

## **“You got to apply seriousness”: A phenomenological inquiry of Liberian women refugees’ coping**

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**This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:**

Clarke, L., & Borders, L. D. (2014). “You got to apply seriousness”: A phenomenological inquiry of Liberian women refugees’ coping. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 92*, 294-303.

**which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2014.00157.x>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with [Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions](#).**

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### **Abstract:**

Liberian women's coping with refugee resettlement in the United States was examined. The authors analyzed interviews of 10 women according to van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology. Nine themes, grouped within 3 coping categories (adopting culturally sanctioned attitudes, engaging with a new environment, and situating oneself in a narrative), were identified. Implications include the need for counselors to use holistic and advocacy-based counseling approaches and facilitate coping by cultural meaning making of experiences.

**Keywords:** refugee women | coping | phenomenology

### **Article:**

Since the end of the Vietnam War, almost 3 million refugees have been resettled in the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2008). Prior to their resettlement, refugees typically have experienced sudden or multiple displacements, violence against themselves or their family, and torture or persecution (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012). Researchers have debated whether resettled refugees experience more (possibly untreated) mental health symptoms than native populations and whether these symptoms are acute or chronic (di Tomasso, 2010). There is, however, some consensus that resettled refugees benefit from support in the adjustment process (Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega, 2005). Counseling practitioners are uniquely poised to support refugees in a holistic way. Concerns about education, career, culture, and family are predominant for refugees and affect their emotional well-being (Tempany, 2009). Counseling practitioners are prepared to give assistance in all of these areas. The multicultural counseling competencies (Roysircar, Arredondo, Fuertes, Ponterotto, & Toporek, 2003) adopted by the American Counseling Association assert that one pillar of providing care is gaining knowledge

about the cultural background and experiences of clients being served. Thus, to provide culturally competent support, counselors should have knowledge about the common coping tasks refugees are faced with as well as how particular groups of refugees navigate those adjustments. For the purposes of this article, *refugee* refers to permanently resettled refugees unless otherwise noted.

## **Mental Health and Coping**

Depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder have been the most commonly reported refugee mental health problems (Beiser & Wickrama, 2004; Pumariega et al., 2005). Prevalence rates of these disorders have ranged from 6% to 62% among community samples of refugees from Southeast Asia (Gong-Guy, 1986), Bosnia (Momartin, Silove, Manicavasagar, & Steel, 2004), Yugoslavia (Lie, Lavik, & Laake, 2001), and Sudan (Tempany, 2009). Poorer mental health among refugees has been linked to being female (Chung & Bemak, 2002), being older at the time of resettlement (Pumariega et al., 2005), and having more traumatic premigration experiences (Chung & Bemak). Better mental health status has been linked to hopefulness and the belief that goals can be achieved (Ai, Tice, Whitsett, Ishisaka, & Chim, 2007). It has also been linked to fewer perceived discrimination experiences and the ability to achieve goals, maintain stable relationships with significant others, use certain coping strategies, and gain employment (Bieser, 2009). Researchers focusing on refugee resiliency have revealed the importance of cognitive coping. Among Kosovar refugees, hope and positive self-talk were related to posttraumatic growth (positive change after trauma; Ai et al., 2007). Sudanese refugees were helped by being able to focus on the future and reframe negative situations (Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008).

Keyes and Kane (2004) and Whittaker, Hardy, Lewis, and Buchan (2005) used qualitative phenomenology to explore how two different refugee cohorts coped with resettlement in culturally specific ways. Keyes and Kane found that Bosnian refugees coped by seeking experiences of empathy and reciprocal help with those around them to regain a sense of belonging. The Bosnian refugees put a high priority on speaking perfect English to gain a “normal” American life. Whittaker et al. studied young refugee women from Somalia. In contrast to the Bosnian refugees, the Somali women felt their community discouraged them from emulating the host country by learning English or changing their dress. Also, they felt there was a cultural expectation for women not to express distressing feelings because Somali women are supposed to be “strong.” These studies exemplify how refugees’ coping can be shaped by culture, gender, and religion.

Culture and religion can also provide the means of coping. Religious coping has been used by refugees from Sudan (Copping, Shakespeare-Finch, & Paton, 2010; Khawaja et al., 2008; Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007) and North Korea (Kim & Lee, 2009). Building social support networks, particularly among ethnic communities (Johnson, Thompson, & Downs, 2009; Khawaja et al., 2008; Singh, Hays, Chung, & Watson, 2010), and maintaining cultural practices within the family and community (Beiser, 2009; Johnson et al., 2009) have also been noted as helpful among diverse refugees. Gender has been shown to differentiate refugee outcomes like economic stability, but it is unclear how it influences the type of coping.

