

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Support Your Documents”: Negotiating identities in displacement narratives.

Eucabeth Ong’au-Mong’are<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Kisii University, Kisii, Kenya. Email: [eucamongare@gmail.com](mailto:eucamongare@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

Narratives have the capacity to give meaning to human experience both individually and socially. In narratives, individuals apprehend reality and use them as a means of communication. They make sense of who they are and others too as they interpret their past experiences and reflect on their future. While most recent research has focused on the challenges, settlement, and coping strategies of Southern Sudan refugees in Kenya, little attention has been given to the narrated experiences of the refugees in the host country. Of interest is how the refugees navigate their agency while evaluating events and people that they interact with. Using in-depth interviews with two Southern Sudan youth refugees (Adut and Ajang-not their real names) living in Kenya, this article examines linguistic resources employed by the narrators to portray their experiences as refugees. It explores how they understand their experiences and thereby ascribing meaning to events. The paper argues that an understanding of their perceptions about conflict and displacement is invaluable for understanding how they represent and structure happenings in their lives and how they construct individual, collective, and national identities.

**KEYWORDS:** narrative, identity, language, displacement.

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## Introduction

Kenya hosts the seventh-largest refugee population in the world, and the second-largest refugee population in Africa. By the end of January 2019, nearly 116, 172 refugees and asylum-seekers from Southern Sudan were registered on the UNHCR registration system (UNHCR, 2019). The South Sudan conflict itself is responsible for the presence of her refugees in Kenya. Out of these, approximately 14,509 live in urban areas (UNHCR, 2017). While in Kenya, the refugees move into the cities in the hope of finding a sense of community, safety, and economic independence. The displaced women, men and children have survived long and extremely dangerous experiences of displacement (Gitahi, 2015).

The experience associated with forced displacement and resettlement can continually shape and reshape refugees' identity construction (Craig, 2012). Indeed, identities are generally considered to be malleable. They are not static or permanent but rather "plastic" and can be molded and remolded to fit ongoing contingencies (Camino, 1994). Displacement narratives among Sudanese refugees in Kenya, therefore, provide an important avenue for the exploration of identity construction. The malleability of the identity of the refugees also shows how heritage is fluid process. In order to find a bearing, an identity, the refugees have to create new heritages for themselves. Based on two narratives obtained from two South Sudanese male refugees in Kenya, this paper explores how they constructed their identities and those of others as they tried to get meaning out of their experiences. I was introduced to one of the youths (Adut) by a lawyer friend who was representing him in a case where he had been accused of participating in a clan feud. He was accompanied by his friend (Ajang). Both were college students and had a good command of English so there was no language barrier between us. I asked them individual questions about life in South Sudan, how they eventually found themselves in Kenya and their experiences in the host country. I recorded their responses on a tape recorder which I later transcribed and analyzed.

## Overview

Language constructs social reality and is an important tool for communication (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Language creates representations that are not just reflections of a pre-existing reality, but rather contributes to creating that reality (Craig, 2012). Human beings perceive and understand their world through language. Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). According to Foncha (2013), people are not born with identity. Instead,

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they take up the luggage of identity as they grow up. In addition, people drop certain identities while picking up others at certain stages of their lives. Therefore, identity keeps on changing since birth till death (Foncha, 2014).

Many scholars such as Bruner (1986, 1990), Hymes (1996), Ricoeur (1990) and MacIntyre (1981) view narratives as a mode of thought, communication and apprehension of reality which is both super-aching and fundamental to human cognitive make-up. The narrative mode is based on verisimilitude rather than truth. Its value does not lie in the ability to describe reality, but rather in the capacity to give meaning to human experience (Bruner, 1986). Writing about the past is not an objective, full-proof discourse that holds an absolute truth but a process of imposing order, structure, and coherence onto the past (White, 1987). This makes narrative an interpretive, meaning-seeking, subjective and particularistic mode.

