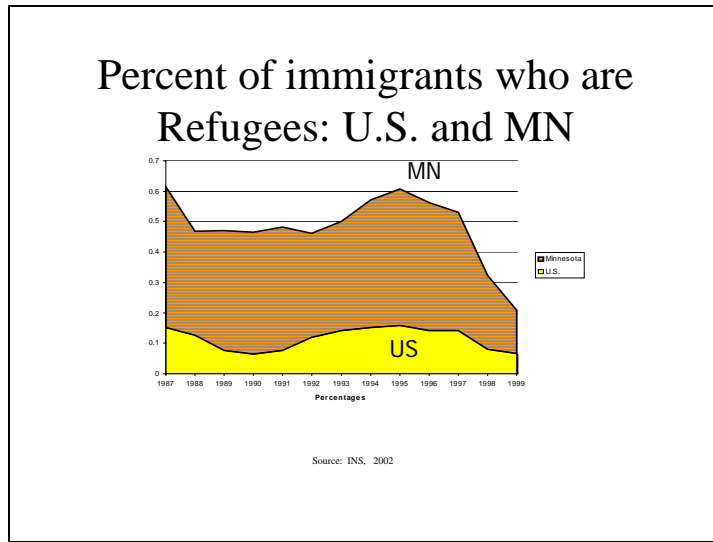


Figure 2

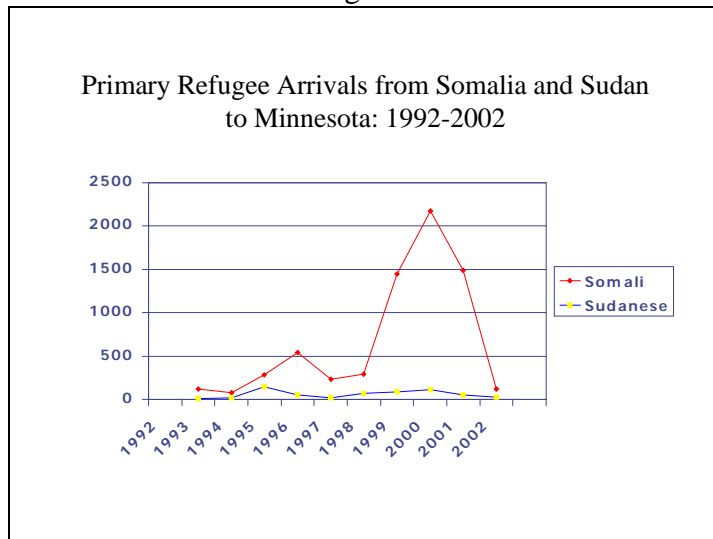


Table 1: Somali and Sudanese Participants in Faribault, Minnesota Focus Group, Summer, 2001: State of Resettlement

Characteristics	Somali		Sudanese	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
Gender^{NS}				
Male	5	(33.3)	12	(75.0)
Female	<u>10</u>	<u>(66.7)</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>(25.0)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.0)
Religion^{***}				
Muslim	15	(100.0)	0	(0.0)
Lutheran	0	(0.0)	11	(68.8)
Catholic	0	(0.0)	1	(6.2)
Other	<u>0</u>	<u>(0.0)</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>(25.0)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.0)
English Ability^{NS}				
None	6	(40.0)	2	(12.5)
Little	6	(40.0)	5	(31.3)
Good	2	(14.3)	5	(31.3)
Excellent	0	(0.0)	4	(25.0)
Missing	<u>1</u>	<u>(6.7)</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>(0.0)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.1)
Currently Married^{NS}				
Yes	6	(40.0)	9	(56.2)
No	<u>9</u>	<u>(60.0)</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>(43.8)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.0)
If married, spouse here^{NS}				
Yes	1	(16.7)	8	(88.9)
No	<u>5</u>	<u>(83.3)</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>(11.1)</u>
Total	6	(100.0)	9	(100.0)
Years in US^{NS}				
0-5	13	(86.6)	6	(37.5)
6-10	1	(6.7)	9	(56.3)
>10	0	(0.0)	1	(6.2)
Missing	<u>1</u>	<u>(6.7)</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>(0.0)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.0)

* chi square p<.05
 ** chi square p< .01
 ***chi square p<.001

Table 1 (continued)

Somali and Sudanese Participants in Faribault, Minnesota
 Focus Group, Summer, 2001: State of Resettlement

Characteristics	Somali		Sudanese	
	No.	(%)	No.	(%)
High School Graduates^{NS1}				
Yes	6	(40.0)	8	(50.0)
No	<u>9</u>	<u>(60.0)</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>(50.0)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.0)
Employed in Faribault^{NS2}				
Yes	8	(53.3)	12	(75.0)
No	<u>7</u>	<u>(46.7)</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>(25.0)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.0)
Ever worked in Meat Processing^{NS}				
Yes	11	(73.3)	9	(56.2)
No	<u>4</u>	<u>(26.7)</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>43.8)</u>
Total	15	(100.0)	16	(100.0)

* chi square $p < .05$

** chi square $p < .01$

***chi square $p < .001$

¹ None of the Somali's and two of the Sudanese had college degrees.

² All of the employed had blue collar jobs.

Table 2

Somali and Sudanese Participants in Faribault, Minnesota
Focus Group, Summer, 2001

Characteristics	Somali		Sudanese	
	\bar{x}	(s.d)	\bar{x}	(s.d)
Hourly wage ^{NS}	\$8.95	(\$0.70)	\$8.90	(\$0.77)
Hours per week ^{**}	40.0	(0.0)	34.6	(0.0)
Children in Faribault ^{NS}	2.4	(2.1)	3.6	(1.3)
Years in U.S. [*]	3.0	(2.2)	6.0	(5.1)
Years in Faribault ^{NS}	1.8	(1.4)	3.1	(7.2)
Age ^{NS}	31.5	(9.3)	27.3	(8.1)

* chi square $p < .05$

** chi square $p < .01$

***chi square $p < .001$