Working effectively with asylum seekers and people from refugee backgrounds

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Overview

- Global definition of refugees and asylum seekers
- Australia’s Humanitarian and asylum seeker policy
- The traumatic experiences of people who have fled conflict and oppressive regimes
- Impact of traumatic experiences on individuals, families and communities
- Psychological impact of detention and prolonged uncertainty associated with seeking asylum
- Principles of good working relationships with clients who have experienced torture and trauma
- Maintaining worker resilience and reflective practice
According to the 1951 Convention (the Refugee Convention), a refugee is a person who left their country of their nationality because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of:

- Race
- Religion
- Nationality
- Membership of a particular social group or political opinion.
Often live outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable to return of his/her country because of fear for persecution and often seek protection (Tipping, 2010 and Abur, 2012).

They cannot return unless the situation that forced them to leave improves. In cases where there are protracted conflict situations this can be many years or not at all.
An asylum seeker is a person who is seeking protection as a refugee and is still waiting for their claim to be assessed.

The Refugee Status Determination process is conducted differently in various countries but is based on UNHCR and international treaty guidelines.
A migrant is a person who makes a conscious choice to leave their country to seek a better life elsewhere.

They usually make an informed choice about their new home, research employment opportunities and study the language.

They can plan their travel, take their belongings with them and say goodbye to the important people in their lives.

They are free to return home at any time if they get homesick or if they wish to visit family members and friends left behind.
How do refugees leave their homes?

- Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their homes, usually without the time and opportunity to pack their belongings, or farewell loved ones.

- Most often, they leave their homes secretly for fear of being identified by conflict groups.
People who have fled wars and oppressive regimes have usually experienced significant trauma.

Trauma is experienced differently by different people.

The refugee experience is often described as traumatic because of: persecution, displacement, loss, grief and forced separation from family, home and belongings (Abur, 2012 and Refugee Council of Australia, 2010).
How do refugees come to Australia?

- Refugees usually arrive in Australia through the offshore humanitarian programme or as onshore asylum seekers.

- The claims of asylum seekers need to be processed in order to decide whether they qualify for refugee status.

- The humanitarian programme is for people subject to persecution in their home country and in need of resettlement.
The Australian Government’s humanitarian programme

- Since World War II ended in 1945, Australia has accepted more than 700,000 refugees and people in humanitarian need.

- Many people from refugee backgrounds have access to government funded settlement support services.

- There are limited support services for asylum seekers in community detention. These limited services are provided by contracted agencies including the Australian Red Cross.
The resettlement period is a difficult time for new arrivals in many ways.

Adjusting to a new culture, language and power dynamic within the family and community is often a challenge for families and individuals.

Social issues include financial hardship, family breakdown, intergenerational conflict, social isolation, cultural shock, homesickness, unemployment and discrimination (Abur, 2012).
Guilt and Stress: due to lack of communication with families overseas, people concerned about their family members’ whereabouts and their wellbeing.

Intergenerational conflict: parents having concerns over integrating their children’s understanding of their culture as well as the Australian culture.

Loss of cultural identity: the younger generation in particular losing contact with their parents’ identity, wanting to be more connected to Australian society.
Social isolation: due to language/cultural barriers, lack of services to accommodate their needs and lack of extended family, limited social capital.

Housing: difficulty accessing public or private accommodation due to large families, low income, no rental history and discrimination in the private rental market.
Asylum Seekers

- Living in limbo – waiting to access the refugee status determination process, most are not able to work or access Government funded services.

- Discrimination or dehumanising language.

- The Asylum Seekers’ Assistance Scheme provides limited financial assistance to some asylum seekers experiencing financial hardship, but not all asylum seekers can access this support.
They are usually ineligible for Centrelink benefits and do not have access to Medicare.

Asylum seekers who are not found to meet the legal definition of a refugee or engage Australia’s complementary protection obligations are required to leave Australia.

They are likely to be preoccupied with the fear of being returned home and have little psychological space for processing the past.

Risk of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder compared to refugees with permanent protection visas.
Impact of Trauma

- Previous and/or ongoing trauma
- Different stages of trauma recovery process – cognitive, emotional and physical
- Fear, guilt, shame and loss of control
- Normal response to an abnormal situation
- Inability to plan for the future
- Flashbacks, nightmares and poor sleep hygiene, anxiety, depression, hyper-vigilance, irritability, disconnection and emotional numbness, social withdrawal, mistrust, adrenaline junkie/risk averse
Key issues of concern for refugees

- Financial hardship
- Finding employment and/or being under-employed
- Finding secure accommodation
- Engaging in education and learning English
- Balancing maintenance of cultural practices with integration into Australian culture
- Lack of social capital
- Experiences of discrimination and racism
- Tracing friends and family still in danger
- Supporting friends and family overseas through remittances or sponsorship
Social Capital

- Identify existing support mechanisms
- Collectivist cultures vs individualist cultures
- Strengthen engagement with families, carers and communities
- Create partnerships with resettlement and other services
- Recognise the warning signs of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout
Four recovery Goals

- Restore sense of safety and control
- Restore attachment and connections to others
- Restore meaning, purpose and a sense of future
- Restore dignity and value

Source—School’s in for Refugees, Foundation House
Cultural competence and skill development

- Respond sensitively to disclosures and requests for support
- Assist students’ to understand roles, expectations and routines
- Adapt teaching strategies to provide intensive support
- Recognise impact of students’ commitments and responsibilities on ability to engage in school (eg lateness / absences)
- Provide opportunities to regain sense of hope, control and self-worth
- Strengths-based approach to educational and resettlement challenges
Good working relationships with clients who have experienced torture and trauma

- Listen and respond respectfully
- Behave sensitively when clarifying or asking for further information related to their history.
- If the client is angry or depressed, validate the client’s feelings by acknowledging their distress, for example: “I acknowledge/can hear you are feeling angry/upset.”
- Acknowledge their strengths, provide hope and never dehumanise them because of their status.
How to maintain resilience and reflective practice?

- Value differences in culture and language.
- Be aware that a person is seeking your support.
- Be ready to learn from them.
- Seek support from skilled people when necessary.
- Recognise the warning signs of vicarious trauma.
- Be aware of your own cultural norms and worldview and how this influences your work.
- Have an open mind and global view when working with different groups.
Questions and Discussion
References

- Tipping, S. 2010. Meaningful Being: The experiences of Young Sudanese–Australians, PhD research, University of Melbourne.
- Refugee Council of Australia, (2010) A Bridge to a New Culture Promoting the participation of refugees in sporting activities, abridged report, NSW.