

Returning Strangers: The Children of Malawian Refugees Come 'Home'?

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There has been relatively little research addressing the important issue of how refugees adapt to returning home. The research which has been done, however, suggests that the process of reintegration can be problematic and, at times, seriously distressing to returnees, especially if they are young. The present study investigated young refugees who had 'returned' to Malawi (the country of their parents' birth), although none of them had previously been to Malawi. Using semi-structured interviews with thematic content analysis, we report returnees' attitudes towards resources, activities, employment and social contacts in Malawi; how the returnees viewed their national identity, their opinions of Malawi and Zambia (where they sought refuge) and of Malawians and Zambians; and their feeling about the future. A variety of experiences were reported, including being disappointed by Malawi, yet cherishing its significance as a 'homeland'; confusion about national and cultural identity; feelings of isolation in Malawi; and the desire to return to Zambia. The results indicate that adjustment to a refugee's homeland may be very difficult, especially for young refugees who may only have idealized impressions, but no experience, of 'home'.

Background

For many of the millions of refugees in the world, and indeed for the governments and organizations involved, the ultimate goal is for them to return to their home country. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has repeatedly expressed the need to create conditions favourable for the large-scale return of refugees (e.g. UNHCR 1990). Voluntary repatriation has been presented as the best way to resolve the world's refugee problem. In Africa, some 3.5 million refugees have returned home since the 1970s (Rogge 1994). However, little information

is available about what has happened to those refugees who have returned home (Allen and Morsink 1994; Rogge 1994; Black and Koser 1999). In a comprehensive survey of the literature on voluntary repatriation between developing countries, undertaken over a decade ago for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (Crisp 1987), it was found that almost all the literature had focused on just three themes: international law, political motivations, and logistics. This incomplete state of the research literature was reiterated more recently by Rogge (1994). More recently, Black and Koser (1999) have brought together a significant collection of essays on repatriation. Yet overall, few authors have attempted to investigate the *experiences of the returnees themselves*, or the longer term economic, social and psychological dimensions of such experiences. This is particularly true of younger refugees, who usually have little influence on decisions to flee or return. The present research was motivated by a desire to explore the acculturation experiences of young refugees 'returning' to a country which they had not been to before.

Repatriation

The United Nations declared the 1990s to be the decade of repatriation, and have encouraged refugees to return to their country of origin voluntarily. Mass repatriation of refugees has taken place in Africa (e.g. to Mozambique and Rwanda), Central America (e.g. to Guatemala) and Asia (e.g. to Vietnam). However, there has perhaps been an assumption that because repatriation is the preferred outcome for refugees, it is also the least problematic, and possibly less of a priority in terms of research. The available research, however, suggests that repatriation may be a complex and difficult experience for many refugees (Akol 1987; Crisp 1986; Rabe 1990; Rogge 1990, 1991, 1994; van Haren 1997; Ager 1999). The extant literature shows that there exist a number of problems involved in repatriation, and a need for an understanding of the processes involved in returning, and how reintegration and rehabilitation of returnees can be maximized. For instance, Rogge (1994) points out that, far from always being a simple and optimal solution, returning to a homeland can be as stressful as fleeing into exile. This may be especially true for second-generation refugees born in exile, who are likely to find 'home' a strange or even threatening place.

Until relatively recently, few refugees saw their exile as semi-permanent, intending to return to their homes as soon as peace was re-established. They did not expect to be in exile two decades later, with children who had grown up in alien cultures. These second-generation refugees are likely to have adopted local ways and attitudes, particularly if they have been integrated into the school system of the host country. Thus, repatriation of second-generation refugees requires a considerable degree of readjustment; returning to their parents' home country may not mean 'going home'. Some families, in the process of becoming refugees, have also undergone cultural and social transformations, such as

becoming urbanized, which may cause difficulties in trying to return to a traditional agrarian economy in the homeland (Peltzer 1996).

Re-acculturation

Dona and Berry (1999) have recently presented a re-acculturation model of the experience of returnee refugees. Berry's original (1980) model outlining four strategies of acculturation (assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization), and its subsequent development into a framework incorporating multi-dimensional aspects of individual and group acculturation (Berry 1997), has been based largely on research carried out in 'Western' countries. Thus Dona and Berry (1999) state that 'there is a need to know more about refugees in the developing world, especially about refugees who live in camps, and about those who return home' (p.14). Dona and Berry's own research on Guatemalan refugees living in and returning from Mexico, concluded that for this group of refugees, 'it is feasible to look at return as re-acculturation' (p. 38). That is to say, refugees returning home, especially after many years in exile, confront many of the same sort of challenges to re-adapting to their environment, as they did in adapting to their place of refuge. The cultural distance (migration to a neighbouring country or to one far away with a very different culture), length of stay in exile, type of migration (individual or group) and the individual circumstances motivating the original migration, are suggested as important factors mediating re-acculturation experiences (see Dona and Berry 1999).