Narrative is seen as a basic sense making mechanism that helps humans to understand the world (Polkinghorne, 1991). Storytelling is a powerful tool for eliciting people's local knowledge and understandings of social phenomena. Representations may vary drastically over time, and across the circumstances within which one lives, so that a single phenomenon may produce very different stories, even from the same person (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008). Personal narratives focus on past experiences from which the teller has sufficient distance to be able to reflect on them. They reflect the teller's representations of past events and into their ways of making sense of themselves in the light of these past events (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

### **Approach and focus**

The study utilized a critical discourse analysis approach under the social constructivism view that deals with identity formation, negotiation, and maintenance. This perspective views identity as emerging in social action and interaction. Individuals continuously constitute social reality and are constituted by it in a dialectical process. Berger and Luckman (1966:3) assert that "Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product." Processes of identity are closely connected to linguistic and communicative processes. If the self is not seen as pre-existing in social interaction, but as constituted through it, and if identities are bound to social contexts, then language has an extraordinarily important role in this constitution, since it is at the center of most of the social practices in which human beings are engaged (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). Identity is, therefore, a process, not an entity, something

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that does not belong to individuals but rather emerges in interaction and within concrete social practices and is achieved through discursive and communicative work (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1970).

According to Bamberg (2011), identity entails a shift away from viewing a person as self (contained and having identity and generating his/her individuality and character as a personal identity project) towards focusing instead on the processes in which identity is done or made as constructed in discursive activities. Identity can therefore be seen as both reflected and constituted in discourse actively, ongoingly and dynamically. Fairclough (2003) asserts that identity is construed with potential for construction.

Within Critical Discourse Analysis, identity is frequently analyzed as constituted in text within semantic, grammatical, lexical and phonological relations at the representation and expressive levels. The representation level is to do with the relationship between text and the reader or conversational participants. The expressive dimension reveals subjects' ideologies and attitudes (Fairclough 1989, 2003). The expressive dimension is characterized as 'style' or way of incorporating both social and personal identity (Fairclough, 2003). However, there is a dialectical relationship between discourse as representation and style/identification by which discourses are inculcated in identities in a more agentive ongoing process of identification. In scrutinizing how discursive forms provide access to general membership categories such as age, gender, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation-states, and regional territories, Bamberg et.al. (2011) suggested three dimensions for exploration:

- i) Agency and control in which agents put themselves in the position of agentive self-constructor. Kopytowska (2012) explains that choices at the level of lexis, grammar and metaphorical conceptualizations may result in high or low agency with implications for the degree of empowerment in the discursive space. Low agency is central to the construal of a victim status or deemphasizing responsibility for one's actions. Conversely, high agency entails a sense of control and can be used in the discursive construction of a hero.
- ii) Difference and sameness between me and others whereby the speaker sets boundaries separating him/herself from others so that the group belongings and individual identities become visible. Discursive choices linked to self-differentiation and self-integration position the subject in relation to others who are being referred to or talked to (Kopytowska, 2012). The in-group versus out-group representation becomes especially important in the situation of conflict in its

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various dimensions like the political, ethnic, cultural, and religious among others or in the representation of immigration (Hart, 2010). Van Dijk (1998) captures its dynamics in what he calls the ideological square which is set to present 'us' in a favorable light and 'them' unfavorably. At the same time, it emphasizes 'our' good properties/actions, while highlighting 'their' bad properties/actions. This has an important role in the construction of identity through the evocation of a set of shared values and through establishing an inclusive subject 'we', and the creation of an enemy.

- iii) Constancy and change which reflects the ideology in the narratives of the speakers through their life courses.

This paper focuses on dimensions (i) and (ii): agency and control; difference and sameness between 'me' and 'others' because they were adequately displayed in the narratives obtained from the in-depth interviews.

### **Agency and control**

In this section, pronominal choices were explored because it has been argued that pronominal usage and switching by narrators are strategies that encode agency. Pronouns are words that are used in place of nouns. Pronouns can be used inclusively (I, our, us, we, etc.) or exclusively (they, their, them, he, she, it, you, your etc.). The speaker and other participants are positioned as allies or in-group members with the him/her, thus assuming shared knowledge, beliefs and values, or how the audience and other participants are marginalized as 'outsiders' with different beliefs and agendas. Pronouns are central to the way individuals and groups are named and so are always political in the way they inscribe power relations.