## **Liberian Women**

Liberian women are a refugee group that has yet to be studied postresettlement. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has facilitated resettlement for many Liberian women under the category of Women and Girls at Risk. Under this ongoing UN program, women and girls who face particular danger because of their gender are recommended for permanent resettlement in a host country (UNHCR, 2011). Often they are widowed mothers who fled from armed political conflicts to refugee camps where they remained vulnerable to gender-based violence. Numerous regime changes in Liberia and a civil war culminated in a spike in violence during 2002 that led hundreds of thousands of Liberians to flee to neighboring countries. Since 1983, more than 30,000 Liberian refugees have been permanently resettled in the United States, including those in the Women and Girls at Risk category (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2011). Thus, many who came to the United States in the last 10 years came with children but without spouses.

Based just on the known risk factors, Black Liberian women with little formal education and without spouses in the United States would be less likely than other refugee cohorts to achieve positive economic and emotional outcomes. Goodkind and Deacon (2004) called such groups “triply marginalized” (p. 724): disadvantaged by their ethnicity, economic access, and gender. In comparing discrimination experiences, which is a refugee mental health risk factor (Beiser, 2009), Hadley and Patil (2009) found that skin color was the strongest predictor of discrimination for refugee groups in the United States. Premigration experiences are also a risk factor for refugee well-being (Chung & Bemak, 2002), and the Liberian women's special status almost guarantees they experienced multiple types of loss and trauma.

Liberian women are potentially vulnerable to a difficult transition to the United States. Understanding how Liberian women cope with the stresses of resettlement, trauma, and loss would help counselors build on these women's resources and address any deficits in access to or knowledge of coping resources. This was the focus of our study, guided by the following research question: How do Liberian women refugees cope with resettlement in the United States?

## **Method**

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach for researchers who seek to understand a distinct experience, often a life transition, shared by a group of people (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007). According to van Manen (1990), hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology “is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (p. 10). Phenomenology is expressly not a problem-solving methodology but provides a way for researchers to focus on the meaning of experiences, usually by way of in-depth interviews. The philosophy and qualitative methodology of phenomenology are particularly useful in cross-cultural research (Creswell et al., 2007). Interpretive qualitative research has been used to better understand a variety of culture-related phenomena, and its reflexive nature allows for the cultural perspective of both the participant and the researcher to be accounted for in how the data are interpreted (Yeh & Inman, 2007). This is important in a study in which the participants and researchers do not share a culture, such as our study.

Van Manen (1990) outlined six nonsequential research activities that should be followed when conducting hermeneutic phenomenology: (a) turning to a phenomenon we care about, (b) investigating the experience as it is lived, (c) reflecting on the themes that characterize the phenomenon, (d) describing the phenomenon through multiple writings, (e) maintaining a strong relationship to the research topic, and (f) considering the parts and the whole. We engaged in these activities and also drew from Colaizzi (1978) and Creswell et al. (2007) for more prescriptive steps to complete these activities.

## Participants

Participant recruitment yielded 10 interviews (two participants were interviewed together). This number fell within the recommend size for phenomenological studies (Polkinghorne, 1989). Eight participants were Liberian women resettled in the United States as refugees in 2004 or 2005 (when the UN program would have been in effect). The ninth woman was born in a country that neighbored Liberia and came to the United States with her Liberian husband in 2004. The final Liberian woman came to the United States in the late 1990s as a school-age child.

