

In treatment experiences of the impact of trauma and resettlement on adolescent identity formation and adult well-being



1

Tindaro Fallo
Migrant Resource Centre
Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy
Torture Trauma Assessment & Counselling Service

MRC IHSS TEAM



ON ARRIVAL



- Young refugees often report experiences of trauma, anxiety and depression.
- Most show resilience and are able to suppress anxieties
- They have escaped from the conflict or camps but also into wellness itself.
- Early assessments aren't likely to identify psychological distress easily.

TRAUMA IN YOUNG REFUGEES

- Trauma affects children and adolescents differently to adults.
- Young people are quick to learn from trauma and incorporate it into their personality and behaviour.
- Adversity and in particular acculturation stress is likely to bring out behaviours influenced by trauma.
- A balanced and less stressful acculturation can help regulate behaviour that would otherwise be influenced by trauma.

COMMON EXPRESSIONS OF TRAUMA

- Loss of sense of invulnerability
- Loss of sense of capacity
- Mistrust
- Self doubt
- Inferiority
- Difficulty with identity development
- Personality organised around revenge and resentment
- Attraction to violent behaviour
- Accepting a defeated and inferior position in life
- Rule breaking behaviour
- Substance abuse



SETTLEMENT AND ADVERSITY

The psychological consequences of trauma often manifest when refugees experience some form of adversity and acculturation stress.

- Rejection
- Racism
- Discrimination
- Experiences of drug/alcohol use
- Violence
- Homelessness
- Family problems
- Language and schooling difficulties



Acculturation to the host culture may involve two independent processes (Berry, 1994).

A balanced acculturation leads to a healthy bi-cultural identity.

	Identification with Host Society	
Identification with own Ethnicity	Secure attachment	Insecure underdeveloped attachment
Strong	Integrated / Bi-cultural identity	Separated identity
Weak	Assimilated identity	Marginalised Identity

ACCULTURATION



- A balanced acculturation is the process through which a healthy bicultural identity is achieved.
- It is essential to recovery from trauma and for reaching ones full potential.
- It involves strong identification with culture of origin and a secure attachment to the host culture.
- The traumatised young refugee can't do this alone. Trauma can impair the learning and exploration process.
- Adolescent refugees need help to set the pace of cultural adjustment.

ACCULTURATION STRESS AND IDENTITY FORMATION

- For the young refugee normal development occurs in an unexpected resettlement context.
- Young refugees have to merge ethnic identity and refugee identity with host culture identity.
- Young refugees can struggle to resolve the differences between their culture of origin and the dominant culture.
- Adolescent refugees exploring their identity from a position of low social status can experience feelings of inferiority, insecurity and resentment.
- They can struggle to gain a sense of belonging and look to groups with shared values and experiences for their identity.

WHEN YOUNG REFUGEES PRESENT AS ADULTS

Common issues:

- Offences involving violence
- Homelessness
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Relationship issues

What went wrong?

Did we miss or underestimate their history of trauma?



WHAT WENT “WRONG”?

- *“I don’t like it when people don’t respect me”*
- *”I don’t like going out. It always ends up in a fight”*
- *“ I don’t know where my life is going”*
- *“I feel I have to change my name and start afresh”*
- *“I don’t feel I belong anywhere or with anyone”*
- *“I can’t stand my community, all they do is talk about war and I hate it”.*
- *“I don’t get on with my father he doesn’t like the way I dress or my friends; he expects too much from me.*
- *”I did everything right, I have everything I need but I am not happy, I drink a lot.”*

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WENT “WRONG”

Explore:

- The broad resettlement factors
- How the person felt he/she fitted in to one or other cultural group.
- How well the young refugee understands the host culture and their own cultural heritage.



I COME NOT WITH MY OWN STRENGTHS BUT BRING WITH ME GIFTS, TALENTS AND STRENGTHS OF MY FAMILY, TRIBE AND ANCESTORS”

MAORI PROVERB

- Refugees have strength they can draw on from their own culture. This strength can protect against mental illness.
- Unfortunately, young refugees don't always have access to their own cultural heritage.
- They may have never lived in their own country. They may have missed out on educational and cultural opportunities to examine and explore their own cultural heritage.
- Their heritage may have been a stigma and the reason for their flight.

SITES FOR POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS

- Much of the acculturative struggle unfolds in schools, shopping centres, Hindley St. and even public transport.
- Acculturation stress often unfolds in schools because of cultural misunderstandings of behaviour and the absence of cultural input from their own community.



THE SUCCESS OF REFUGEE SETTLEMENT RESTS ON THE OFFER OF HOSPITALITY.

- Community education encouraging an understanding of the cultural needs of refugees
- Young refugees need help to better understand **both** their culture and the host culture. Only then choose can they what they are comfortable identifying with from each culture
- Initiatives in schools to promote a deeper understanding and connection both **within** and **between** different cultural groups in our community.
- Social activities encouraging mutual respect and open dialogue between host culture & young refugees will have a positive impact on acculturation.



CONCLUSION

- Healthy acculturation is as much about young refugees understanding their own culture as it is about them understanding the host culture.
- Acculturation difficulties can result in social problems with considerable costs to the community.
- Recognising the relationship between trauma, acculturation stress and bi-cultural identity, is essential to understanding what young refugees need for emotional well-being in adulthood.