

The *Lost Boys* of Sudan: Coping With Ambiguous Loss and Separation From Parents

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The *Lost Boys* of Sudan were separated from their families by civil war and subsequently lived in three other countries—Ethiopia, Kenya, and the United States. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 refugees about their experiences of separation from parents and ambiguous loss, and the coping strategies the youth used when they did not know if other members of their family were dead or alive. All of the youth reported using both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies. The youth also discussed the importance of support from peers and elders while they lived in the refugee camps. In addition, they reflected on the psychological presence of parents who were physically absent, and the important role that hope of being reunited with parents played as they struggled with survival issues and ambiguous loss.

Keywords: refugees, ambiguous loss, coping, resilience

Because an estimated 80% to 90% of the victims of war in recent decades have been civilians, there is growing interest in how children are affected by war (Joshi, 2003; Shaw, 2003). Typically, children in war zones experience trauma and many are exposed to additional risks as they flee to displacement camps or refugee camps in neighboring countries. Around the world there are an estimated 22 million refugees, about half of whom are children (Lustig et al., 2004; Shaw, 2003). Most research on refugees has focused on adults, but increasingly researchers are examining the health and well-being of refugee children (Lustig et al., 2004). Among the studies of refugee children, a small number examine the experiences and adjustment of unaccompanied children—that is, those who have been separated from their parents (Mann, 2004; Ressler, Boothby, & Steinbock, 1988). The present study focuses on a group of unaccompanied youth, known in the media as the *Lost Boys* of Sudan, and the largely neglected topic of how

children cope with ambiguous loss—not knowing if members of their families are alive or dead (Boss, 2006).

The *Lost Boys* were separated from their families during the civil war in Sudan; they lived apart from their parents in refugee camps in Ethiopia (late 1980s to May, 1991) and Kenya (1992 to 2001) and in displacement camps in Sudan (Bixler, 2005). Although some of them witnessed the death of their parents or learned of their deaths later, many left the Kenyan refugee camp to resettle in the United States not knowing if their parents and siblings were dead or alive (Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson, & Rana, 2008; Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005). Interviews with 147 *Lost Boys* from the Dinka tribe in 1993, a little more than a year after they arrived in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, revealed that 72% of the boys were uncertain they would ever see their families again (Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005).

This qualitative study was designed to address three research questions related to the Sudanese youths' experiences of ambiguous loss and living apart from their parents: (a) How did the Sudanese youth describe their experiences of ambiguous loss? (b) What were their recollections of how they coped with ambiguous loss and separation from their parents while in the refugee camps? What coping strategies did they use? (c) In what ways, if any, did their memories of their parents influence them in the refugee camps? Findings from this study contribute to current research by illustrating the ways refugee children who were separated from their families coped with ambiguous loss.

Ambiguous Loss

Pauline Boss (2004, p. 554) defined ambiguous loss as “a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present.” According to Boss (2006), ambiguous loss is particularly stressful because of the uncertainty surrounding the loss, and it has resulted in depression, hopelessness, and immobilization in some individuals. In the case of a loss that is *not* ambiguous, such as the death of a parent, there

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is pain and a grief process by which offspring come to terms with their loss. Rituals, such as funerals and memorial services, provide comfort to the survivors. Eventually, some form of closure generally is achieved. However, in the case of ambiguous loss, closure cannot be achieved. Moreover, when a loss is not verified, there are no traditional rituals to provide comfort to those who grieve or anxiously search for answers about the fate of their loved ones (see also the special issue on ambiguous loss in *Family Relations*, April 2007).

Although refugees, as a group, often must deal with ambiguous loss, surprisingly little research on this topic focuses on refugees (Rousseau, Rufagari, Bagilishya, & Measham, 2004). Moreover, our search of the ambiguous loss literature did not yield any studies on the coping strategies used by unaccompanied children who are uncertain whether their parents are alive or dead; what tended to be available were anecdotal accounts of the experience of ambiguous loss in case studies of adults who survived horrific events such as the Holocaust (Hogman, 1985; Moskowitz, 1983). This study attempts to address this important gap in the literature on refugee children. Below we review two areas of literature that have relevance for this study—how adults cope with ambiguous loss and how refugee children cope with trauma and adversity.

Coping With Ambiguous Loss Among Adults

In her study of individuals who managed to live well despite ambiguous loss, Boss (2006) defined resilience “as the ability to regain one’s energy after adversity drains it. It is more than ‘bouncing back,’ which implies regaining the status quo; rather, it means rising above traumatic and ambiguous loss by not letting them immobilize and living well despite them” (p. 27). She noted that resilient individuals view ambiguity as a chronic but manageable stress. Boss also delineated some factors associated with resilience, although various individuals found different routes to the same endpoint. Some individuals were able to draw on their religious or spiritual beliefs to find meaning in their loss. People’s personal or cultural beliefs about mastery also seemed to play a role in how individuals dealt with ambiguous loss. Resilient individuals recognized that there are things that they have no control over and found ways to accept this situation. They were able to tolerate ambiguity and temper feelings of mastery. In her research on families affected by the 9/11 terrorist attack, she noted that many of the people who coped well with ambiguous loss were immigrants and refugees who did not assume mastery. They had experienced living in circumstances that they could not control and had no illusions about having complete control over their destiny.