Participants ranged in ages from 24 to 59 years, with a mean age of 28 and a median age of 38. They left Liberia between 1990 and 1996, spending between 9 and 14 years outside of Liberia (in Ghana, Guinea, or the Ivory Coast) prior to resettlement in the United States. The age at which they left Liberia ranged from 7 to 41 years old. Except for the participant who arrived in the United States as a child, all participants brought children to the United States. Because of the chaos of war and flight from their homes, six of the participants had to leave at least one child in Africa and were trying to get them to the United States. All but one participant arrived without a spouse, because they had never been married, never were formally married (the United Nations would require marriage documents to allow a couple to be resettled together), or their husbands had been killed in Liberia during the war. None of the participants had married since coming to the United States and all identified themselves as single, although some were observed to have men living in their homes. Formal marriage as defined within most Liberian ethnic groups would be considered a serious economic, familial, and social undertaking, but marriage for Liberians would not be as narrowly defined as it is in the United States. Polygyny was permitted by Liberian law, and in some communities both men and women could maintain extramarital relationships (Olukoju, 2006). Six participants were employed, two were looking for work, and two were neither working nor looking for work. All identified themselves as Christian and represented Kran, Grebo, Kru, Temne, and Sapoh ethnic groups. All participants spoke English. Some distinguished that they spoke “Liberian English” (a spoken form of American English influenced by tribal languages; Ngovo, 1998), and some reported that their primary language was their “dialect,” the language of their ethnic group.

## Researchers as Instruments

The philosophy that underlies hermeneutic phenomenology denies that an investigator can ever fully separate from the data or “text” to merely observe it; she or he is interpreting the text to find the meaning within it (Creswell et al., 2007). However, making explicit how one relates to the object of study does help us to learn something beyond what our own biases and knowledge

have to tell us (van Manen, 1990). To begin investigating the phenomenon of interest (van Manen's second task), Colaizzi (1978) suggested researchers first ask themselves, "How and why am I involved with this phenomenon?" to free themselves to look at the phenomenon in a truly descriptive way. The first author, a licensed professional counselor and doctoral student at the time she conducted the interviews, became interested in the current topic after volunteer activities led to deep involvement in the lives of a few resettled Liberian women. Her work in the Liberian community was instrumental in gaining access to participants; however, it also meant she was known in a particular role within that community and was invested in aiding the participants' adjustment process. The second author, a licensed professional counselor and counselor educator, had significant experience with qualitative research and an interest in acculturation. Both authors are Caucasian women born in the United States.

For this study, we used a reflecting team (so named for van Manen's [1990] identification of reflection as a key phenomenological activity) to review interview transcripts and engage in dialogue with us to help structure the data and identify themes. This type of collaborative analysis of qualitative data can lead to deeper understandings and limit biases (van Manen, 1990). The reflecting team included a Caucasian social work educator who has researched Liberian women and is married to an African man, and an African American woman who is a counseling doctoral student and has a background in literature.

Prior to data analysis, we and the reflecting team completed a written bracketing activity based on Ahearn (2000) to help one another set aside biases. The activity revealed that values we all shared included the importance of education, the equality and dignity of all people, a responsibility to help others, a strong work ethic, a belief in the good motives of others, and personal responsibility. Potential biases included an affinity for Liberian refugee women, a desire to portray them positively or heroically, and a tendency to interpret participants' stories from a therapeutic standpoint (as a counselor). During data collection and analysis, the reflecting team provided verbal feedback on the research process via periodic meetings with us and written responses to our transcripts and writings. Two Liberian refugee women who resettled during the same years as the participants served as cultural auditors for the study. They provided feedback on the language and appropriateness of the interview questions, facilitated introductions to study participants, and gave feedback on the final themes.

## Data Collection

Convenience sampling began with a cultural auditor introducing the first author to other Liberian women. The first author also used her connections in the Liberian community. When refugees are included in research, the perceived motives and trustworthiness of a researcher are particularly important because of the refugees' past experiences with those in authority (Bertrand, 2000). The interview questions were developed using van Manen's (1990) guidelines for collecting phenomenological data through interviews, which suggested participants should be asked to describe experiences in chronological order rather than rationalize behavior (i.e., why questions). Questions were designed to elicit both the concrete details of experience (e.g., "Tell me about your journey from Liberia to America" and "Tell me about the life you and your children have here") and defining moments along with the related cognitions and emotions (e.g., "When are times you have been surprised/disappointed/worried/happy since coming to

America?"). Because the focus was on how refugees cope, some questions addressed this (e.g., "How have Liberian women learned to survive in the U.S.?" "What do you do differently since coming to America?" "What do you imagine will happen to you and your children in the future?" and "What would you tell a Liberian woman who just arrived about living here?"). In a pilot study, both cultural auditors reviewed the questions prior to data collection and answered them based on their own experiences as refugees. We made adjustments to the protocol based on their feedback and our determination of whether the questions elicited the desired information. For example, the original protocol included a question explicitly about how participants coped. The pilot study revealed that the word *coped* was not familiar to Liberians, so questions were modified.

