

Chapter 14

Counseling Refugees

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the plight of refugees, the challenges faced, and the psychosocial impact of said challenges. It further provides practitioners with a review of coping methods utilized by refugees throughout the refugee journey in order to highlight possible protective factors practitioners may build on in the provision of mental health services. Lastly, the chapter provides an overview of current therapeutic frameworks that are culturally sensitive for counselling refugees, the challenges in the provision of mental health services, and techniques utilized by practitioners in the delivery of mental health services through evidence of research and case-based examples.

INTRODUCTION

Being a refugee is usually considered a temporary situation (El-Sharaawi, 2015). Yet, due to political and environmental situations that impact the flow of migration around the world, being or living as a refugee is met with persistent instability and the consistent need to re-conceptualize a situation of exile and transit in an environment that places little within the direct control of refugees themselves. This also includes a suspension of future plans for education, financial security and building a family with no way of knowing when a durable solution will be reached. Currently, the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) has recorded the highest amount of displaced persons across the world since World War II (UNHCR, 2016). The rise of displaced persons and persons seeking asylum across the world has led to increased efforts to alleviate this growing crisis. However, although the crisis of refugees is not new, knowledge is still emerging on evidence based therapeutic frameworks and techniques in providing mental health and even social work services to this group of persons.

This chapter aims to provide a background understanding for mental health practitioners on the plight of refugees, the challenges faced and the psychosocial impact of said challenges. It further aims to provide practitioners with a review of coping methods utilized by refugees throughout the refugee journey in order to highlight possible protective factors practitioners may build on in the provision of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8544-3.ch014

mental health services. Lastly, the chapter provides an overview of current therapeutic frameworks that are culturally sensitive for counselling refugees, the challenges in provision of mental health services and implications for practice.

BACKGROUND

To date, there are 67.75 million displaced persons in the world, the largest number since the end of World War II (UNHCR, 2018a). A majority of this number is made up of refugees. Refugees are one of the biggest crises amongst modern day issues. Each day, masses of individuals and families seeking asylum are forced to leave their homes in search for safety. Some make a long journey on foot or are smuggled into vehicles across country borders. Others even brave the journey by sea in the hopes of landing on more welcoming shores. Many risk their lives and are separated from family and friends in the process.

The term “asylum seeker” and “refugee”, although used interchangeably, have different operational definitions. An asylum seeker is an individual who is seeking international protection but whose claim has not been confirmed by the UNHCR (Phillips, 2011). For example, an individual escaping armed conflict in Myanmar may cross the border into Thailand or Malaysia seeking asylum and protection, however is not referred to as a refugee until he or she has completed a refugee status determination process by the UNHCR. On the other hand a refugee as defined by the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, is a person who

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to, or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country...or is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR, 2010, p14).

Examples of these reasons include evidence of discrimination and violence towards ethnic minorities, LGBT community or even arrest and detention of individuals who voice opinions opposing that of the government in their home country. The convention also states that refugees should at the minimum be accorded the same rights given to foreign nationals living legally in a country (Arshad, 2005). However, in implementation, the likelihood that refugees have access to the same rights as foreign nationals is not only dependent on the migrant laws of a country but also each country’s adherence to international humanitarian treaties and declarations.

The experiences that comprise the asylum seeker and refugee journey can be complex to understand. This journey involves the forceful uprooting of an individual or group of persons from their home country to begin an uncertain journey in the search for safety (Vogel, 2016). The journey of a refugee often involves a lack of certainty of a foreseeable future for a protracted period of time. Refugees can live for several years without recognized documentation, stable financial income and the ability to plan a secure future.

The refugee journey has been conceptualized by researchers in three stages; preflight, flight or asylum and resettlement (Gonslaves, 1992). Preflight is defined as the stage where refugees or asylum seekers are still living in their home country (Wessels, 2014). The flight period, on the other hand, is characterized by a physical relocation to a country of asylum where refugees await a long term solution (Bhugra & Jones, 2001; Wessels, 2014). Lastly, resettlement is the stage where refugees are relocated to a host country where they will be able to live in the long term (Wessels, 2014). However, resettlement is not

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