Coping with ambiguous loss may also require reconstructing one’s identity and accepting new role responsibilities in response to new realities (e.g., taking on responsibilities formerly carried out by the absent person) (Boss, 2006). Besides emphasizing the individual’s resilience in coping with ambiguous loss, Boss indicated that relationships are important in dealing with ambiguous loss. Maintaining attachments with caring and supportive people, such as family members, mentors, neighbors, and people in the community help some individuals cope successfully with loss. The missing person, who remains psychologically present, may also be a source of strength; those struggling with ambiguous loss may think about how the missing person would want them to respond,

and conclude that he or she would want them to move on with life rather than being immobilized by his or her absence (Boss, 2006).

Coping Among Refugee Children

As others have pointed out, research on psychopathology in children affected by war is far more extensive than research on coping and resilience (Lustig et al., 2004; Shaw, 2003). Moreover, most research on refugee children has focused on those who live with at least one of their parents, and one of the most consistent findings is that refugee children’s adjustment is related to the support they receive from their parents and how well their parents cope with adverse circumstances (Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1993; Farwell, 2001; Joshi, 2003; Shaw, 2003). Refugee children who are separated from their parents benefit from establishing supportive relationships with alternative caregivers (Moskovitz, 1983; Ressler et al., 1988), and close relationships with peers (Freud & Dann, 1951; Goodman, 2004). The values and expectations parents passed on to their children before separation may also influence the youth during their parents’ absence (Ressler et al., 1988).

Personal characteristics and coping strategies are also related to the adjustment of refugee children (Lustig et al., 2004; Shaw, 2003). A study of Sudanese youth living with parents in a refugee camp in Uganda found that the predominant coping strategies used by children were emotion-inhibiting strategies, emotion-focused strategies, wishful-thinking strategies, and prayer (Paardekooper, de Jong, & Hermanns, 1999). Other studies have also noted refugee children’s use of emotion-focused coping strategies, such as avoidance and distraction, and the use of religion to find meaning in their experiences (Goodman, 2004). Ideological commitment has also helped children cope with the hardships of war (Lustig et al., 2004). Having characteristics that are appealing to adults, such as high levels of sociability and an easy temperament, may also be important for unaccompanied children who need to elicit support from unrelated adults (Moskovitz, 1983).

To summarize, most of the literature on ambiguous loss focuses on adults and little is known about how war-affected children who are separated from their families cope with uncertainty regarding the fate of their families. In this paper, we used qualitative interviews to explore Sudanese refugees’ experiences of ambiguous loss and how they coped with loss and separation from parents. We were also interested in the youths’ perceptions of parents’ psychological presence in their lives despite their physical absence in the refugee camps.

Method

Data analysis was guided by a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) that used both an established theoretical perspective (Boss, 2006) and emergent theory derived from the youth themselves. In particular, as with traditional grounded theory, this approach pays attention to the complexities of the participants’ lived experiences embedded in unique social contexts (Fassinger, 2005). Our participants’ unique experiences and cross-national contexts make this approach optimal; ultimately, we can expand our current understanding of how refugee children cope with separation and ambiguous loss.

The 10 youth interviewed in this study were a subsample of participants in the larger research project with 73 Sudanese youth

that began in 2001, shortly after their arrival in the United States. The focus of the larger study was on risk, resilience, and adaptation to a new culture among refugee youth resettled without their parents (Bates, Baird, Johnson, Lee, Luster, & Rehagen, 2005; Luster, Bates, & Johnson, 2006). Initially we were cautious about delving into their experiences in Africa because of the trauma they had experienced. However, during interviews and focus groups conducted over a 6-yr period, many youth spontaneously shared their experiences of separation and loss. These disclosures over time provided the necessary foundation for the current study.

Participants

Selection criteria for this study were (a) being part of the group known as the *Lost Boys* of Sudan who were resettled in the United States in 2000 through 2001 from the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, (b) having experienced separation from their parents and uncertainty regarding their fate while living in the refugee camps, and (c) subsequently having located surviving members of their families and reestablished relationships. We limited the sample to those who reconnected with surviving members of their families for ethical reasons; we believed that the interview would be less stressful for youth who were no longer trying to determine the fate of their parents.