Young Refugees

It is well known that refugees are a vulnerable group in terms of psychological and physical well-being (MacLachlan, 1997). It has been estimated that one-half of the global refugee population comprises children under the age of 16 (United Nations 1996), and UNHCR has developed specific guidelines for work with refugee children (Crisp 1996). Ahearn, Loughry and Ager (1999) have argued that it is important to examine the particularities of the experience of refugee children. They note that children who become refugees may encounter many difficulties including: malnutrition, disease, disability, separation and loss, disruption of socialization and traumatic experiences. With regard to the latter, the nature and number of events, the child's developmental stage, the nature of previous socialization, and current family and community support, have been found to influence the impact of refugee children's traumatic experiences (see Ahearn *et al.* 1999). Studies of children who have been exposed to war have found a vulnerability to psychological distress: conduct disorder, post traumatic stress disorder and anxiety have all been shown to exist at elevated levels among warfare-exposed children (Ager 1996).

Traumatic refugee experience and being a victim of violence can have intergenerational effects. Evidence suggests that this can significantly influence

interpersonal relationships, marital roles and parenting patterns (Baker 1983). If family members suffer psychological distress, this may make them less able to respond to the social and emotional needs of the child, and, in this way, emotional problems of refugee children may be increased (McCallin 1991). Thus the children of refugees can be affected by traumatic events which may have occurred either during the flight or resettlement of their parents; the children need not have experienced them directly. On the other hand, children's adaptability and flexibility in the face of adversity have stimulated research into the 'resilience' of children. This approach emphasizes that children can experience highly adverse situations and still remain well-adjusted and psychologically healthy (Dawes 1994; Rutter 1985).

Re-acculturation of Young Refugees

Ahearn *et al.* (1999) note that 'In most social settings children, because of their age and position in society, have very little input into the programmes and policies designed to meet their needs' (p.11). It is not only valuable and legitimate, but also practically important, to investigate the experience of young refugees in their own right (Ahearn *et al.* 1999). Given the relative lack of research into the consequences of returning to a home country, and the evidence that would predict difficulties facing young returnees, this study aimed to address the issues of adjustment, adaptation and integration that constitute an important part of the experience of acculturation.

The present research focused specifically on young refugees who had recently returned to Malawi after many years in exile. None of these 'returnees' had, in fact, been to Malawi before. They had all been born outside Malawi and had accompanied their parents on their return to Malawi. These young 'returnees' are a particularly interesting sample for two specific reasons: 1) they had not directly experienced the trauma of forced flight, but had been born into the psychosocial, political and economic context of being a refugee; and 2) they had the experience of 'being different' in their country of exile, without having had the transition of acculturation. Based on these two characteristics of our sample, we set out to research the hypothesis that these young returnees would experience a significant degree of acculturative stress and ambiguity regarding self and national identity on their 'return' to Malawi.

Much of the research conducted on acculturation attitudes and experience has utilized psychometric scales. While psychometric scales can offer a degree of objectivity and be of value in estimating the limits within which their results may be generalized, there are also important limitations of their use in a refugee sample (Gillespie, Peltzer and MacLachlan in press). This is especially so in the context of researching the acculturation process in a group for whom psychometric measures have not been specifically developed. Such scales may exhibit construct bias (the scales may not be sensitive to the behaviours of interest), method bias (the process of completing rating scales may be unfamiliar to the sample), or item bias (particular terms may be inappropriate

or have no direct translation) (van de Vijver and Leung 1997). It has also been suggested that psychometric measures may be culturally insensitive to the oral tradition of refugee populations in developing countries (Dona and Berry 1999), and that more open-ended, or narrative, approaches to collecting data may be of value in research with refugees (Ager 1994). Such an approach was adopted in this research.

Method

Participants

Under the dictatorship which lasted from 1964 to 1993 in Malawi, huge numbers of Malawian citizens were forced into exile because of political or ideological stances which displeased President Banda. On leaving, their property was confiscated, and contact with relatives was made very difficult. Many were tortured and had to flee to neighbouring countries, where they were accepted as refugees. Since the advent of democracy in Malawi, and a general amnesty for all Malawian exiles in June 1993, the Malawian refugees have begun to return to their home country, invited by their government, and encouraged by governments of the host countries. Many of the returnees have been refugees since 1964, or since 1972 when there was a large-scale persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Malawi. At the time of this study (July–September, 1996) many of these refugees were returning, with their children who were born and had lived all their lives in Zambia, Zimbabwe or Tanzania. It is a sample of these young people who were the participants in this study.