All of the interviews were conducted by the first author in the participants' homes. Taped interviews were transcribed by the first author. Four participants declined to be taped, so the first author created transcripts with detailed notes. Interviews with new participants were stopped when we deemed that meaning units overlapped enough to create a description of the essence of the Liberian women's experience (van Manen, 1990). Participants' confidentiality was protected throughout the study, and particular care was taken in the informed consent process to avoid jargon and instead use language that would be familiar to the participants.

### Data Analysis

Van Manen's (1990) third and fourth tasks are determining themes and describing the phenomenon. To accomplish these tasks, an investigator reflects, writes, rewrites, and reorients (Colaizzi, 1978; van Manen, 1990). These cycles are also called immersion (i.e., looking at the details of the data) and crystallization (i.e., stepping back to see the structure of the data; Borkan, 1999). We began with multiple readings of the transcripts, made individual notes about our responses to the data, and shared our initial responses with each other. The first author kept a record of these responses and emerging ideas. We and the reflecting team read the transcripts and identified significant statements (Colaizzi, 1978) within three broad categories: (a) experiences, events that shaped what participants were coping with; (b) attitudes, ways participants made sense of those experiences or cognitive coping; and (c) behaviors, things participants did to cope. The first author wrote a detailed summary of the significant statements within these three categories, producing a description of what the participants coped with (i.e., experiences) and how they coped (i.e., cognitively and behaviorally).

We and the reflecting team read this description and reread the transcripts to make notes on clusters of meaning (i.e., text that overlapped in meaning within and across transcripts; Creswell et al., 2007) related to how participants coped. The first author read the notes and created a list of all the clusters with a description of how each cluster related to participants' significant statements. Thirteen clusters were initially identified. We then met with the reflecting team to discuss how the clusters related to each other. Clusters were collapsed into nine initial themes, which were then grouped into broader themes to form the structure of the data, yielding three main themes, with three subthemes each. The first author wrote descriptions of the nine subthemes, which the reflecting team read and verified as representing the original transcripts.

Giving participants the opportunity to review the data after they have been analyzed is one way to keep the researchers' interpretations as close to the lived experience as possible (Colaizzi, 1978). However, the first author found it difficult to engage in critical reflection with the participants. When she returned the transcripts to the participants, none of them wished to add ideas or make corrections. She learned that disagreeing with or criticizing an outsider would be considered rude in Liberian culture, so sometimes Liberians may say yes but mean no. In light of these cultural norms, the first author consulted the cultural auditors. They had a closer and less formal relationship with the first author and were willing to give feedback on the themes. They affirmed and elaborated on how the themes reflected Liberian women's coping. Their comments were interwoven into the description of the themes.

Verification of themes by the two cultural auditors who experienced the phenomenon enhanced the trustworthiness of the data (Colaizzi, 1978), as did the previously described bracketing process undertaken by us and the reflecting team (Creswell et al., 2007). Triangulation of data (among reflecting team/authors with significant Liberian contacts, cultural auditors, and participants), group decision making, and debriefing during data analysis were used to prevent the dominance of any one participant's or researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon. The repeated cycles of reading, reflecting, and writing created an audit trail that minimized the distance from interview transcript to written interpretations. The use of thick description and quotations from participants in the final exposition of themes allows the reader to examine the transferability of our findings (Creswell et al., 2007).

## **Results**

The challenges the participants reported experiencing before and after resettlement were significant and in line with what one would expect given their refugee status. All of the women experienced multiple losses, including family members, livelihoods, property, and communities. The participants were not asked specifically about traumatic experiences, but some did describe experiencing or witnessing violence prior to resettlement, including spouses or parents being killed in front of them. Participants who were resettled in a specific housing complex in the United States reported physical and verbal harassment by neighbors. All reported some type of current economic difficulty, including lack of employment, supporting family who had not immigrated, or lack of health insurance. None reported homesickness by name, but almost all said they hoped to return to Liberia or Africa at least to visit. Our study did reveal that, despite their struggles, the participants had found ways to cope.

The participants' coping methods were reflected in three main themes: (a) outward face was coping by representing themselves and their community in strategic ways (i.e., responsible, grateful, African), (b) interface was coping by engaging with the new environment, and (c) inward face was coping through the stories they told themselves to make sense of their experiences. Each of these themes had three subthemes. Note that the participants often used the terms "Africa" or "African" in place of more specific terms like "Liberian," so we have intentionally maintained this more general language to report the results.