The use of pronouns point to agency that is revealed by analysing how pronouns are used to show the position of the speaker. Linguists have discovered the importance of pronouns in connecting language and specific users in specific contexts (De Fina et. al. 2006). This importance has been stressed by researchers who say that pronouns not only reveal the identity of the speakers clearly but reveals in an indirect way their social identity (Ochs, 1993). Since pronouns are crucial indicators of group participation that can create inside and outside groups, (us versus them), its importance in identifying social inclusion or exclusion is clear (Leudar et.al. 2004). According to O'Connor (1994), the choice of

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pronouns is one of the strategies that reveals agency. This is a linguistic strategy that uses personal pronouns. *I*-is an indicator of personal agency while *we*- indicates general agency.

### **Refugee agency and academic experiences**

Adut constructed his academic identity by narrating about schools in South Sudan as follows:

*In Sudan, we were only taught grammar in primary school, nothing advanced. We were taught by class six drop-outs. In Kenya it was a bit better, that is in Kakuma refugee camp. We were taught comprehension and other subjects. We were taught by form four leavers who had scored grade D in the national examinations. No experienced teachers.*

In the above excerpt, Adut uses the collective pronoun *we* to construct a collective identity. This implies that he represented others in Southern Sudan schools. This tends to generalize experience to mean that it is not exclusive to him but rather a representative of other pupils in Sudan. Adut has defined who he is and the group he belongs to. The excerpt portrays the education system that Adut and others went through. Though education was a bit better in Kenya, it was however being delivered by untrained school leavers who did not perform so well in their final secondary examinations. This constructs Adut as a receiver of a sub - standard education both in Kenya and Sudan, though the situation was fairer in Kenya. It implies that he did not go through a good system of education so his academic life was deficit. He uses low agency to construct himself as a victim of a bad education system that he was not responsible for.

Adut was later sponsored to study in Kenya and assessed the high school he attended in Nairobi as follows:

*It was a lousy school. You could sneak out any time you wanted. You could walk out freely. It was a high school university. It was a business center. Provided you paid fees, no one was concerned with what you did. In the whole year, I only remained in school for two weekends, the rest of the weekends were spent in my brother's house. My brother helped me to be lousier. He could question why I was not home for the weekend. After all, I was always position one in our class.*

The school described above is portrayed as lacking clear rules and regulations on student discipline. Students could do anything they wanted, and no one was bothered. Adut uses the pronoun 'you' to involve the audience in the narrative. This is a mechanism of involving the addressee into the story-

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world, creating empathy, and presenting a reflective self. It could be a way of deflecting responsibility; meaning that given a chance, anyone could behave the same in such a school. Students in the school could be out of school without anyone caring. That is why Adut referred to it as a school university because at the university there is relatively much freedom and the lecturers do not monitor the students' movements as it happens in high school. They just teach and leave them to do what they wish to. The said school is described as a business center where the only concern for the administration is fee payment.

Adut later uses the pronoun 'I' to include himself in the category of students who took advantage of the weak school administration to sneak out. The narrator positions himself as a helpless student who was at the mercy of the school and brother for guidance. However, he creates an identity of a bright student who, even after sneaking out on almost all weekends, could still manage position one in his class. This deemphasizes his responsibility in sneaking out of the school. He narrated that his brother could even question why Adut was not home over a weekend. The school itself had so much freedom than could be resisted by students. The school and brother are therefore portrayed as entities that did not offer guidance to Adut and he was therefore left to decide what to do on his own. He constructs an identity of a critical student who knew that he was operating under a defective system, and something needed to be done. He therefore displays high agency which constructs him as a hero.

Adut explained that his life changed in high school. He said the position one that he attained did not reflect his true identity. He narrated as follows:

*This could not be me. I know the 'me' who has been studying at Kakuma. There were better students in that class who had scored 300 marks and above in their KCPE. This was impossible.*

From the above excerpt, it is evident that Adut was self-denying the changes that had taken place in his life. He did not think that he was the one performing well. He said his real 'self' was the one who was a pupil at Kakuma. He did not perform so well in his KCPE exam (he attained 297 marks out of a possible 500) and could not believe that he was now topping his class with an average A grade. He constructed himself as a student who was not capable of doing well in an environment different from his refugee one. Adut displayed low agency thus constructing himself as a victim of poor education. He did not think that this position was genuine. He remarked as follows:

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*In term one of form two, I told myself: this is not me. The exams must be easy. I have to move out of this school.*