In order to clarify the context of the present study it is necessary to outline the historical backdrop of the refugees' flight from, and return to, Malawi (see Peltzer 1996 for more detail). It is estimated that about 25,000 people were forced to leave Malawi over a period of three decades, beginning in the 1960s. The persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses led to 21,000 of them fleeing to Zambia by November 1973. Under pressure from the Government of Malawi, and fearing problems of its own, the Zambian Government forcibly repatriated 17,000 of them back to Malawi. The returning Witnesses were again persecuted and fled to Mozambique this time, but after Mozambique's independence in 1975 they were expelled again. On their return to Malawi they were persecuted when they refused to buy party cards.

According to a report by the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (1995) on the analysis of needs and opportunities for Malawi returnees, 5,200 returnees (1,300 adults and 3,900 children) registered as returnees in Malawi. The major centre of concentration of returnees is Mchinji, with the main cities, Lilongwe and Blantyre, having the second and third largest populations of returnees respectively. Their experiences in exile were as follows. Upon arrival in the countries of asylum (mainly neighbouring countries), many were immediately confined to refugee camps with an uncertain future. The conditions in the camps were far below the standard of living that they were

accustomed to. Eventually, all exiles had to fend for themselves. The host governments' hospitality was limited so that exiles were not accorded equal opportunities for jobs or education. Only a tiny minority of exiles managed to get jobs and education in the host countries. Some exiles organized themselves to better their lives by securing scholarships for their children. Even in exile the Malawians were not safe. There is ample evidence that on several occasions the Malawian Government sent agents to hunt down exiles so as to stifle opposition by assassinating those in leadership (Lwanda 1993).

As has already been stated, many of the returnees were Jehovah's Witnesses. Wilson (1994) has described their history in Central and Southern Africa during the early colonial period. They offered new ideologies and associations that both provided a sophisticated critique of the nature of colonial domination and also enabled people to live better in the changing socio-economic contexts of the period. Whilst the movement regularly attracted suppression by colonial authorities because it refused to accept the legitimacy of state authority, the persecution of Witnesses increased greatly following independence, due to the all-encompassing demands of the new African political leadership. Witnesses refused to respect the new symbols of nationhood (especially slogans and flags), and to participate ritualistically in mass political movements, and the parties. Indeed, for a variety of complex reasons the persecution of Witnesses, and the redistribution of their private and public assets, became central to the process of nation-building and government in these countries, particularly for the establishment of a strong party rank and file. The result of this was a series of seven systematic persecutions and subsequent mass migrations within and between Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique between the late 1960s and mid-1970s.

It has also been suggested that Jehovah's Witnesses seemed to cope successfully with camp life in exile, due to long familiarity with persecution and camp life, an effective approach to handling authorities and agencies, an ideology that could ascribe purpose to exile and suffering, and economic skills, such as carpentry, useful in camps with low agricultural potential, which are organized around artisans' circles (Peltzer 1996). In each of the camp settings, though to differing extents, the Witnesses have proved capable of attracting adherents among other refugees, local people, and have even converted soldiers and relief officials.

The social problems of the exiles on return to Malawi have been described by the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (1995) as follows: food shortage, difficulties in bringing their personal belongings with them from exile, part of their families still being in exile, problems having their academic qualifications recognized, difficulties in social integration and communication (especially for those who left while still young or those born in exile), inability to pay school fees for dependants, lack of further education opportunities (mainly due to the inflexibility in the Malawian education system resulting in a failure to absorb students educated outside of the country).

All the participants in the present study had experienced exile in Zambia, and were at the time of the study living in Lilongwe, the capital of Malawi, where 20

per cent of the returnees were located. In February 1996, the government stopped all welfare payments to returnees. Without money to pay rent, many of them became homeless, and decided to occupy the Social Welfare Centre in Lilongwe. Here, about 120 people were accommodated at any one time in one large hall, and were given *nsima* and beans by the government each week, which they cooked over outdoor fires. The participants in this study were either living at the centre, or regularly visited the centre (residing nearby). All youths attending the centre were invited, through a public announcement, to participate in a study of their experiences of life as refugees since coming to Malawi. Thirty-six young people volunteered to be interviewed. That participants had not previously been to Malawi was an inclusion criterion of our study. The sample comprised 21 females and 15 males, with a mean age of 16.36 years (SD=3.54, age range 9–21 years old). Given that interviewees were volunteers drawn from one centre we cannot claim that our sample is representative of young Malawian returnees who had been living in exile. However, our concern in this study was not necessarily to generalize our findings to diverse returnee contexts, but to conduct an in depth qualitative study of how a group of young returnee refugees were affected by the political, social and economic context in which they found themselves (the representativeness and generalizability of our findings are considered in the Discussion section).

Materials

A demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interview were used in the present research. The demographic information sought was: age, sex, size of family, place in family, length of time in Malawi, religion, current accommodation (renting or Social Welfare Centre), and area of accommodation (village, town or city) while in Zambia.