For this part of the study, we used a snowball sampling approach. One of the benefits of this approach was that most of the youth had an opportunity to hear about the study from another youth before they decided to participate in interviews. Everyone we spoke with about the study agreed to be interviewed. This approach resulted in a sample of 10 Sudanese male refugees who were separated from their parents at a very young age ($Mean = 7.4$ years, $SD = 2.62$). No females were identified with our snowball sample strategy. Of the 3,800 Sudanese youth resettled in the United States, only 89 were female (Bureau of Population, Refugees, & Migration, 2005) and only 13 females were resettled in our area.

At the time of their separation, the children ranged in age from 3 to 12 years. If a youth did not know his exact age, we used the age estimated by the UN based on their level of physical maturity when examined in the refugee camps. Children were separated from their families between 1985 and 1991. Seven of the participants were from the Dinka tribe, the largest tribe in Southern Sudan; the other three belonged to the Moru tribe from the Western Equatoria area of Sudan. At the time of interview, the average age of the respondents was 25.8 years ($SD = 5.99$). The average time period between separation from the family and talking with a family member by phone was 13.7 years ($SD = 3.26$).

Procedure

The first author conducted 9 out of the 10 interviews (the third author conducted the 10th interview). The participants were given a choice regarding the location of the interview. Six of the interviews were conducted in the first interviewer's home and the other four were conducted in the homes of the participants. Before each interview, the interviewer went over the consent form with each participant, including the fact that his participation was voluntary and he did not have to answer any questions that he did not want to. In addition, the interviewer explained the main purpose of the

study and the general procedures of the interview. The interviews were semistructured and consisted mainly of the following parts: (a) Who they lived with in Sudan and how they became separated from their families; (b) Their circumstances while they were separated from their families and their experiences of ambiguous loss; and (c) How they coped with not knowing the fate of their family members. The interviews also covered topics related to experiences of reconnection with their family (see Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson, & Rana, 2008). The interviews, about 2 to 2.5 hours long, were conducted in English and were videotaped with the participants' consent.

Data Analysis

We have taken a modified grounded theory approach to the study of coping with separation and ambiguous loss among Sudanese refugee youth. The data were coded by four members of the research team—one male and three females; two of the coders grew up in the United States and the other two coders grew up in China and India. First, the four coders did "open coding," an "open" process in which the researchers fracture the data into discrete unit of analysis, assign initial labels or codes, and note themes emerging from the data, without making any prior assumptions about what may be discovered (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes were developed primarily inductively from the data and consisted of both codes constructed by the researcher based on the data (e.g., "Coping Strategy—Distraction," "Psychological Presence of Parents") and in vivo codes, that is, using the words of the participants (e.g., "I Had to Accept It" "God Can Work You Through Bad Things") (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To monitor research bias in this process, the four coders frequently cross-checked their codes and wrote analytical memos that were shared within the group.

Next, we conducted "axial coding," that is, grouping the codes and concepts into higher level conceptual categories, which deepens the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, codes such as "Refugee mentor support," "My friends were like family," and "Help from others from the clan," were grouped into the category of "External Support at the Refugee Camp." Then, we indexed selected categories, codes, and linked quotations into a number of matrices arranged by research questions (e.g., "Separation and Loss," "Coping with Ambiguous Loss"). This served the dual function of data reduction and displaying the analyses in a format that allowed each theme to be grasped (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

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

Results

The results section is divided into three parts: (a) youths' experiences of ambiguous loss and living apart from their parents; (b)

strategies the youth used to cope with ambiguous loss and living apart from parents; and (c) youths' perceptions of the psychological presence of parents during the separation. Much of the results section focuses on how the youth coped with ambiguous loss and living apart from their families. Drawing on prior literature on protective factors and coping strategies, this section is further subdivided into three parts: (a) individual coping strategies; (b) relationships with peers and elders in the refugee camps; and (c) community resources and culture (Masten & Powell, 2003).

Youths' Experiences of Ambiguous Loss and Living Apart From Their Parents

Most of the youth reported that they were separated during sudden attacks on their villages by government troops or militias. In the ensuing chaos people ran for their lives and lost track of family and friends. While in hiding, many children grappled with the question of whether or not to return to their villages to look for family and risk being killed by the soldiers. Some of the children hid in the bush until soldiers from the rebel army or elders from the area gathered the survivors and started leading them to the refugee camps in Ethiopia, a walk that took several weeks or months. Other youth simply fell in line with the streams of refugees who were moving eastward toward Ethiopia. The march to Ethiopia was hazardous for the ill-equipped children and their adult leaders. As one youth recalled:

A lot of children died too. It kind of really was a lot of reasons for these children to die. First one, they did not have enough food to eat. Second, they did not have enough water. At night sometimes it raining; it's really cold and they don't have enough blankets. And they think about where their parents is. All of those things together can explain why the children die.