### **Culturally Prescribed Attitudes/Outward Face**

The participants created an outward face for themselves and their community by adopting and displaying culturally prescribed attitudes. The attitudes emerged both out of their cultural identity and also in response to their resettlement experiences. This was exemplified in responses to the interview question, “What would you tell a Liberian woman who just arrived about living here?” It elicited opinions such as the statement, “You got to apply seriousness.” The first two culturally prescribed attitudes, seriousness and gratitude, appeared to be cultural norms applied to handling resettlement. The third, cultural maintenance, was more specific to the resettlement process, emerging as a reaction to participants’ intercultural experiences.

*Seriousness.* Participants felt that to survive and be successful in the United States, it was important for them and other Liberians to take on an attitude they referred to as “seriousness.” Being serious meant working hard and not spending time partying, being lazy, or depending too much on others. It meant honoring their responsibilities, primary of which was taking care of children and elders, both in the United States and in Africa. The cultural auditors affirmed that this was a cultural expectation. Taking care of their children in the United States as well as sending resources back to family abroad was often impossible. However, the participants disapproved of Liberians they considered lazy or not meeting family duties. Two participants interviewed together discussed “seriousness”:

Participant 1: You got the serious men and the serious women. So they got some that are not serious. Some of the girls are not serious. They just want to hang around.

Participant 2: Like some of us who have more expenses to do, we have people [in Africa], children, family back home.

Participant 1: Some of them got ... expenses, some of them got it but they don't want to do it. Some of them like me got parents here, but because they say my parents got a home and I want to go live with them, “I don't want to work, I don't want to go to school.”

Being “serious” helped the women cope by conferring a dignity to their struggles and instilling a sense of pride at having met their culturally dictated obligations. It also shored up their sense of Liberian community in the United States, saying in a sense, “This is how WE act.”

*Gratitude.* Participants expressed gratefulness, in a spiritual sense, for specific people who had helped them and for the things they liked in the United States. Displaying gratefulness was both a form of cognitive coping in that it focused them on the positive aspects of resettlement and a form of relational coping by generating goodwill with American friends. One participant said,

I thank God for White and Black [people] in America because the fact is when I got here I was very, very sick. I was sick. If that back in Africa maybe I could die and today, God so have it, I'm alive, so really I thank God. Because when I got here they find a solution to all the things that happening to me and today I'm moving strong.

There were predominantly positive feelings expressed about life in the United States and American people. Complaints about life in the United States were specific, such as an experience of discrimination or difficulty with a certain social services agency. To complain globally about

life in the United States, particularly to an American interviewer, would have been considered rude, according to the cultural auditors. This is not to say that the participants' expressions of gratitude were disingenuous but, like an attitude of seriousness, it is another example of the importance placed on how one presents oneself and doing so within culturally prescribed norms.

*Cultural maintenance.* Another form of participants' coping was entrenching themselves in an "African" or "Liberian" identity. The women made distinctions about American and African ways of doing things, extolling the supremacy of the African way, often after reporting that they had experienced harassment or discrimination by Americans. They said they wanted their children to "know where they came from." One participant said that letting your child "rule" you, which she perceived as acceptable in the United States, or allowing your parents to live in a nursing home instead of taking care of them yourself, would cause you to be cursed. As with gratitude and seriousness, the participants expressed a collectively prescribed way Liberians should navigate life in the United States (i.e., be responsible, be grateful, and do not forget where you came from). In drawing a circle around themselves with their cultural distinctions, they created a supportive community across Liberian ethnic and dialect differences and a sense of pride in the face of discrimination and harassment.

### Engaging the Environment/Interface

For the participants, maintaining cultural identities and practices did not mean being culturally isolated. The participants described multiple ways they coped with challenges by using resources outside of their community, in the form of people and systems (e.g., educational, social services, employment). They presented their engagement as utilitarian: They wanted help to accomplish their goals and felt disappointed when help was cut off or difficult to access. However, they did not necessarily want to be influenced, or have their children influenced, by American people and institutions. Some participants reported that attempts to keep their children doing things "the African way" were not always successful; they could not fully insulate their children from perceived negative American influences.