With little previous literature addressing the experience of young returning refugees, it seemed that pre-formed ideas would be unlikely to capture the full range of their experience. Therefore, a more 'bottom-up', emic interview approach was used, where the participants themselves were allowed to develop the content of their interview, and in so doing had opportunity to describe *what was important to them*. Topics which we wished to address from the outset included issues of identity, attitudes to Malawi and Malawians, issues of integration into Malawian society, and daily activities.

During the process of the interviews, we sought to be responsive to what was being learnt through the process, and therefore introduced questions suggested by the responses of previous interviewees. While one consequence of this technique of 'rolling interviews' is that not all interviewees are asked the same total number of questions, it does have the advantage of being responsive to, and being able to collect data on, ideas generated by the interviewees themselves.

Procedure

The questionnaire was translated into Chichewa, the language most widely spoken in Malawi, and understood (to varying extents) by all of the participants, then back-translated into English by a different interpreter to check that the translation was accurate. First the demographic details were asked of the participant (or for the younger children, sometimes a parent provided these details). Then, participants underwent a semi-structured interview. Content analysis was performed on the translated qualitative data to reveal common themes that emerged through the interviews.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the demographic data revealed that 47 per cent of the returnees interviewed were living in the social welfare centre, and 53 per cent were living in houses elsewhere in Lilongwe. While in Zambia, 43 per cent had lived in a village, 37 per cent in a town, and 20 per cent in a city. The mean length of time they had spent in Malawi so far was 14.91 months ($SD=7.2$). This length of time ranged from 7 to 31 months. The number of children in a family ranged from 2 to 12, the mean number of children being 6.5 ($SD=2.57$). The participants' place in the family ranged from first-born to eighth-born, the mean being 3.86 ($SD=1.9$). In terms of religion, 80 per cent were Jehovah's Witnesses, 20 per cent Catholic or Seventh Day Adventist. Although all the participants were of school-going age, 56 per cent of them were not attending school. One quarter (24 per cent) of the sample reported having difficulties with the language in Malawi (Lilongwe).

To test the reliability of the content analysis of the semi-structured interviews, inter-rater reliability was calculated. A random sample of 10 per cent of the transcripts were given to an independent rater, who analysed the material, extracting themes and categorizing them. Eighty-four per cent agreement was achieved between the two raters.

The themes that emerged from the content analysis of the narratives of the 36 participants are presented below. The themes have been grouped into categories of (1) resources, (2) employment, (3) activities, (4) social contacts, (5) identity, (6) opinions of Malawi and Zambia, (7) opinions of Malawians and Zambians, and (8) the future.

Resources

A thematic analysis of the way in which resources were talked about with regard to Malawi and Zambia is presented in Table 1. It is clear that the lack of resources in Malawi, and their relative abundance in Zambia, dominated the discussions. The resources referred to included concerns about money, food, accommodation, clothing, and so on. Of the 33 returnees who responded to this question, 17 (52 per cent) mentioned a lack of resources in Malawi, and 12

(36 per cent) mentioned the greater availability of resources in Zambia. Nobody reported a lack of resources in Zambia, but three subjects (9 per cent) felt that they had greater access to resources in Malawi. Clearly, for only a minority had the change been positive in terms of resources, and many of the young returnees were aware of a worsened financial situation. According to one girl, 'In Malawi we are just living by the power of Jehovah God.' Another girl made this comparison: 'In Zambia, we were eating meat, but here we only eat meat at the end of the month.' In the words of one boy: 'life was tough in Zambia, but not as tough as it is now.'

A difference between the meaning of resources to the younger and older participants was evident. The younger ones mentioned specific things, for example, having a radio in Zambia but not having one now, or the type of (good) food they used to eat in Zambia, in contrast to what they were now eating. The concerns of the older participants were more likely to be about broader issues such as schooling or accommodation: 'accommodation is the most important thing, even if you sleep with hunger.'

Employment

In undirected discussion concerning resources, the issue of opportunities for employment, or for making some money from a small business (e.g. making and selling doughnuts), was raised by 14 (39 per cent) of the returnees, primarily the older ones. Six (16 per cent) remarked on the good availability of employment in Zambia, while 2 (6 per cent) returnees mentioned opportunities for employment in Malawi, and a further 6 (16 per cent) complained of a lack of employment in Malawi. One older boy felt that there were more opportunities in Malawi for someone who had an education.

Activities

Mostly the activities mentioned (see Table 2) related either to school or to forms of commercial work. Sixteen (46 per cent) returnees reported going to school, while seven (20 per cent) reported inactivity with little to occupy them

Table 1

Frequencies of Themes regarding Availability of Resources in Malawi and Zambia

Theme	Frequency
Malawi lacks resources	17
Malawi has resources	3
Zambia lacks resources	0
Zambia has resources	12
Equal resources in each country	1

Table 2

Frequencies of Themes of Activities	
Theme	Frequency
School	16
Inactivity	7
Piecework	4
Making baskets	3
Housework	3
Bible study	1
Sleep	1

at the Social Welfare Centre: being bored or having nothing to do, 'just staying' or 'just wandering.' One girl said 'I don't spend the day well according to me', and reported going to bed early and sleeping 12 hours, and again sleeping during the afternoons.