According to other published accounts (Bixler, 2005) and reports from the youth in our sample, thousands of children streamed into the refugee camps in Ethiopia without their parents. There they lived in same-age peer groups. A few adults were assigned to be their teachers by day and their caretakers by night. Caretakers spent most of their time attending to children in the greatest need, such as those who were sick.

All of the youth in our sample were uncertain about the fate of at least one of their parents and also several siblings. They recalled the distress they experienced as the result of their ambiguous loss: *"It was really a nightmare. . . Some people become depressed. Some people would be calling their parent's name at night."* Another youth described his experience of ambiguous loss: *"From the beginning it is very hard because every night, day, you have to think about them. Sometimes you dream about them."*

Across the interviews, the youth reported that several of their peers became depressed and died, and they linked these deaths to their peers' struggles with loss:

So many kids were dying because they were thinking about something they left back . . . And some people went crazy. You could stay with a person today, and tomorrow he would be dead. And you wouldn't know what killed him. He was not like sick or anything. But part of it was they just have to think back about their families.

In addition to the sadness and depression, the youth reported being very worried about their families. One youth was unable to attend school because of concerns about his family:

The whole time I stayed in Ethiopia I did not go to school because that whole time I was not in the mood to go to school. I was just worried. Even when I came to Kenya, the first year I did not go to school.

The experience of ambiguous loss was also a source of frustration as the youth tried in vain to find out information about their families:

. . . 1989 to 1995 didn't have no contact. Didn't know if they were alive or dead. I asked so many people who come, at least from the area I left (name of home area), Do you know where my parents is? They know who my father is, but they don't know where my father is. I end up giving up, not even ask.

In summary, all of the Sudanese refugees noted the range of negative emotions that they felt as they struggled with the separation from their parents and ambiguity regarding the fate of their family members. They noted feelings of sadness, loneliness, fear, worry, and frustration. In the next part of the interviews, they discussed how they coped with ambiguous loss and living apart from their parents.

Coping With Ambiguous Loss and Living Apart From Parents: Individual Coping Strategies

Emotion-focused coping strategies. The youth reported that they used a variety of emotion-focused coping strategies (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) to deal with the strong negative emotions they struggled with when they first arrived at the refugee camp. One of the most common coping strategies was avoidance—putting thoughts of their family out of their mind. As one youth noted, *"I just not think about it,"* and he went on to note that many youth pretended that they had never known their parents to avoid feelings of depression. Another youth used sleep to mentally disengage:

Sometimes if I have a bad feeling I will sleep. If I am sleeping, I won't be having that bad feeling. When I wake up, I will be thinking about going to school, and the thing I was thinking about will go away.

A related coping strategy mentioned by several youth was distraction, such as reading or playing with other children. Reading the Bible or focusing on schoolwork kept them from thinking about their missing families:

So if I am thinking a lot (about his Mom not being there), I will read the Bible or I will go out and play with my friends. So at that time, the thinking would go away. Sometimes I read the books, do the homework.

During the interviews, a number of youth mentioned that playing with their peers helped distract them from the emotional anguish that was tormenting them. As one youth remembered:

When you start to play with other children, then it is easy to forget about those memories, to stop thinking about it (missing his family). Then you start feeling ok when you start playing around with the other children—have fun with them.

Several of the youth mentioned that to cope with living apart from parents, they had to *"make my heart strong,"* a phrase we later learned was used by their caretakers. As one youth said, *"I recognized that the world had changed for us. To survive, you have*

to make your heart strong.” Another youth who was hospitalized for depression, decided that he had to make his heart strong or suffer the fate of his peers who were dying around him:

What I remember is there were kids that were around me; there was like no hospital beds. There is a blanket that you sleep in, and there is like 30 people in the room sleeping by each other. And when you will wake up tomorrow, you will find like maybe 15 of them. Where are the rest? They are gone; they are dead. And that really blew my heart away. And I was like, do I have to die like them or do I have to do something else?

Active or problem-focused coping strategies. Eventually the youth also used active coping strategies to try to obtain information about their families to resolve the issue of ambiguous loss. Once they were capable of reading and writing, one strategy they used was sending letters via the Red Cross addressed to their parents in their village. In the mid 1990s, two youth in our sample found out information about their families using this method, including this youth who received mixed news regarding his family:

Then I get that letter from my brother with my dad’s words (dictated) . . . What he said was that he was fine, but that after (our separation), my mother actually gave birth to three other children, but they did not make it.

