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“ROUND FIRE” DISCUSSION GROUP

**A THERAPEUTIC GROUP PROGRAM
FOR SOUTHERN SUDANESE MEN**

EVALUATION REPORT

October 2006

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“Round Fire” Discussion Group
A Therapeutic Group program for
Southern Sudanese Men
Evaluation Report

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1 Introduction

Adjusting to a new cultural environment can affect family relationships and contribute to family crises and breakdown. The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) in partnership with the South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre received funding from the Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to develop and implement a counselling service to strengthen family relationships amongst newly arrived refugee families.

The program “Family Relationships Services for Humanitarian Entrants Program” provides individual and couple counselling as well as group therapy programs. The first group therapy program in the Eastern Region of Melbourne was developed to support Sudanese men to strengthen family relationships. This report is an outline, analysis and evaluation of the program.

2 Background

In previous forums and research with Sudanese families conducted by the Migrant Information Centre, Sudanese men indicated that Australian culture has had a significant impact on family relationships. It is a commonly held belief that settlement issues and Domestic Violence and Child Protection Laws in Victoria have undermined the roles of men as husbands and fathers and made it difficult for them to support their family. For example, men find it difficult to secure employment to provide financial security for their family particularly if their overseas qualifications are not recognised in Australia.

In the Sudan, men are the head of their family and they have a responsibility to care and discipline their wives and children. In Australia, Sudanese traditional modes of discipline are not allowed according to Domestic Violence and Child Protection Laws which means men can be removed from their home and lose their wife and children if there is abuse. In the Sudan, if a marriage breaks down regardless of whether there has been family violence, it is the wife who must leave her husband’s home and any children over 7 years of age in her husband’s care.

Furthermore, women cannot speak against their husbands in public. As a result, western traditional styles of couple counselling either with individual couples or in a group would not be culturally appropriate. Therefore, the first group therapy program targeted Sudanese men within a culturally appropriate context – “the village fire”.

3 The “Village Fire”

In the Sudan, men resolve problems when they share a meal together and discuss village and family problems around the fire during the evening. The program was developed using the analogy of the “village fire” allowing men to come together and talk through the problems impacting on their lives and family relationships in Australia.

This analogy meant that participants, interpreters and facilitators had to be men only so that the group could provide a familiar and safe environment to encourage trust and openness between group members and facilitators. The psychologist and Sudanese workers were all males so they could co facilitate the program.

In addition, Christianity plays an important role in Southern Sudanese family and community life. To validate and bless the program a local Anglican Pastor was invited to participate in the program and use scripture to reinforce the messages of Christian values within families.

4 Aims and objectives

Historically, the implicit goal of counselling was to bring about a greater degree of conformity to the norms of the dominant group. However, contemporary cross cultural counselling equips clients for a greater degree of accommodation to the new social structures. There is an increase in the individual’s options involving having choices on the extent and nature of one’s identity and relationships.

The aim of the program was to strengthen Southern Sudanese families through changing the momentum in men’s thinking from culturally embedded concepts to becoming open to new perspectives and ideas in relation to family relationships and practices.

Objectives for the program included to:

- Enable Southern Sudanese men to openly discuss issues affecting themselves and their families
- Enable Southern Sudanese men to appreciate and understand Australian culture
- Develop an understanding of the “we feeling” between husband and wife
- Change the idea of ownership of wives to partnership
- Connect separated men into a support group.

5 Target Group

Ten men were targeted to participate in the program. The men were Dinka – a tribe from the Sudan – so that only one interpreter was required and the men had the same cultural background and value system.

Those targeted included:

- Men who had experienced family crisis or breakdown
- Community leaders
- Men who were adjusting well to life in Australia.

Six men completed the program - two stopped attending sessions without explanation and two gained employment and were no longer able to attend sessions.

6 Program development – “Warrior to Wise Man”

The 8-week program was developed by the psychologist working 2 days per week at the Migrant Information Centre in consultation with the Sudanese Family Educator at the South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre, a Sudanese Project Worker at the Migrant Information Centre and the Community Development Worker at the Migrant Information Centre who had had extensive experience in working with the Sudanese community. (See Appendix A for a weekly outline of the program.)