In order to make some money, four (11 per cent) of the returnees occasionally did piecework, which was considered badly paid and hardly worth doing. For instance, a thirteen year old girl described how the work she did was carrying water, but she did not like it and she said it made her ill, so she stopped. Three (9 per cent) of the returnees made baskets to sell. Again, the money was paltry and unpredictable. Three (9 per cent) girls who were living outside the Social Welfare Centre, and stayed with relatives other than their parents, complained that they had to work too hard at home. Two (6 per cent) of them were going to school and spending their spare time doing housework for their aunts. These two girls were in fact orphans and were being looked after by their uncle's family, but were having to pay for this through work in the house. Two (6 per cent) adolescent boys also reported having to work in order to support their families, while another two (6 per cent) older boys described how they had taken part in a three-day demonstration which involved marching to the President's residence, where they demanded aid for resettlement of returnees.

Social Contacts

One-third of the interviewees mentioned a difficulty in making friends. The different themes they raised in relation to the issue of social contacts are presented in Table 3. They identified two main reasons for this difficulty. One reason was a hostility on the part of young Malawians towards young returnees. Having Zambian accents, many of the returnees are easily identified as outsiders by Malawians. One girl was told by her school peers: 'you are insulting us by speaking like a Zambian', and she was excluded from games and social contact with the Malawian children. However, she became more

Table 3

Frequencies of Themes of Social Contacts Mentioned	
Theme	Frequency
Malawians unfriendly	6
Difficulty meeting people	5
Separation from family	4
Bible study friends	2
Difficulty socializing	2
Only one friend	2
Only friends are Jehovah's Witnesses	1

accepted as time went by. A second reason for difficulty in making friends lies in their accommodation arrangements. Returnees who were not going to school had no opportunity to meet people outside the centre they were living in. As there were relatively few young people at the centre, and with a constant turn-over, many of them felt they were lacking good friends. The Jehovah's Witnesses, however, had opportunities to meet other Malawians at their Bible study groups. The support provided by their religious group seemed to be useful to the young returnees in extending their social contacts. Two girls mentioned the Jehovah's Witness meetings as beneficial to them; however, one of these also expressed dissatisfaction that all her friends were Jehovah's Witnesses.

Identity

The importance of being in one's 'homeland' seemed to be felt by a majority of the returnees, even though they had never before been in Malawi. Nine (25 per cent) of them reported having felt like a foreigner, an outsider, or a refugee in Zambia. Some were teased or excluded from games because they were refugees. One older adolescent described how, where he originally lived in Zambia, his house was burnt down, and his family was forced to move out of that village. Four (11 per cent) returnees said that their families had felt obliged to conceal their Malawian identity while they were in Zambia. One family changed their surname when they moved to Zambia, so that they would not be identified as Malawian by their name. Another family pretended to be from the Chewa tribe in Zambia, when they were really Chewas from Malawi.

Returnees were asked whether they considered themselves Malawians or Zambians, and which nationality they had felt themselves to be while in Zambia. Twenty-seven (75 per cent) reported that they felt Malawian now, only 4 (11 per cent) still felt Zambian, and 5 (14 per cent) were unsure. However, 20 returnees (55 per cent) said they had felt Malawian while in Zambia, 15 (42 per cent) had felt Zambian, and one (3 per cent) was unsure of her identity (see Table 4). These results seem to indicate a trend towards a

Table 4

Frequencies of Returnees Considering Themselves Malawian or Zambian		
	While in Zambia	While in Malawi
Malawian	20	27
Zambian	15	4
Unsure	1	5

changing identity from Zambian to Malawian, or to being unsure of one's identity. Even for those who gave clear answers about their national identity, there was sometimes an ambiguity: 'Because I'm here, I'm a Malawian, but I still feel I'm a Zambian because I was born there.' An adolescent boy called Malawi his home at first, and described Zambia as his 'second home', but when spoken to a few days later, he said that Zambia was his real home, and he felt himself to be Zambian. Another example of such confusion is illustrated in the following quote: 'Zambia is better, here is not better, but since here is home . . . , here, I don't think it's home here'.

Along with national identity, some participants may have been identifying themselves with a 'returnee' identity, rather than as Malawians or Zambians alone. Speaking about Malawians, two older adolescents said that 'returnees are cleverer than Malawians'. Further evidence that the returnees were identifying themselves as separate from Malawians can be seen in the following quotes: 'us, we are cool, but Malawians are too talkative' and 'Malawians are very dull, but us, we are clever we Zambians.' The 'us' in both these quotes was referring to the returnees. In the latter quote the 'us' was also being used to identify returnees as Zambians. These four (11 per cent) participants, at least, saw returnees as different from Malawians. Some interviewees also mentioned how Malawians perceived the returnees. Five (14 per cent) of them said that Malawians think, or used to think, that the returnees were Zambians. To some, this had a negative effect on their relationship; in one girl's words: 'most Malawians don't like Zambians because they are foreigners. People at school think I'm a Zambian, and that's why they're not friendly.' Others, however, felt that the Malawians did not dislike Zambians; one boy said: 'Malawians and Zambians, they are friends.'