Adut's words expressed his unbelief in his capability to perform so well in his studies to the extent of leading other students who had attained better marks in KCPE. He thought that something was wrong and singled out easy examinations as the cause of his false identity in academics. This realization constructed Adut as a keen student who wanted to achieve the best in his academic life. He thought that the results were not a true reflection of his abilities and if they were, then the education was of a low standard. He constructed himself as a pupil who was not privileged to get quality education but who was agentive in searching for superior education. He decided to transfer to another school in Nakuru (a town approximately 161 kilometers from Nairobi). Adut described the new school as follows:

*Academic life was good here. I got what I wanted. The teachers and the administration were serious. But I did not know what to complain about, whether the raw foods or the small portions. They served maize and beans every lunch hour and with my ulcers this was unbearable. If I wanted special diet I had to get a letter from a government doctor. But everything academic was fine. I was good in math but I did not do well in the exams. My cousin who was in form three led in math throughout. He gave me tips on how to perform well and I never scored below 90% in subsequent examinations.*

The above narration portrays the school as a serious one academically. This is where Adut found his academic focus. He used the pronoun 'I' to show an identity of a fulfilled student who was satisfied with his school progress. He had agentively searched for the school because he knew what he wanted. He again constructed an identity of a student brilliant enough in math though he did not do well in his exams. He had to search for answers as to why he was not performing well and take action. This is an identity of a student who did not sit back and let things happen; he was always ready to find a way out of a problem. Apart from having problems with the food served, he had found the academic environment that he had desired. Adut used the pronoun 'I' to show that he was responsible for his performance.

Adut however realized that the school was not without loopholes in its programs. He said the following:

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*The school was an academic prison. We could only go home on the third week of the holiday month. We could also wake up at 4am to an ice cold shower. But there was also a water problem in the school.*

Although the academic conditions were fair in the school, Adut, in his appraisal, thought that it was rather extreme. He used the collective pronoun 'we' to show the challenges faced by all learners in that school. They spent half of their holidays in school, and this did not amuse him. He uses an 'academic prison' as a metaphorical expression to show the state of the school. There was not much time spent at their homes. Periodic water problems gave the students some discomfort too. However, as an agentic student, he didn't allow the challenges in the school to dim his vision. He worked hard and as he narrated, he attained a grade A-of 73 points in his final secondary examination. This gained him entry into a local university where he pursued an electrical engineering course successfully. He pointed out that he related well with fellow students at the university because according to him, they were not ignorant of issues like conflict in other countries and were quite accommodative.

Adut said that there was a time he was implicated in a clan feud and arrested while in college and taken to the cells. He narrated his experience as follows:

*The room was very small with lots of mosquitos. I had a feeling that I was better than other inmates. At least I had a CV. But there was a lot of harassment from the warders. The first thing they do when you are taken there is to take you to an open field and undress you totally in the name of searching you. The Kenyan police cells are small hells. I slept on the floor. They treat you as a criminal.*

In the above excerpt, Adut uses the pronoun 'I' to construct an identity of a person who was aware of his worth. Though he was locked behind bars, nonetheless he was confident that he was better than the other inmates because he had an education. Having a CV means that he was not hopeless like the other inmates. He had a good education and therefore a bright future. He considered the imprisonment as a temporary event that portrayed him as a helpless agent. The cells were clumsy, warders were cruel and the food unpalatable. However, having a good academic record gave him confidence that created high agency and portrayed him as an academic hero. He was due for his last undergraduate examination in electrical engineering.

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### **Refugee sameness–differentness with others**

The self can be defined and maintained by the construction of the other (Chen, 2009). Narrative discursive approach has identified sameness and differentness as the theme underlying identity construction (Bamberg, 2011). Sameness and differentness can be looked at from the perspective of the position of speaking subject in relation to the 'other' (what it talks about and who are being talked to). This is collectively called 'self-differentiation' and 'self-integration' (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2010) which can be categorized under racial or ethnic identity. Moreover, category attributions to characters that offer membership categories or linguistic choices for description of events, as category-bound activity indicators, show the relationship with these categories in terms of distance, where speakers mark boundaries around themselves separating the 'self' from the 'others' (Bamberg, 2011). As a result, speakers' identities and affiliations are visible in this kind of narratives. Furthermore, speakers in their interactions indicate their ethnic identity by positioning themselves either integrated or different regarding the sameness and differentness between 'self' and 'others'.