The program was developed using a narrative psychotherapy approach to strengthen families by allowing men to change their own narratives of themselves by rewriting their own stories from “warrior” to “wise man” and from “ownership” of wives to “partnerships” with wives – moving from “I” thinking as the person with sole responsibility for the family’s welfare to “we” thinking – shared responsibility between husband and wife.

The model used to develop the program was not two dimensional emphasising either success or failure in dealing with major life changes. Rather, the model used to develop and facilitate the program was dynamic allowing feedback from participants, integrating contradictory feelings as being normal, reducing isolation and a sense of failure, giving hope and looking forward. There was no firm structure - the sessions were informal and able to blend from one to the other using humour, imagery and discussions to address difficult issues. However, the general components of the program included sessions designed for healing, understanding and learning new ways of life and thinking.

7 Program Concepts

7.1 “Dreams and Reality”

In the first session, men were asked to introduce themselves and tell their life stories i.e. their names, tribe and details of their family. As the program was not developed to address trauma, facilitators did not engage in reflections of the refugee experiences/traumas from the past. The men were asked to discuss their experiences of life in Australia – the “here and now” or the future. This enabled the facilitators to encourage openness and prevent the men from entering into their “survival mode” of thinking.

The facilitators were concerned that discussions of past traumas could put the men into ‘survival mode’ - a very rigid, closed position - that served them well as survivors and tough people under extreme conditions. For the purposes of this program, it was believed that this position would prevent them from staying “open” to learn new skills and accept new ideas. Therefore, discussions were focused on their experiences of life in Australia – their dreams and expectations and reality of settlement.

The discussion of “dreams and reality” enabled the men to talk about their anger and concerns about family life in Australia – how their roles as husbands and fathers had been challenged and changed by living in a new cultural environment under Australian Family Laws.

This cultural change meant that the majority of Sudanese men, regardless of whether there is a crisis in their family, fear Australian Family Law and believe they are unjust to men placing women in power over men. As one man in the group commented:

“Men are considered last in social welfare – children are first, women second, dogs third and men are last.”

The men’s views were not challenged by the facilitators in early sessions to ensure that they felt safe to talk openly about their experiences. Furthermore, the program had been designed to assist the men to redefine their new roles as men, husbands and fathers in Australia, building on each session from week to week.

7.2 Individuals and “Shadows”

Sessions three to five involved discussion of images that could provide different pictures depending on how you looked at them and reflections on spiritual sayings.

Humour was encouraged throughout discussions and images were used to introduce the men to ideas about how you perceive life depends on how you look at it e.g. the image of a horse/frog can represent how you look at Australia – could be a horse or it could be a frog depending on the position you are coming from.

The men were asked to reflect on the sayings and images introduced in the sessions and to consider how they represented human behaviour. Following discussion, the concept of the “shadow” in each person was introduced and the idea that each one of us is responsible for mastering his/her own “shadow”. In addition, taking responsibility for responses to problems and their ability to respond differently to problems was encouraged.

7.3 Cooperation between Men and Women

Using comments made by participants in earlier sessions, the ideas of cooperation between men and women and human rights were introduced as key concepts for consideration.

An analogy of conflict in the Sudan was used to demonstrate the links between human rights and women’s rights. This enabled participants to consider their own roles as husbands and fathers and how they treat their wives and children in the home.

7.4 “Thinking outside the Box”

The concept of “thinking outside the box” was introduced in session seven. It was important that participants could consider alternative narratives of their lives within a new cultural environment.

In setting up a new life in Australia, migrants have no choice but to face challenges and simultaneously undergo a number of changes as a result of cultural, economic, political, religious and other differences. The ways people deal with these changes vary from individual to individual and are a direct result of their psychological makeup, motivation levels and expectations – cultural and occupational background on one side and the host society on the other side. For people who have been transplanted to new cultural settings, a level of psychological acculturation (which refers to people’s value systems, behaviour, attitudes and identity concepts) has to be achieved.

By introducing people to new ways of thinking, individuals can consider new ways of looking at a situation including their role within the family in a different cultural environment.

8 Feedback

8.1 Key learnings

Of the six men who completed the program, four rated the program as “excellent”, one “very good” and one “good”. One believed the program should have been held on a Saturday so more men could attend rather than on a Friday evening when some men were required to work.