Opinions of Malawi and Zambia

One issue explicitly addressed in the interviews was attitudes to Zambia and to Malawi. The resulting themes relating to Zambia are presented in Table 5, and the themes relating to Malawi are presented in Table 6. A number of the remarks about the countries were made contrasting the two. The most common response was to do with the difference in availability of resources in the two countries, as has already been described. Several other themes also emerged.

Table 5

Frequencies of Themes Relating to Zambia	
Theme	Frequency
Positive attitude	13
Wish to return to Zambia	8
School free in Zambia	4
Zambia is home	3
More developed	3
More friends	3
Negative attitude	3
Used to Zambia	2
Entertainment in Zambia	2
Cheaper	1

A positive attitude to Zambia, such as Zambia being better than Malawi, or Zambia being a nice country, was expressed by 13 (36 per cent) of the interviewees, while three (8 per cent) of them expressed a negative attitude to Zambia, saying that it was a bad country. Fifteen (42 per cent) returnees expressed a positive attitude to Malawi, saying that Malawi was better than Zambia, or a good place, while only two (6 per cent) expressed a negative attitude to Malawi. Eight (22 per cent) returnees mentioned the possibility of returning to Zambia. Two (6 per cent) of these said that if they did not receive money from the government, they would return to Zambia; the others said that they would simply prefer to move back to Zambia.

Malawi undeveloped: Four (11 per cent) of the older boys expressed the opinion that Zambia was a more developed country than Malawi, and that Malawi was

Table 6

Frequencies of Themes Relating to Malawi	
Theme	Frequency
Positive attitude	15
Homeland	14
Undeveloped/backward	6
Lack of entertainment	3
Traditional	2
Cheaper	2
Bad country	2
Expensive	1
Entertainment	1
Opportunities	1

'uncivilized' or 'undeveloped'. They felt that they had moved to a country that was more backward than Zambia. Two (6 per cent) of these boys had been living near the capital in Zambia, and one in a town. One of them put it like this: 'Most of the development in Malawi is rural development, but I prefer town life, I don't want to be a farmer. I had expected it to be more developed here, I don't like Lilongwe [the town they were living in], in Zambia there are bigger buildings.' Another said: 'we have, in Zambia, five TV stations.' (There was no television station in Malawi at the time of this study—1996). Another said: 'in Zambia it is civilized, here it is not civilized. People in Zambia do things fast, business and agriculture, here it is slow.' Two returnees who had lived in a village in Zambia said that they preferred the town life in Lilongwe.

Two (6 per cent) older girls remarked on the typical clothes worn in Malawi. One said that 'Malawians do not know how to wear clothes properly', while the other said that 'where my family stays, people laugh if they see a girl wearing trousers. I like to wear trousers!' They both felt that Malawi was backward in terms of fashion: 'people are still blind here in Malawi. They have spent too long under a dictatorship and they still think a dictatorship works. They cannot think for themselves.'

Malawi traditional: Two (6 per cent) returnees mentioned that Malawi was traditional in its outlook. One remarked that children who grew up in towns want to be in towns again, that it is difficult for them to go to villages, where the way of life is more traditional: 'with African doctors practising witchcraft, and no hospitals'.

Entertainment: Three (8 per cent) returnees mentioned there being more entertainment in Zambia and a lack of entertainment in Malawi. One had been a member of an athletics club, another had lived in the capital and had the opportunity to play football and other games, another had been on a football team in Zambia, but there is no opportunity for that in Malawi, where there is very little of such organized sport. One returnee remarked on improved opportunities for entertainment in Malawi.

Home: Fourteen (39 per cent) of the returnees mentioned that Malawi was their homeland (apart from in connection with the previous questions where the theme of homeland was mentioned by a much greater proportion). Two (6 per cent) returnees said that they were used to Zambia, and thus felt more at home there. Similarly, another said of Malawi: 'I am not getting used to it, not a bit.' Three said that Zambia was home to them. Here again, the notion of 'home' was somewhat confused. That is, saying Zambia was home did not necessarily preclude saying at another time that Malawi was home. One girl said that her home was in Zambia because she was born there but later gave her reason for being in Malawi, that it was her 'homeland', by which she meant her parents' home. Finally, one boy described feeling like a stranger in Malawi.

He said 'I am a stranger in Malawi, not in Zambia, nobody knows me here, in Zambia many friends have known me since I was born.'