### **Refugee experiences with law enforcement agents**

Adut narrated his encounter with the police in Kenya who are law enforcement agents. Their main aim is to ensure that law and order are maintained in the country. Adut had this to say about the police:

*They are not conversant with immigration laws. They spot you, stop you any time, rough you up and demand for your identification documents. Even when you have them, they ask you to 'support' the documents. Failure to do this can easily land you in jail.*

The above example portrays a negative construction of the police as the 'other'. The 'you' in Adut's narration refers to any Sudanese, of which he is one. According to Adut, the police spot the Sudanese because of their height and skin, meaning that they are conspicuous. They are taller and darker than Kenyans and this identifies and separates them easily from others. The two groups are therefore different in terms of their identification features and character, and this gives them a different national identity. The police are exhibited as agents of harassment and intimidation who did not have a knowledge of immigration laws. Adut's construction implies that he is not like them; he is rational.

The policemen are also reported to be corrupt. The 'support' they ask for is a bribe. Adut narrated that most Sudanese reported that they had to buy their freedom with not less than 500 Kenyan shillings. Adut explained that he had just arrived in Nakuru from Nairobi one night and was walking home when the

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police confronted him. They handcuffed him and asked him who he was and where he was going. He explained after which he showed them his student identification card, but they were not interested in it. He said that he bought his freedom with 1000 Kenyan shillings. This practice by police persisted day and night but was reported to be rampant at night. The above experience portrays Adut and his fellow Sudanese as helpless and at the mercy of the police officers. They are weak agents who could not stop police harassment even when their immigration documents were valid. They exhibited low agency as they were victimized by the police. They are therefore not like the police who were exhibited as merciless agents of corruption.

Ajang narrated as follows concerning his experience with the police:

*While in Nairobi at a certain bus stop, I saw a Sudanese pregnant woman arrested by police and was asked to 'support' her passport. She could not even communicate in English nor Kiswahili. I intervened and she told me that the only money she had was bus fare to Githurai estate. The police officers told me to give them 'something'. I gave them 500 Kenyan shillings and that is when they accepted to release her.*

The police are further reflected in bad light. They don't even have mercy on pregnant women who are a vulnerable group. The woman in the above excerpt had language challenges. She could not communicate in English nor Kiswahili which are Kenya's official languages; Kiswahili additionally being the national language. It is a fellow Sudanese who saved the day, and this displays the importance of 'sameness' in contrast to 'differentness'. The police were unkind and therefore different from the Sudanese who acted in the spirit of togetherness to save themselves from the cruelty of the police. Ajang therefore constructs his identity as a good person, including other Sudanese who are not cruel as the Kenyan police.

Ajang also gave an account of another experience with the police:

*In Kitale (a town in Kenya), a Sudanese woman was knocked down by a public service vehicle and died instantly. We reported the incident to the police and even gave them the number plate of the vehicle. We made several trips to the police station and could always be told 'come tomorrow'. The officers claimed that the driver and vehicle could not be traced. We gave up going to the station after a lot of frustrations. There is no justice when going to court to report another Kenyan.*

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The narration above portrays police officers as biased when dealing with foreigners. They are portrayed as agents of frustration who did not value the life of the Sudanese woman. Ajang and his fellow Sudanese feel that they receive unfair treatment from the police. They construct an identity of a helpless people who cannot get justice with the law enforcers. The Sudanese feel that Kenyans protect each other against foreigners. They claim that a Sudanese cannot get justice in court at the expense of a Kenyan. They are therefore different from other Kenyans whom they felt were dealt with fairly. This however does not mean that other Kenyans are not treated unfairly by the police. Adut also portrayed a different image from the police; he/they were not unfair like them. The police are inhuman when dealing with the Sudanese.

Ajang again recounted the following about law enforcers in Kakuma:

*Police purport to provide security during the day but turn into criminals at night. When you tell people they don't believe you.*

The police are evaluated as unreliable security agents who turn against the people they are supposed to protect at night. Ajang confessed that he identified some but no one believed him. He had nowhere else to report so events took their course. Ajang portrays the police as wolves in sheep's skin and therefore different from them. Ajang and others are portrayed as honest but helpless agents who failed to get help from the relevant sources.