Parts of the program that they found most beneficial included:

- Better understandings of Australian culture, parenting and family relationships,

- Discussions on the roles of men and women in the Sudan and Australia,
- Talking about problems, and
- “Seeing things in a different way to allow your mind to think out of the box”.

One person found the component of the program that covered “general information and social issues” as least useful. However, all participants indicated that they had learnt a lot from the program

8.2 Strengthening relationships

All six men indicated that the program had helped them to strengthen their relationships with their wives and children in Australia. Three indicated that they had learnt a lot and felt that their relationships would improve. One participant stated that he required another 8-week program whilst another requested that the program be continued on a fortnightly basis. The remaining three participants requested the program to continue.

All participants suggested ways the program could improve. These included:

- Leadership training for women
- Leadership for both men and women
- Introduce new topics that were not covered in the first program
- Introduce speakers on Family Law, mediation and counselling
- How to gain employment to be financially stable
- How to access training for employment

9 Conclusion

The men were keen to share their experiences, feelings and beliefs throughout the program. The group discussed the significance of the “fire” as a symbol that represented a safe and “sacred” environment where they could be open and trusting of each other, often revealing intimate details about themselves and their family. This reinforced the cultural significance of the approach provided in the program and the strong oral traditions in Africa.

Feedback from participants indicated the success of the program as a way of assisting men from an extremely different cultural and political background to become open to new ideas and ways of understanding relationships in their family. Furthermore, the men requested that the group continue to meet and further explore issues that impacted on their settlement and their family.

Prior to this program, previous attempts to establish a Sudanese men's group had been unsuccessful due to a range of competing priorities and commitments that impacted on their ability to attend. This program was the first program for men facilitated by the Migrant Information Centre and the South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre where a group of adult men were prepared to attend sessions for 8-weeks and request that the program continue.

Not only had the men indicated a level of satisfaction with the program, they requested that their wives learn leadership and that joint groups be arranged with both husbands and wives. For the facilitators, this represented a significant shift in thinking which they would have not thought possible when the program began. It seems that the men from this group will serve as valuable role models to other men in their community.

Using a narrative approach that is culturally appropriate, an 8-week program can have an impact on the thinking of men about their family relationships. However, there is a need to continue the program to provide further learning and strategies that can assist both men and women to strengthen family relationships and adjust to a new cultural environment.

As a result, the Southern Sudanese "Round Fire" Discussion Group will continue to meet for a further eight sessions to cover anger management and conflict resolution. Sessions will also be arranged with their wives to assist them to understand the cultural environment for families in Australia.

Appendix A – Outline of Weekly Program

Prayers and Blessings

Each session commenced and ended with prayers – the opening prayer included blessing the food and the final prayer was for the protection of participants and their families. As prayers were included at the commencement and end of each session, they will not be included in the weekly program description.

Community Meal Around the Fire

Each session began with Sudanese food being served to the men on arrival. The food was prepared by a Sudanese woman who was paid to cook the meal and brought to the group each week.

The food was presented as a buffet and the men served themselves and brought their plates to the meeting room where chairs had been placed in a circle with a symbolic “fire” placed in the centre of the circle. The “fire” was made of logs of wood placed strategically to represent a camp fire.

The men and facilitators ate for approximately 30 minutes, greeting each other and catching up on social events that had occurred since they had last spoken to each other. This approach was culturally appropriate as traditionally village problems are not discussed until the meal is finished.

As the community meal was included at the commencement of each session, it will not be included in the weekly program description.

Week 1 – Getting Started

1 Introduction to the program

One of the Sudanese facilitators who was well known as a worker in the community introduced himself and advised participants of the purpose of the program, the symbolism of the fire and group rules. He also introduced the other facilitators – a second Sudanese facilitator, the non Sudanese psychologist and the non Sudanese Anglican Pastor.

2 Personal stories

Each participant including facilitators were asked to introduce themselves and tell their life stories i.e. their name, tribe and details of their family.

3 Program aims and objectives

At the end of the program, the men provided feedback on their commitment to attending weekly meetings and aims and objectives of the program.

Week 2 – Dreams and Reality

The second session commenced with the continuation of the men's stories including the facilitators and the interpreter.