*Opportunity.* The word *opportunity* was one of the most consistently used words among the participants when talking about life in the United States. Participants expressed a desire to take advantage of opportunities they did not have in West Africa, particularly employment and education. They were pleasantly surprised that a woman could find a job despite her limited education and especially glad for the opportunity for their children to go to school for free. One participant contrasted her friend's African versus American opportunities in the following way:

In Africa ... they got some people that got master's and doctorate degrees that don't have a job. Where are you going to get a job? You just a high school graduate so you come here, maybe you not go to school like her and she got a job. She got a three bedroom she paying for all by herself... Back home you didn't have the opportunity you got here.

Even for participants who were disappointed by some of the difficulties in the United States or were struggling to get access to work or education, the perception that opportunities were better in the United States maintained their hopefulness and future-oriented thinking. Much of this hopefulness was focused on their children, who, with the opportunity to have a free education,

were expected to become successful and help support their families. Their focus on better opportunities buffered a despondency that might set in where they see their goals as unachievable or life as not improving.

*Systems.* Participants became actively engaged in trying to navigate systems in their new country. These systems included the immigration system, which they were trying to use to get family members brought to the United States; the social services system, which could provide food stamps, income, Medicaid, day-care vouchers, and subsidized housing; the education system; and the employment system, in which they were trying to get jobs, stay employed, and take advantage of any benefits. Access to systems was a double-edged sword. Participants were both thankful for the systems, most of which they did not have in Liberia or the refugee camps, and also frustrated with the systems, which were not user-friendly and sometimes cut off help when it was needed. One participant described her struggle:

When I was working I left here at 11 something, I got here at 4:30. That's not many hours... . When I had a part-time job they cut my Medicaid. They send the Medicaid now, I just sat here. I go there for food stamps. I don't have a ride ... I got to walk to DSS [Department of Social Services] to get food stamps and Medicaid. They qualify me, that is the help, but how to get there? You can't see job anywhere.

The participants were proactive about becoming informed and using services, but their negative experiences with some providers did create a sense of helplessness and frustration.

*Relationships as resources.* Participants made efforts to engage with systems, but they also put effort into developing personal relationships. They used relationships for support and getting access to resources. Participants networked with professional and volunteer service providers as well as friends and family, who were almost exclusively within the Liberian diaspora. Because participants saw relationships as important to their success in the United States, they expressed disappointment or confusion when relationships ended or did not meet their expectations. A participant described her relationship with her refugee resettlement worker very simply: "I came first the people do everything for me. Food, the children, everything. Three months, I not see her again." The participants used relationships with Americans and Liberians to get information and navigate bureaucracies. One woman said that she continued to seek help from Americans to read her mail to her so she would not miss deadlines. This theme was also exemplified by the way some participants interacted in interviews with the first author, asking her to help them with things like getting health insurance for their children, filling out job applications, or talking to immigration agencies about the status of their children's applications.

### Situating Oneself in a Narrative/Inward Face

The participants coped by engaging with systems and individuals and by presenting a unified front, but they also coped by creating a narrative that made sense of their experiences. In creating this narrative, they did not situate themselves as driving the story but as a part of a spiritual plan that was playing out around them. This theme perhaps comes closer to reflecting how the participants made sense of their experiences internally, whereas the culturally prescribed attitudes theme reflected how they presented themselves outwardly.

*Aftermath of premigration experiences.* The participants made clear that resettlement did not create a clean slate and what they experienced in the war and refugee life continued to affect them. Primary was the experience of leaving children behind, usually because they could not be located prior to immigration. One participant described the ongoing effects of this:

I lay down. I can't sleep. My heart just doing the thing again, for my children... My children business, it hurting me, hurting me. I don't know what to do. I not get good job. Somebody [my children] they call, "Ma, we don't eat, we don't eat." When they can give me food stuff for me to eat it can't go in my stomach. Now it worry me now too much.

These women framed their struggles as being specific to their refugee/immigrant status, almost as if to soften expectations. Another participant attributed living in subsidized housing to this status: "I live in [housing project] because I'm not from here. I'm from a different soil; I don't come here from my date of birth, but I can't born here and live in [housing project]." Viewing their current difficulties in the light of their past experiences is one way that these women made sense of their circumstances.

*Progress.* Having been through struggles was also a motivating factor for the participants, and they expressed hopefulness for the future. One woman said, "By working hard I know that in the future I will be successful. I know I will be better; my children are trying in school. I'm sure God will make a way for me. Things will be better." Some participants were struggling to find work and some had children with problems in school, yet they still expressed the expectation that things would improve and the opportunities and relationships they had in the United States would allow them a "better life." Creating a future-oriented narrative was another way to make sense of things and buffer feelings of disappointment or helplessness.