A second problem-focused strategy was to ask new arrivals in the refugee camp who were from their home area if they knew anything about their family members. Three of the youth encountered someone who had some news about their family, but others, like this youth, received no information, “*Yeah, I asked people but they say no, we don’t know now where your family is. So I was really so upset about that.*”

Religion and finding meaning. Religion helped the youth to find meaning in their suffering. It also offered guidance about how to conduct oneself in life. When we asked how they coped with the separation from their parents, one youth responded, “*God can work you through bad things.*” As they lived apart from their parents, they believed God played a role in their survival, “*I cannot say that I was the one taking care of myself. There was Someone taking care of me. And if there was no God, I would not be here today.*” In their parents’ absence, they also turned to the Bible for advice, “*Every Sunday I would go to church, and I would hear the Bible. And somehow the Bible became like someone who is advising me in my life.*” During Sunday services, the youth were told the story of Moses and the Israelites wandering through the desert for 40 years as a reminder that they had to be patient and wait for the time when they could return to their villages and see their parents again. Moreover, having survived many near-death experiences, they believed that God had kept them alive for a reason, “*What made them not to die at that time? God not make their day to come. Maybe God has a purpose for them to do.*” Believing that there was something important that God still intended for them to do, they gradually changed their focus from what they had lost to what they were kept alive to do.

Acceptance of their situation and refocusing on the present and future. Over time the youth reached a point of acceptance of their situation, as this youth recalled, “*Is there anything I could do about the situation? No. There was nothing I could do to change it. I just*

had to accept it.” Another youth reflected that he gradually came to a point of acceptance as he matured cognitively:

At that time I was growing. I start to understand more. And I said that if this is how life wants to be, then there is nothing I can do about it. Let it be the way it wants to be then. From there I did not think much about them (his parents) again.

With acceptance, the youth made a cognitive shift from a preoccupation with events beyond their control, such as the civil war and their inability to rejoin their families, to those things that they could control. With the encouragement of the elders, they focused on the future—on getting an education, which they could use to help rebuild Sudan when the war was over: “*You have to think forward; don’t think backward.*” Focusing on education was also viewed as important if they never found their parents again and had to continue to support themselves:

If I die, I die. If I live, I live. Whatever I get, I get. But I have to go to school . . . so that I can support myself. Because there’s nobody now gonna support me. That was the only thing that keep me strong.

Coping With Ambiguous Loss and Living Apart From Parents: Relationships

Relationships with peers. Besides their individual coping strategies, the youth also talked at length about the support they had received from relationships in the camps. For the youth in our study, a critical source of support in dealing with ambiguous loss was their peers who shared their experiences of separation, trauma, and the ambiguity of their life circumstances. Nearly all the youth we interviewed articulated that “*what helped me most was my friends.*” Talking with their friends made them realize that they were not in the situation alone. As one youth put it:

What came into my mind then is that I am not the only one in this situation by myself. Other people are facing the same thing, so why I am so worried about mine? If other people are the same and they can do something different, then let me also do something. That was the only thing that helped me actually to deal with that. At the end, I knew that I was not the only one in that situation.

Talking among themselves about their common experience provided an outlet for their sadness, worries, and anxiety that were internalized before that:

We all have the same problem. If I have the same problem, if you have the same problem, there is not a need to keep the problem to yourself. I think by talking over these issues, it had some positive influences on individuals. I loved talking about my issues. By talking about the issues you find that it helps. If you keep it to yourself, it is hard to find relief.

Not long after they had arrived in the refugee camps, the boys gradually formed an alternative “family” in which they looked after one another emotionally: “*We stay together as a family . . . we become like family members . . . we played together and went to school together.*” One youth from the Moru tribe specifically remembered peer support during that challenging period for all of them:

Among the Moru boys, whenever someone has a problem, we always get involved in it. When I am mad and don’t want to talk to anyone

... they come to me and ask me if I am ok. They try to involve you, even if you don't want to talk, they try to involve you in conversation. So we did engage in those conversations: 'Can I see my parents? When am I going to see my parents?'

Relationships with elders in the camps. Another source of critical support was informal relationships with the elder refugees in the camp from their respective tribes who both provided emotional support when the children were feeling distressed and encouraged healthy coping strategies to help the youth to deal with ambiguous loss. During the interviews, the youth remembered with gratitude how their elders would come to them at times of hardship. As one youth recalled:

When I was crying, they would come and talk to me. And they would tell me a story of what happened and how I should deal with this. So they would give me advice, so that it would calm me down, until I stop crying and forget about what was making me cry.

Similarly, another youth was so distressed and sad that he could not even enroll in school. During this period, it was an elder from his tribe and a local school headmaster who finally sat down with him, listened to his problems, and then advised him to make the best use of his time in the camp by going to school.

