COMMUNITY-BASED, SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACHES TO PROMOTING REFUGEE MENTAL HEALTH: THE REFUGEE WELL-BEING PROJECT

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August 31, 2011
Health Dimensions of Dislocation

- Pre-flight
- Flight and Separation
- Asylum
- Resettlement
## Health Dimensions of Dislocation: Resettlement

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Possible Approaches to Mental Health

- Traditional healing practices
- Individual therapy
- Family therapy
- Group therapy
- Psychiatry
- Community-based universal approaches
- School-based screening & services
Limitations of Individual Interventions

- Contribution of post-migration stressors to psychological distress
- Ineffectiveness of medication alone
- Access
- Cultural relevance
- Victim-blaming
Challenge

How can we maintain a balance between addressing the immediate needs of refugees AND building on refugees’ strengths to create long-term, sustainable change?
Refugee Well-being Project

Project Goals:

1. To improve refugees’ access to community resources
2. To provide learning opportunities for refugees
3. To create a forum for refugees and Americans to learn from each other, share ideas and cultures, and change the way they see the world and their ability to engage in collective action
4. To promote and preserve refugees’ valued social roles
5. To improve intergenerational respect and communication
6. To enhance refugees’ empowerment and integration in their communities
7. To improve communities’ responsiveness to refugees
Refugee Well-being Project

Project Components

1. **Education** component: Learning Circles

2. **Advocacy** component to mobilize resources based on needs/wants of refugee families (e.g., housing, employment, healthcare, school issues for children)
Risk Factors for Refugee PTSD and Depression

- Trauma
  - Exposure to war-related violence
  - Loss of loved ones
  - Torture

- Exile-Related Stressors
  - Separation from family & friends
  - Loss of social roles
  - Loss of environmental mastery
  - Poverty
  - Discrimination
  - Language differences
  - Loss of employment
  - Intergenerational conflict

Community-Based Mental Health Intervention

- Learning Circles
- Advocacy

Outcomes

- Decreased PTSD Symptoms
- Decreased Depression Symptoms
- Decreased Psychological Distress
- Increased Quality of Life

Empowerment

Intrapersonal/Individual

- English proficiency
- Environmental mastery
- Techniques for managing & reducing stress

Interpersonal/Microsystem

- Social support
- Valued social roles & activities
- Intergenerational communication & understanding

Exosystem/Macrosystem

- Access to resources, including additional mental health services if necessary
- Reduction of unfair treatment & inequalities
- Community integration
Overview of Learning Circles

- Modeled after Learning Circles at Jane Addams School for Democracy in Minneapolis
- Meet two hours, twice a week for six months
- Approximately equal numbers of refugee participants and students
- Two components, based on two types of learning:
  - Emancipatory Learning – Cultural exchange
  - Instrumental Learning – One-on-one learning
Learning Circles: Cultural Exchange
Learning Circles: One-on-One Learning
Learning Circles: Special Supports

Dinner

Transportation

Child Care
Overview of Advocacy Component

- Each student matched with one or two refugee partners
- Students spend at least two to four hours each week on advocacy for five months
- Four phases of advocacy: 1) assessment, 2) implementation, 3) monitoring, and 4) secondary implementation
- Explicit focus on securing social justice and accessing rights & benefits
- Advocacy goals determined by refugee family
- Focus on transferring advocacy skills to family by end of project
Participants

Year 1: 2000-2001 (Michigan)
- 27 undergraduate students; 28 Hmong refugee adults (Goodkind, Hang & Yang, 2004; Goodkind, 2005; 2006)

Year 2: 2006-2007
- 20 undergraduate students; 25 African refugees (19 children, 6 adults) from Liberia and Burundi

Year 3: 2007-2008
- 18 undergraduate students; 30 African refugees (16 children, 12 adults) from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda

Year 4: 2008-2009
- 17 undergraduate students; 25 African refugees (10 children, 18 adults) from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Eritrea

Year 5: 2009-2010
- 26 undergraduate students; 38 Iraqi refugees (11 children, 27 adults)
Student Training/Supervision

- Two-semester commitment for students
- Undergraduate course credit (8 credits)
- 48 hours of manualized training over 12 weeks
- Training includes substantive knowledge and practical skills
- Weekly supervision in groups of 4-6 students replaces training once advocacy and learning circles begin
Summary of Findings – Hmong and African Adults

1. Increased English proficiency over time
2. Increased access to resources over time
3. Increased social support over time
4. Increased quality of life over time
5. Increased enculturation over time
6. Increased psychological well-being over time

- Hypothesis supported for Hmong and Africans – Significant change
- Hypothesis supported for Hmong but not Africans
- Hypothesis supported for Africans – not tested with Hmong
Summary of Findings – African Children

1. Increased English proficiency over time
2. Increased internal resiliency (goals & aspirations and internal problem solving) over time
3. Increased quality of life over time
4. Increased enculturation over time
5. Increased psychological well-being over time

- Hypothesis supported – Significant change
- Hypothesis not supported – Non-significant change
Qualitative Themes

- Improved mental health & well-being
- Increased environmental mastery/self-sufficiency
- Increased self-confidence
- Increased social support, safety & trust
- Breaking down race barriers and stereotypes
- Participants’ knowledge and experience valued
- Increased community participation/integration
- Increased focus on future goals
- Positive impact on children
- Learning about American people/culture and diversity in meaning of “American”
For a long time in my life, I lived like a refugee. This project is really good in terms of helping me with mental health. If I was just by myself, with just the family, I would be thinking about the terrible things that happened in the past. But when I come from work and get to meet with him [student advocate] and the other people; I am really engaged in the present, and I don’t dwell on the horrible things that happened in the past.