The following quote from a ten year old girl incorporates several of the themes from this section: 'People in Malawi are too jealous because they don't want to see a person living in a comfortable place. When you have found money, they [Malawians] don't feel good. When we were living in Zambia we had a lot of things. We were not suffering. Zambian people are very good people. When you tell them your problems they understand, they don't want to see you suffering. Also, food wasn't difficult. In Zambia we were living well, eating every day, so I want to go back to Zambia. In Zambia we were eating meat, here we only eat meat at the end of the month'.

The Future

One of the items we added to the 'rolling interview' process simply invited returnees to describe any thoughts they had about the future. The respondents to this item were primarily older returnees and the themes emergent from their comments are presented in Table 7. Of the 23 returnees who responded to this question, six (26 per cent) had plans to return to Zambia, three (12 per cent) were planning some sort of business venture, and three (12 per cent) said that they were dependent on the government giving them money in order for them to be able to do anything constructive. Three (12 per cent) were hopeful of some positive change in their circumstances and another three were generally worried about what would happen to them in the future.

General Discussion

Young refugee returnees were studied, using a semi-structured interview methodology and qualitative analysis, to explore the hypothesis that these

Table 7

Frequencies of Themes Relating to the Future

Theme	Frequency
Will return to Zambia	6
Worries about future	3
Dependent on government	3
Planning business	3
Hopeful of change	3
Will not return to Zambia	1
Hopeful of money	1
Uncertain future	1
Hopeless about future	1
School then job	1

refugees would experience acculturative stress and ambiguity regarding self and national identity. Our findings have provided some support for this hypothesis. They also shed light on aspects of Dona and Berry's re-acculturation model, and on the importance of vicarious learning for the social constructivist perspective.

Ager (1996:168) argues that we should 'move away from a simple "balance-sheet" approach to child development (i.e. do protective influences outweigh stressors) to a more constructivist approach, where the key task facing children is to make sense of the world around them.' He cites research into adherence to religious or political ideology (Kanaaneh and Netland 1992; Kinzie and Sack 1991; Punamäki 1990), psychological consequences of conflict in Palestine (Punamäki 1990), and children growing up in apartheid South Africa (Dawes and Donald 1994) which provide support for the thesis that the *meaning attributed to a stressful experience* can determine its impact on the individual. The process of socialization is central to understanding the effects of stressors on the adjustment of young people. The qualitative data of the present study gives some important insights into how young refugees, 'returning' to a country which they had never before seen, construct an understanding of their situation.

The theme of Malawi as a homeland arose repeatedly during the interviews, in the context of the reasons for the move to Malawi, reasons for being glad to have come to Malawi, and for having wished to come, and appears to play a central part in the interviewees' understanding of their move. However, one of the striking findings that emerged from our data was the contradiction between most of the participants saying that they were glad to have come to Malawi, and that Malawi was a better country; while expressing dissatisfaction with Malawi, either in terms of a lack of resources, or unfriendliness, or backwardness, or a wish to return to Zambia.

A possible interpretation may lie in a representation of the homeland communicated to children by their parents during exile. Majodina (1995) proposed that the initial culture shock of leaving the country of origin forces a distorted perception of home. Home may be idealized, and all the difficulties of exile attributed to the fact of being uprooted. Return to the homeland becomes seen as an end to all difficulties. Even though the participants in this study had neither direct experience of being uprooted from their homeland, nor previously been to it, they nonetheless appear to have formed a very positive, and perhaps idealized, impression of it. Such a perception while in exile would have developed through their vicarious experiences and identification with the values of their parents. Most reported that they had expected Malawi to be better than Zambia. These expectations were disappointed, but it may take a longer time for the strong idealized notion of homeland to change. One difficulty encountered in Zambia was feeling like an outsider. This was reported by 25 per cent of the interviewees. For them, the notion of Malawi as a homeland may have been comforting, and thus have been idealized. It may be that the positive attitude held toward Malawi is not easily surrendered, especially if it has played an important part in coping with hardship in Zambia.

Dona and Berry's (1999) model of re-acculturation seems to be applicable to the present sample of returnees. In their case, the *original acculturation process* is an experience that children may have been socialized into, growing up with a feeling of 'otherness' in the country where their parents sought refuge, and identifying with their parents idealization of 'home' in Malawi. The *re-acculturation process* requires them not only to let go of the notion of an 'ideal' home in Malawi and their 'otherness' in Zambia, but to adjust to the reality of their poorer living conditions in Malawi, and perhaps a different sense of 'otherness'; one that distinguishes them from Malawians. Such re-acculturation may be particularly difficult for young returnees who have taken from their parents, in good faith, the notion of an 'idealized home'.