Coping With Ambiguous Loss and Living Apart From Parents: Community Resources and Culture

Community resources. For the majority of youth in our study, the refugee camp was the place that they had spent the most time after they had left home. The youth had spent about a decade in the refugee camps before they came to the U.S. The refugee camps offered activities such as drama club, church groups, cultural dances, soccer balls, dominos, chess, and other games for the youth, which distracted them from dwelling on their sadness. The refugee camp also offered services provided by the relief agencies and UN, such as schools, foster care, and caretakers for the minor group.

In Kakuma, relief organizations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, and World Lutheran Federation were involved with the youth. The UN and the relief agencies made arrangements so that the younger boys had the option of having a foster family (refugees in the camp) to help them care for themselves. Two youth in our sample lived with foster parents for some time and these relations helped them to cope with their loss. However, one youth acknowledged that foster families were not like their biological families. Sometimes their foster parents had too many children on their hands and the foster family was "a place to live, [but] you were still on your own anyway."

In the refugee camp, the minors who lived together were also assigned caretakers who took care of the children both physically and psychologically; these were paid positions in contrast to informal relationships with other elders. Caretakers provided encouragement, advice, and support to help them cope with their loss. They also helped children understand the Sudanese civil war and its impacts on them and their families. In both public and private forums, the caretakers also encouraged the boys to be strong both physically and mentally and focus on the important things in front of them instead of looking back into their sadness. For example, one youth recalled that every morning they would have "parade" in

which all of the boys would come together so they could account for all the boys.

Often, one of the adults would address them to reinforce the message that they needed to make their hearts strong. Another youth remembered the advice his caretakers gave him:

The most thing you should do is like to study. Be educated. So let's focus on your school. For example, they told me, if you are thinking about your mom, she is not here; you know it. She will not come. So we need you to forget it for a second. We know it will be in your heart, but just focus on your life, what you are doing right now to manage it. If you think about it a lot, you will die. So don't think so much. Take it easy.

The caretakers also encouraged the children to be optimistic about finding their families some day:

You know they are not going to tell you, you know, your parents are dead. They encourage you. They tell you, 'You know, these things happen. You don't know if your parents are alive or dead. Don't worry. One day you are going to find your parents. It is war, people get separated, those things happen. And God will help you, and one day you are going to find your parents.'

Culture. Besides individual coping strategies, relationships, and community support the youth had in coping with their losses, culture played an important role in three ways: first, many youths experienced early separation from parents while taking care of cattle in the cattle camps, a common cultural practice in the Dinka tribe, which helped them adjust to the separation from their parents in the refugee camps. Second, cultural beliefs about adult responsibility for all children appeared to influence the behavior of elders in the refugee camps. Third, the concept of mastery in the Sudanese culture helped the youth cope with their unanticipated and ambiguous loss.

Separation from parents was not new to the Dinka children who worked in the cattle camps. In fact, the cattle camps were worked mostly by the children and teens under the supervision of young adults in the clan (Dau, 2007; Deng, 1972). Typically, while the children tended the herds in the cattle camp, their parents were back cultivating crops and tending to the farms near the village. It was not uncommon for children to be separated from their parents for months at a time. As one youth recalled:

In Dinkaland, when they are 4 or 5 years, they go up to the cattle. Because young children go to the cattle camp and they feed with milk ... you protect yourself as a human. At that time, you stay alone for certain months—like from January to May. So separated from your parents. And people manage it that way too.

Several youth mentioned during the interviews that this earlier experience separating from their parents and living with other children by themselves contributed to their resilience in coping with separation from their parents and ambiguous loss.

Culture also seemed to play a role in the way many elders came to the assistance of the unaccompanied children. In the Dinka tribe to which most of our participants belonged, for example, there is the belief that "any child is everybody's child." The elders saw taking care of the children as their responsibility.

Finally, cultures differ in their notion of mastery. It has been suggested in the literature that it is easier to deal with ambiguous loss when a culture perceives less control in life (Boss, 2006). This

fits the experiences of the youths in our study. During interviews, the youth frequently mentioned the lack of control people had in life: *When things want to happen you will not change them. They happen always the way they want to happen; you can't change it.*" Another youth thus reflected on his experiences of loss: *"It happened, I did not have any control over it. I just think I wish it did not happen. But it did and I could not do anything about it."* This attitude led many of the youths we interviewed to finally accept the traumatic events that happened in their lives as beyond their control.

Coping With Ambiguous Loss: The Psychological Presence of Parents

Despite having peer and elder support, the youth still missed their families and their own parents. Some youths who were old enough to remember their earlier years with their parents, kept an image of their parents in their heart. As one youth noted, the connection with his parents stayed on even though he did not know where they were:

Although my parents were not physically present and I did not know if my parents were alive or dead, there was that connection—that cultural connection—the culture they had passed on to me and the advice they have given me when I was still at home.