- African man, age 42
The lady here [referring to his wife], she said at some point she was really suffering from depression and she even attempted suicide and when she wrote the sentence in Arabic [on one of the research interviews] and after one or two hours, one of the program facilitators or one of the program staff came to her house, talked to her, met with her many times or several times, helped her to address her conditions with the physicians.

- Iraqi man, age 47
She [advocate] took me to the university to see the classes. I learned too much there because I saw the classes and the library, everything. She told me there's 700 students in this class and there's 12 students in this class. We went to the first class to ask about my application and my scores. She helped me a lot. I was scared from UNM. I wanted to go to the CNM, but she told me no, there is nothing hard and take it easy. You can go to UNM. She helped me a lot. She brought for me form about the university, to supply for me, like how it's - the system there. Without her, I can't go to the university.

- Iraqi woman, Age 18
Increased Self-Confidence

So then now I have the confidence to start learning the citizenship [U.S. citizenship exam]. And then I thought well maybe if I could get a little bit down I could get more. So then now I’m more of helping myself, where I could understand that I could get more and more.

- Hmong woman, age 36
Increased Safety & Trust

Definitely we learn a lot during this program. We learn about the U.S. cultures and traditions and believe they learned the same things about our culture. I believe we can say that this program helped us to build trust all together. We feel we are much, much more comfortable now when they approach us and we feel we are no longer lost.

- Iraqi woman, Age 55
Breaking Down Race Barriers

When I was leaving Africa some of our friends were like, ‘Well, you’re going to a foreign country, you’re going to live in your house, nobody is going to come say hello, there are no black people there from Africa, you’ll live all by yourself.’ …As refugees, we receive so much food, and clothing, and shoes, but then would these white people, are they going to accept food and water from us? And so you guys came in and you were eating with us and hanging out with us and we were completely in shock and we were so amazed that a whole group of white people would come to our house, and our friends find it difficult to believe that such a thing happened. A lot of people are really shocked that this has happened. So our friends in Tanzania are asking, ‘So the American people, do they really come up and say hello to you, do they greet you and hang out with you?’ And we say, ‘Oh yeah, they do! And they’re our friends, and we hang out,’ and they’re like, ‘Well then America is a good country.’

- African woman, age 41
Cultural Identity Recognized

I think that this project is good for everybody. And I think that it teaches other students to know what Hmong people look like, and where they’re from and what they are, that we are different from Vietnamese and other people – Chinese, and other people. Because we look alike and I think that we don’t have a country of our own and then people don’t know the Hmong people that much so we’re sort of like under everybody, you know? But it’s good that we have this program where they know who we are and then just so that they don’t think that only Vietnamese people are out there or only Chinese people are out there. Just so that they know that there are many different kinds of Asian people – and that we are the Hmong people, and it’s good that we have this program.

- Hmong man, age 64
Community Participation

This program was important for me because we needed to be part of this society, so we thought it was important to be part of it, to learn more about the customs and learn more about being part of this state.

- African man, age 33
Qualitative Themes – Impact on Students

- Increased understanding of refugees’ challenges and resiliency
- Cultural exchange
  - Cultural awareness
  - Value/validation of African cultures/experience
  - Re-examination of values
  - Breaking down race barriers and stereotypes
- Increased critical consciousness
  - Inequities in social systems/need for social change
  - Society’s roles/responsibilities
  - Recognition of privilege
- Increased self-confidence and initiative
- Positive impact on future goals
Other Outcomes

- CLEAR – Coalition for Legal Education and Advocacy for Refugees
- Education of schools about ROTC
- Coordination with refugee resettlement programs in NM
- Replication with torture survivors (refugees and asylum seekers) in Chicago
- Association of Burundian Americans in NM
- Multiethnic advisory council planning multiethnic model and implementation
Acknowledgements

RWP has been funded by NIMH (F31 MH12789), UNM School of Medicine Research Allocation Committee, the UNM Department of Pediatrics Research Committee, UNM Signature Program in Child Health Research, Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement Program, St. Joseph Community Health Services, New Mexico Department of Health Office of School & Adolescent Health, and Con Alma Foundation, and involves partnership with the UNM Departments of Psychology, Anthropology, Africana Studies, and Research Service Learning Program. We wish to acknowledge the contributions of:

- Refugee families and UNM undergraduate student participants
- Co-investigators & Co-teachers: Ann Githinji, Natalie Roche, Chao Sio, & Kathryn Vadnais
- Research Assistants/Apprentices: Brandon Baca, Michaela Brown, Julissa de la Torre, Tricia Gunther, Elisa Gutierrez, Madelyn Ikeda, Safer Lalani, Rosalinda Olivas, & Danielle Parker
- Learning Circle Volunteers: Doris Benjamin, Aimee Bustos, Carmen Gonzalez, Katrice Grant, Dee Ivy, Irene Mwamikazi, Ngerina Nyankundwakazi, Janet Sairs, Babylove Tieh, Juliana Vadnais, Kim Vadnais, & Layla Wall
- Facilitators, Interpreters & Interviewers: Rose Afandi, Sam Ali, Azhar Al-Jarry, Suha Amer, Corinna Hansen, Panfoua Hang, Amelia Hays, Adeline Kisanga, Christy Mello, Jessica Meyer, Cyntia Mfurakazi, Eric Ndaheba, Martin Ndayisenga, Patrik Nkouaga, Liana Serna, Angela Speakman, Mai Yang, Sanaa Yaqoob