Another aspect of the re-acculturation experience that may be important for Dona and Berry's model is the need to rationalize apparent contradictions, such as the returnees in this study stating that they were glad to be in Malawi, but at the same time being disappointed in it. As children they had little choice but to 'return' if that is what their parents had decided to do. If they experienced dissatisfaction with Malawi, but wished to make the most of it, an obvious reason to offer for being glad to be in Malawi, was that it is 'home'. Thus an important aspect of refugee re-acculturation, especially among young returnees who may have little personal control over their migration, may be the need to retain some sense of internal consistency (in terms of motivations, beliefs, etc.) in a transitional period characterized by uncertainty and inconsistency.

Related to their representation of the homeland, and the returnees' experience of re-acculturation, is their construction of their national identity. In Zimbabwe and Namibia, it has been found that among returnees, long struggles for self-determination and the political activities of resistance movements were instrumental in establishing a *collective identity*, which at least partially survived in the years following repatriation (Makanya 1994; Preston 1994). Due to their extended contact with others, they had formed an identity as a group of refugees, and after return to their home country, as returnees. In the case of the young returnees in the present study, many of them had known other Malawian refugees while in Zambia, and the Jehovah's Witnesses had gone to church along with other persecuted Malawian Jehovah's Witness refugees. If their identity is being constructed partly on the basis of group membership, and their living in or around the Social Welfare Centre in Lilongwe (in isolation from other young Malawians and interacting only with other returnees) then they may increasingly come to identify themselves as returnees, and as separate from Malawians. Evidence from the interview data suggests that several of them did identify themselves as returnees.

Integration of these returnees may become more difficult as they spend longer amounts of time isolated from other Malawians, whether in a foreign country or in their home country, and come to establish a collective identity as separate from Malawians. It is clear that choice of acculturation (or re-acculturation) strategy will be influenced not only by the desire of those moving from one culture to another, but also by the receptiveness of the host

culture (Berry 1997). Taking both the issues of identity and social interaction into account, a solution would be to house the returnee families separately, dispersed through the community, and for the children to go to school while also having some centre where they can meet other people who have had similar experiences, and where services to help them to adapt can be provided. Schooling may facilitate the process of socialization into Malawian society, while a centre particularly for returnees may help the children to digest and make sense of their experiences. Such an arrangement would fit well with the recommendation of the International Save the Children Alliance (ISCA 1996) that returnee children should be engaged in community based self-help that builds on local culture, realities and perceptions of child development.

Seventy-eight per cent of the young returnees said that their national identity had changed since coming to Malawi, and 10 per cent were unsure whether they were Zambian or Malawian. Those children who previously considered themselves Zambian seem to be in the process of changing their sense of identity toward feeling Malawian, or to being unsure. Such flexibility of national identity may reflect confusion, but also facilitate the process of integration into the new country. For many of the children, the experience of being an outsider did not end on return to their homeland, but, having grown up elsewhere, and in many cases, having integrated into that society, many now felt more like outsiders than before their return: 'I am a stranger in Malawi, not in Zambia, nobody knows me here, in Zambia many friends have known me since I was born.' The anguish involved in many of the returnees' attempts to establish their identity is just one aspect of acculturative stress; other aspects including the lack of resources, lack of schooling and employment opportunities, and so on. Such stressors can only be managed by a host government policy that seeks to engage with, and act on, the needs and aspirations of returnees.

While this study has provided some support for our hypothesis that young returnees would experience acculturative stress and ambiguity regarding national identity, it is important to address the generalizability and representativeness of our findings. Clearly this study was conducted in a very specific context, not just in terms of the events surrounding the Centre for Social Welfare in Lilongwe, but also in terms of the history of flight and persecution of many of the returnees' parents. It would therefore be wrong to try and generalize such specific aspects of this study to other refugee settings, which would of course have their own particular historical, geographic, economic and political circumstances. However, given the large number of mass refugee repatriations in Africa, Central America and Asia (in 1997 3.3 million refugees returned to their country of origin (Ahearn *et al.* 1999)), and the fact that many of them can be described as second-generation refugees (being born in exile), the experience of our returnees may be of value in anticipating the needs of young returnees elsewhere who have never seen their homeland. Nonetheless, our emphasis on the social constructivist approach suggests that while the themes of re-acculturation, vicarious learning and

confusion over self and national identity may be salient in other settings, the content of these processes will be determined by local history and conditions.

The negative comparisons made between Malawi and Zambia by some of the respondents, the difficulty in schooling, the concern about a lack of resources, worries about the future, and the reported hostile attitudes of Malawians to returnees, all indicate that the return to a homeland does not mean an end to the difficulties of the refugee experience. Rather, new difficulties are encountered upon return which disappoint the optimistic notion of the homeland constructed while in exile. The initial positive attitude toward the homeland may be seen as a resource to be built upon in facilitating reintegration, but it may be that without sufficient support for the transition, the return to the homeland will not be a success, either in terms of economic viability or psychological well-being and social integration. For young returnees the issues of re-acculturation and self/national identity must be addressed constructively if they are to be offered the opportunity of making a meaningful contribution to what they wish to be their 'homeland'.

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