The psychological presence of their parents even after long separations played an important role in guiding them to stay on the right path and keep a positive eye toward the future, which was another significant coping strategy. During interviews, the youth talked about how their internalized parental expectations kept them doing the right things, and they thought about what their parents would have wanted them to do when they made important decisions. Some thought about the prospect of seeing their parents again one day and how the parents would react upon seeing the kind of persons they had become. As one youth said, *"I will find my parents one day, and if they find you as a person they don't like, that would not be good."*

The psychological presence of their parents also helped them via the moral stories, lessons, and advice they remembered from their parents that kept them away from trouble. One youth recalled when he was a child, his mother told the children stories or fables that had a moral message. As he grew older, he could understand the messages of those stories better and the messages or advice he received from his mother influenced what he did. He remembered his mother told him:

Do not do bad things. Do not insult. Do not steal. Respect your elders. Listen to your elders. Those advices had a lot of influence on me. I have never stolen anything from anyone. I accepted that I only had one pair of trousers to wear or no shoes to wear.

Similarly, another youth remembered his mother telling him to respect the elders and others and *"Don't be lazy. You have to work to support yourself."* Thus, among the youth old enough to remember their parents, the absent parents continued to exert some influence on the youth while they moved on with their lives as well as they could without knowing the fate of their loved ones.

Discussion

We asked the Sudanese youth to share with us their recollections of their experiences of separation from their parents and ambigu-

ous loss and how they coped with these difficult circumstances as children. All of the youth reported dealing with strong negative emotions including sadness, loneliness, fear, and worry after the separation from their parents. They also reported frustration as they tried unsuccessfully for years to learn the fate of the rest of their family members. In addition to struggling with loss and ambiguity, the youth also struggled to survive. In the camps they experienced inadequate food rations and other necessities, poor sanitation, epidemics and limited medical care, and violence. It was especially during these difficult times that they missed their parents. Some of the youth seemed to cling to idealized images of their parents, as protectors who could provide all of the things they lacked even in the bleak refugee camps.

Despite living in circumstances that must have seemed unbearable at times, the Sudanese youth seemed to fit Boss's (2006, p. 27) description of resilient individuals as *"rising above traumatic and ambiguous loss by not letting them immobilize and living well despite them."* We found many similarities between the youths' coping strategies and the coping strategies used by resilient adults studied by Boss. Many of the Sudanese youth drew on religious beliefs to find meaning in their loss and guidance regarding how to conduct themselves in the present and the future. Like other resilient individuals, the Sudanese accepted that they had no control over certain things, such as the civil war and the separations caused by the war, and instead focused on the things that they could control, such as getting an education. Getting an education was viewed as a way to help themselves, their families (if they were ever reunited), and their country once the war ended and the rebuilding process began.

Unlike other studies, our sample was dealing with ambiguity regarding the fate of their families as unaccompanied children—ages 3 to 12 at separation. What did we learn about how refugee children coped with ambiguous loss? One factor that was evident in the interviews was the important role that other children played in the process. Most of the youth lived in peer groups in sections of the refugee camps set aside for minors. The youth noted that peers tried to bolster each other's spirits when a friend was feeling down. For example, they would invite a sad friend to come play with them to distract him. They also helped each other obtain basic necessities in the absence of their parents. They shared food rations, cooked and ate together, and even built the houses they shared. In his memoir *God Grew Tired of Us*, John Dau (2007, pp. 280–281) said, *"For 14 Years I lived without a family of blood relatives in the refugee camps of Pinyudu and Kakuma. I learned that if you do not have a family, you must make a family in order to survive."* We heard much the same sentiment in our interviews—the peers were viewed as their second family. Some of the youth talked with their peers about how difficult it was to live without knowing whether their parents were alive or dead, and they found comfort in talking about their shared problem.

In addition to distracting, supporting, and comforting each other, the peer group provided role models for coping adequately. The youth reported that when they first got to Ethiopia, it was a "nightmare" with children crying often and calling the names of their parents during the night. Eventually the youth who survived managed to adapt to the situation and control their emotions. When the children saw other children their age dealing with the stressful situation, they tried to follow suit. If they did not, there were adults

in the camp who would point out someone the same age who was not crying and tell the child that he should behave likewise.

We also learned of the important role the elders played in helping children cope with separation and ambiguous loss. Adults provided emotional and instrumental support to the youth and also suggested coping strategies they could use to deal with separation and loss. Many of the individual coping strategies that the youth reported using (e.g., trusting God, maintaining hope that their parents were still alive, and focusing on the future and on education) were approaches that the adults encouraged. Whether talking to the youth individually or in groups (e.g., during parade), adults sounded the same drum beat—Sudan needs people who are educated to rebuild southern Sudan once the war is over. The youth were reared in a culture that emphasized the wisdom of those who are older because “*they saw the sun first.*” Thus, culture had prepared the youth to heed the advice of their elders.