*Spirituality.* The participants did not claim authorship of their narratives but described the past, present, and future as the work of spiritual forces. Bad things happened because of curses or evil spirits, and good things were the work of God. One participant said, "My coming here, it was just by the grace of God... I was not really expecting it because I not have no family... I don't have anyone to fighting for me, nothing. I came here by God grace." This attribution framework could serve to prevent survivor guilt and provide spiritual resources when their own efforts or relational resources failed. When asked how she managed the worry over her children in Africa, one participant said, "Sometimes just pray. Just pray. Sometimes call my mom, auntie. Tell them my problems... If I worry just pray over it. Or if need like a new job I fast about it, fast and pray. And I know I'm gonna make it."

## **Discussion**

In turning our attention to how Liberian refugees coped with resettlement, this study has accomplished three things. First, we illuminated a previously unexplored phenomenon (i.e., coping after resettlement for Liberian refugee women). Second, we affirmed and broadened the view of refugee coping by describing participants' particular behavioral and cognitive coping methods. And finally, in grouping/structuring those methods, we introduced a new frame for types of refugee coping.

## Liberian Women

On the basis of resettlement outcome research with other refugee groups (for a review, see Yakushko, Watson, & Thompson, 2008), resettled Liberian women were at high risk for both emotional distress and poor economic outcomes. Our study did not measure outcomes, but based on participants' self-reports, they were not "succeeding" economically. Over half lived in government-subsidized housing, and if they were employed it was in low-wage jobs. They did report emotional distress, but it was more situational (e.g., a child's immigration application or being harassed by a neighbor) than chronic. Overall, the participants' expressions were future-oriented and hopeful. They said they had access to the resources they needed to improve their lives. Brandt (2010) found the same optimism through interviews with the first generation of refugees resettled in the largest Liberian community in the United States, in southwest Philadelphia. They too affirmed their belief in the "American dream" despite a lack of jobs, poor educational opportunities, and conflict, sometimes violent, with other immigrant and American-born groups. Brandt hypothesized that, like the participants in our study, Liberians in Philadelphia viewed their hardships in the broader perspective of their lives. Liberians experienced protracted displacements in refugee camps, and the economic as well as political stability of Liberia was poor before and after the wars. Life in the United States did improve much of that. But as an alternative interpretation, our study's findings also suggest that Liberians value presenting oneself in a positive way and may find it difficult to share negative emotions with an outsider.

Previous research also suggests that the Liberian participants' shared experience of resettling as single mothers would shape their narratives. Researchers have found that gender and marital status can affect adjustment to resettlement (Beiser, 2009; Chung & Bemak, 2002). Halcón et al. (2004) found that Somali and Oromo refugee women reported more premigration trauma, social problems after resettlement, and desire to return to Somalia compared with their male counterparts. They also found that the women were significantly more likely than the men to cope with sadness by talking to friends. When the participants in our study were asked how Liberian men's adjustment might be different, they denied any differences or had none to offer. The participants also did not regularly use the terms "Liberian women" or "single mothers" to refer to themselves; they were simply "Liberians" or "Africans." Although their narratives were not explicitly gendered, the theme of relationships as resources reflects a relationally oriented coping style that may be favored by women, as in the Halcón et al. study. In the social science literature, Taylor et al. (2000) named this the "tend and befriend" response to stress as opposed to the male preference for "fight or flight."

## Coping Methods

Liberian participants' coping echoed previous findings on refugees adjusting to resettlement and processing trauma. Hopefulness, optimism, and planning for the future have been shown to be important in mitigating the effects of trauma and fostering resiliency among refugees of varying ages and ethnicities (e.g., Ai et al., 2007). Positive spiritual and religious coping, meaning making, cultural maintenance, and social support seeking have also been shown to be helpful coping methods for refugees (Beiser, 2009; Khawaja et al., 2008). Goodman (2004) found

through qualitative research that young Sudanese refugees positioned themselves in a spiritual narrative that helped them make sense of their experiences. This meaning-making exercise has been associated with posttraumatic growth (Park & Ai, 2006).