The session was primarily co-facilitated by the two Sudanese facilitators to continue to encourage openness and trust amongst participants who shared common migration experiences and understanding of the role of men in Sudanese culture. The non Sudanese facilitators were able to observe the session and gain a better understanding of Sudanese culture and their perceptions of life in Australia.

The men were asked to talk about:

- Their dreams of Australia
- Their reality in Australia including “culture shock”

Prompt questions:

What were your dreams/expectations about Australia when you were overseas?

What are the differences on arrival in Australia?

Week 3 – Looking at our lives

The facilitators introduced images to generate humour and interest amongst the men. The images included:

- A picture of a horse/frog that changed image depending on how you looked at it
- An image of a woman's head that could be seen as old and ugly versus young and beautiful

Week 4 - Reflections

Session 4 was facilitated by the psychologist who began by introducing ideas through:

- The Serenity Prayer - *God grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.*
- Lao Tzu sayings - *Knowing others is intelligence; knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength; mastering yourself is true power.*

He then asked the men to reflect on the sayings and images introduced in the previous session and to consider how they represented human behaviour. Following discussion, the concept of the “shadow” in each person was

introduced. The ideas that each one of us is responsible for mastering his/her own shadow and taking responsibility for responses were introduced (responsibility = ability to respond).

Week 5 – Reflections continued

As three members had not attended the previous session, it was decided that a member of the group would introduce them to the images and sayings as well as the issues covered in the previous session. This took a considerable amount of time so that no further issues were covered in this session.

Week 6 – Roles of men and women

Session 6 provided an opportunity for the facilitators to explore the logic of beliefs about the roles of men and women in the Sudan and in Australia that had been raised in earlier sessions.

These ideas included:

- Centrelink is the cause of family separation in Australia

“We had harmonious marriages (no divorces) in the Sudan and there was no Centrelink. There are so many divorces here in Australia and there is Centrelink giving money to women/kids”

- Life in Australia is the same for men as life in the Sudan:

In Sudan (“hell”) they tried to take my wife/kids, house from me. In Australia (“paradise”) they can take (or already took) my wife/kids/possessions from me.

Points for discussion included:

- Would life in Australia be better without Centrelink? Who would pay for your house, food, bills if you did not have a job?
- What’s great about Australia? What’s bad? What would you do if you were the prime minister?

The group was then asked to consider human rights and compare them with women’s rights. An analogy to the conflict in the Sudan was used to demonstrate this point so the group could consider their own role as husbands and fathers and how they treat their wives and children in the home.

The analogy:

In Sudan, the government army (men with bigger guns) caused troubles. There are always men with bigger guns. Just because you are physically bigger you do not have more rights.

If you were a woman, would you fight for your rights too (as you do against the Sudanese government)?

Funny images were introduced showing two donkeys tied together carrying a heavy load working against, and with, each other. This promoted humour and enabled the group to talk about the concept of cooperation between men and women.

Week 7 – Thinking outside the box

The psychologist introduced an exercise asking participants to use a pen to join all 9 dots placed in a square using only 4 lines. This exercise enabled the participants to have fun and discuss the idea of thinking “outside the box”.

The group then discussed the idea that the quality of a man is not defined only by their ethnicity or nationality.

Week 8 – Understanding the new roles for men and women in Australia

Session 8 began by reflecting on what participants had learnt in the previous session and the value of thinking “outside the box”.

The men were then asked to discuss the roles of men and women in the Sudan and Australia.

The psychologist then introduced the ideas of equality, justice, fairness as the rationale behind Australian laws – protection of the weakest (women, children, elderly, minorities in any sense, sexual orientation, religious orientation, race, ethnicity, even animal rights). The idea that there has been a long legacy of battles for individual rights was also introduced.

The men were then asked to consider alternative narratives of their lives.

For example:

Instead of Man is the head of a family and responsible for everything, introducing “we” thinking – the idea of co-operation, partnership, team contributing to a healthy family and

Different perspectives of the dowry system – instead of dowries being payment for the bride, dowries are an expression of your gratitude for bringing this beautiful woman to me as my wife.

Towards the end of the session, evaluation forms were distributed and the men were asked whether they wanted to continue the program.