The adults encouraged the children not to give up hope of being reunited with their families. The hope of being reunited with their families played an important role in getting through the most difficult times in the refugee camp. In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, concentration camp survivor Victor Frankl (2006, p. 76) quotes Friedrich Nietzsche, “*He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How.*” For Frankl, the “why” was being reunited with his wife and sharing his scholarship with the academic community that he had been working on before his imprisonment. The “why” for the *Lost Boys* in our sample seemed to have been the hope of being reunited with their families and eventually rebuilding southern Sudan.

Boss (2006, p. 28) noted that although loved ones may be physically absent, they may be psychologically present, “*The family in one’s mind and heart can help overcome hard times. When we think about this family, we no longer feel so alone, even though we are not in physical proximity to anyone.*” As noted above, the hope of being reunited with their parents was important to the youth while they were in the refugee camp. The other ways in which parents influenced the youth seemed to depend on the developmental level of the youth at the time they were separated. The children who were the oldest at the time of separation could remember specific things that their parents had told them or the way their parents interacted with others. Parental advice continued to influence their behavior during the separation. For example, one youth, who took pride in never stealing anything when he lacked basic necessities, recalled a story his mother had told him about a young man who had to leave his village in disgrace because he had stolen food from another family. In contrast, those who were youngest at the time of their separation could not remember anything that their parents had told them.

Our findings are consistent with those from Goodman’s (2004) study of 14 Sudanese youth who were resettled in another part of the U.S. When Goodman asked each youth to tell her “the story of your life” (p. 1180), they talked about the many hardships they endured and the importance of their peers in coping with the hardship. Other themes in her study included the use of suppression and distraction to avoid thinking about traumatic memories and accompanying emotions, their use of religion to make meaning of their experiences, and emerging from hopelessness to hopefulness. News that they would be resettled in the United States and could pursue postsecondary education was the catalyst for renewed hope according to Goodman.

Our findings are also consistent with Rousseau et al.’s (Rousseau, Said, Gagne, & Bibeau, 1998) findings regarding unaccompanied Somali children. Rousseau and colleagues concluded that the Somali children’s experience with culturally normative separations from parents when they tended cattle in the cattle camps may have aided the children’s adjustment when they were separated by war. Like the Somali cattle herders, the Dinka youth in Sudan also spent months at a time living with peers and older youth in the cattle camps. However, the Moru tribe typically did not raise cattle, and the Moru youth in our sample did not have the experience of tending cattle away from their villages. There may be differences in youth who had experienced culturally normative separation from parents and those who had not in coping with ambiguous loss.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is the relatively small sample size. Our observations—such as the way the psychological presence of parents is experienced depends on the age of separation—while making sense intuitively, should be viewed as a hypothesis to be studied with a larger sample rather than a conclusion. Another limitation of our study is the use of a snowball sample. We used the snowball sample because of our desire to interview youth who eventually reestablished relationships with their families because of ethical considerations. We did not interview youth who still struggled with ambiguous loss, because of concerns for uncovering their painful experiences. Although some trauma researchers have argued for the potential therapeutic benefit of discussing painful experiences with children shortly after trauma occurred (Dyregrov, Gupta, Gjestad, & Raundalen, 2002), we realized that for many Sudanese youth, ambiguous loss occurred more than 14 years ago. Uncovering these painful memories may risk bringing the youth back to their struggles while some of them may have learned to cope with it in their current life. As a result, these youth may not be representative of the larger group and may overrepresent those who have more connections within the Sudanese community. Selection factors may have also played a role in which Sudanese youth survived, stayed in the camps, and successfully completed the interview process to come to the United States; thus, one cannot determine the extent to which the Sudanese youth in the United States are representative of those who ever reached the refugee camps. Finally, the accuracy of the Sudanese refugees’ reports depended on how well they recalled emotions and coping strategies from several years ago and their willingness to disclose what they remembered.

Conclusion

Despite limitations, we believe that this study sheds light on an important topic—how children who are separated from their parents by war cope with separation and ambiguous loss. This study builds on the work of Boss (2006) and others who have studied ambiguous loss and coping with ambiguous loss with samples of adults. We have seen similarities between the ways that adults cope with ambiguous loss and the way the Sudanese recalled that they coped with loss as children. However, we also extended this work by showing the important role that other children played in the process for the Sudanese youth and the important role that

elders played in coaching the youth to use certain coping strategies. We also saw evidence of the importance of community resources, such as the schools and churches in the refugee camps, for youth who are coping with loss. This study also gave us a glimpse of the role that culture plays in coping with ambiguous loss (e.g., cultural views on mastery, experiences in the cattle camp, a collectivistic orientation, and respect for elders). Understanding how people from various cultures cope with ambiguous loss is an area that should be studied more extensively in the future.

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