What was perhaps particular about Liberian refugee women's coping was their focus on presenting themselves in certain ways. In a study of women who remained in Liberia during the civil war, Utas (2005) found that they took on various roles to access services and stay alive. Those roles were that of “victim,” someone in need of help; “warrior,” participating in armed combat; or “girlfriend,” aligning oneself with a man who could provide security and resources. Utas called this strategic role-switching tactic agency, suggesting the roles were not disempowered but a means to an end. The women in our study were also strategic about their “outward face,” which helped them maintain cultural bonds and achieve goals. Being serious was a kind of positive peer pressure to cope with a multitude of responsibilities, and it was also a point of cultural pride. Adapting their self-presentation to their environments also helped the women to navigate relationships and institutions that allowed them access to resources needed for goal achievement. By expressing gratitude and belief in the American dream, Liberian women fostered goodwill with native-born Americans who could help them in specific ways.

### Coping Categories

Postimmigration adjustment has sometimes been confounded with acculturation. However, the Liberian women demonstrated that their coping tasks are much more complicated than just adapting to cultural differences. In the future, those seeking to understand how a refugee is coping with resettlement can ask: How does this person want to be seen? How has this person chosen to make contact with her environment? And how does this person explain her experiences? Answers to these questions will provide a useful picture of how a person with refugee status is coping with resettlement.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

Considering the Liberians' experiences broadened what coping means and affirmed the resiliency of people who must integrate traumatic pasts with challenging presents. Because our study was undertaken 3 to 4 years after the participants arrived in the United States, it is unknown whether different coping methods were used very early in the resettlement process or if the methods changed over time. Beiser's (2009) work with refugees in Canada showed varying emotional adjustment tasks over the course of resettlement, particularly if traumatic memories were suppressed. For exploring this, longitudinal or cross-sectional case study research with Liberians would be a good complement to our study. It is also important to consider that the participants' willingness to be interviewed, compared with those who chose not to participate, may reflect a sample skewed to include participants with more positive views of the United States and Americans. The engaging with the environment themes may be partly attributable to the self-selected sample because refugees willing to engage with the interviewer might be more likely to seek help outside of their community. It would be useful for counselors to investigate any barriers to Liberians' engagement with service providers. Participatory action research or a needs assessment initiated within the Liberian community would be appropriate methods for engaging those who perhaps feel less comfortable sharing concerns with an outsider.

## Counseling Implications

Counselors and researchers can consider refugees' outward face, interface, and inward face. Counselors should be aware that when refugee clients present themselves in strategic ways, as perhaps all clients do, they may be doing so as a way of coping. Counselors should not undermine this by overemphasizing self-disclosure, emotional expression, or direct acknowledgment of suffering (di Tomasso, 2010). Charlés (2009) presented a case study of counseling a resettled Liberian woman in the United States and found that focusing on past trauma directly had little effectiveness and was met with resistance. Refugee clients' stoicism or optimism may be needed psychological defense mechanisms (Beiser, 2009). However, counselors also should not assume that a refugee client is not experiencing distress when she describes her situation in positive tones. Counselors may have to be creative in addressing a woman's suffering in a way that keeps her dignity intact and allows her to adhere to her cultural norms. Less direct approaches such as metaphor, telling stories about others with similar concerns, or expressive arts may be helpful, particularly in the beginning stages of counseling when a safe, trusting environment is being established. Counselors can also help refugee clients work toward specific nonemotional goals or problems that may be addressed via community resources or advocacy. Counselors can assess how refugee clients have chosen to interface with their ethnic and host communities and then introduce additional resources as appropriate and as desired by the client. Liberian women, like other refugees, often deal with many service agencies, and it is important that counselors are knowledgeable of what is available, particularly for family reunification assistance. Family reunification has been shown to be an important mitigating factor of refugee trauma stress (Weine et al., 2004), and it was certainly a priority for the participants in our study.

To work with refugee clients' inward face and help them reconcile their pasts and presents, counselors can facilitate the meaning-making process. Sheikh (2008) found that a counselor's active support of meaning making can promote posttraumatic growth among refugees. To assess how clients are making sense of their experiences, counselors listen for clients' understanding of "how did this happen?" and "why did this happen to me?" In the case of Liberian women, this would provide an understanding of the spiritual frames they put on their life narratives. To encourage growth, counselors can help clients explore their pretrauma and posttrauma selves to uncover strengths, new skills, and areas of growth (Sheikh, 2008). This latter intervention seems particularly well suited to Liberian women, who without prompting looked at the positive changes in their lives between pre- and postmigration.

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