### **Refugee experiences with communities neighbouring Kakuma refugee camp**

Adut narrated that the Turkana and Borana tribes of northern Kenya attacked them regularly at the Kakuma refugee camp. He reported as follows:

*The Turkana could attack us at night and force people to produce money after they learnt that some refugees were sent money from abroad by their relatives. The security officers were few and could not repulse them. They fought the Sudanese using guns and some people were shot dead. The Sudanese only fought with spears and stones. We were vulnerable at the UN camp. The Borana youth could also attack and shoot indiscriminately demanding for money.*

The Turkana and Borana have been portrayed as being different from the Sudanese. They are enemies of the Sudanese who attacked them for monetary gain and in the process, lives were lost. They are

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therefore portrayed as cruel enemies who are different from the Sudanese that were peaceful. The two ethnic communities have been portrayed in negative light thus giving them a negative ethnic identity. Such as being labelled as thieves and murderers. The Sudanese are portrayed as peace makers in the above excerpt.

### **Refugee experiences with the business community in Kenyan urban areas**

On business matters, Ajang observed the following:

*When you buy something from the shops the price is normally exaggerated. People think we have a lot of money from UNHCR. But we dress to hide our frustrations. People accuse us of skyrocketing the house rents, but we have no choice, we must get a house to live in.*

The above example has utilized the pronouns 'you' and 'we' to represent the Sudanese. Apparently, businesspeople exploit the Sudanese because they think they have a lot of money from UNHCR. They price their wares highly. Even the costly clothes that others think they can afford are said to be outward expressions of inner frustrations. The locals accuse the Sudanese of raising the rent, but they argue that they have no option when the landlords are adamant of what they want. They depend on the Kenyan landlords for shelter. The above example portrays the Kenyan businesspeople as exploiters and Ajang constructs his identity and that of other Sudanese as exploited people who are victims of the business people's lust for money. The Sudanese are portrayed as being different from the businesspeople.

### **Refugee experiences with the public**

About the general Kenyan population, Ajang had the following to say:

*Sometimes you are trying to interact with people, and they are asking you many questions out of jealousy. At times you hear abuses in the streets or compound like 'Sudanese, stupid'. We live in perpetual fear. Kenyans are good in beating a thief and a foreigner. A Sudanese boy was beaten to death in Nakuru by some Kenyan boys. We rescued another Sudanese boy who was almost lynched.*

Kenyans are portrayed as jealous people who think that the Sudanese are funded while in Kenya. According to Ajang, they ask questions that do not make sense. Some Kenyans abuse the Sudanese without cause as is clear from the above excerpt where 'Sudanese, stupid' is mentioned. Ajang narrated

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that murder incidents made the Sudanese live in perpetual fear. This description portrays a picture of a hostile Kenyan public which is different from the Sudanese who portray themselves as peacemakers despite their engagement in clan feuds.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Identity entails speakers linguistically defining who they are and the group they belong to. Speakers use words that portray common beliefs, activities, norms, expectations, aspirations and even relationships with others. When we speak or write, we use language to display who we are and how we want people to view us (Gee, 2005). Identity therefore keeps shifting depending on context, occasion and purpose of discourse. Narrative research is interested in understanding meaning that narrators attach to events rather than whether their narratives are an accurate reflection of real events (Chase, 2011). Discursively, the refugee is constructed as a victim, helplessly displaced from a homeland, having lost a sense of belonging. One way refugees deal with changes in environment and identity is through creating narratives that resolve the conflicted past and make sense of the new present (Craig, 2012). Producing a new identity connects both to a homeland that is often now inaccessible as well as that of belonging to a diaspora or displaced people, while making a space for themselves in a new homeland (Witteborn, 2008). Consequently, the data has revealed that refugees are not simply passive recipients of labels and categories that others place on them. Many innovatively negotiate new identities and positions for themselves by using their own experiences and incorporating elements of their new home. They place themselves in terms of self-differentiation and self-integration based on their own experiences and perception of themselves. The refugees' narratives therefore are seen as both reflecting and constituting social reality.

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