

Adolescent and Young Refugee Perspectives on Psychosocial Well-being

January 2007

Jaya Earnest, Tambri Housen and Sue Gillieatt



<http://i2.photobucket.com>



<http://www.ursw.org/evt/festival/highlights.cfm>



<http://www.smuhsd.k12.ca.us/smhsls/library/album.htm>

Centre for International Health

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the support of Terry Dunn, Lesley Forgione, Kath Moore and Chris O'Brien in taking time in their busy schedules to provide assistance and much-appreciated support during the in-field research process.

We would especially like to thank Ms. Jane Fellman, master's student at the Centre for International Health for assistance with the literature review.

Our special thanks to the refugee adolescents who took part focus group discussions and those who volunteered their time to take part in either key informant interviews or to provide the data for the research project. Without their support and participation, such a project would not have been possible.

Jaya Earnest, Tambri Housen & Sue Gillieatt
Centre for International Health
Curtin University of Technology

Copyright © 2006, Centre for International Health, Curtin University of Technology. All rights reserved.

ISBN 1 74067 519 3

For further information, please contact:

Dr Jaya Earnest

J.Earnest@curtin.edu.au

The Centre for International Health

Curtin University of Technology

GPO Box U1987, Perth 6854

Western Australia

Telephone: +61 8 9266 4151

Facsimile: +61 8 9266 2608

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's migration patterns have shifted in ways that bring new challenges to the field of refugee mental health. Increasing numbers of new refugee arrivals in Australia have histories of loss, grief and trauma. Migration alone is a stressful experience but, when accompanied by traumatic pre-migration and trans-migration experiences, the stress induced commonly exceeds an individual's normal coping capacity.

It has been clearly demonstrated that refugee children and adolescents are vulnerable to the effects of pre-migration, most notably exposure to trauma. Refugee children are often torn between their homeland culture, the culture of the new country and the culture of refugee resettlement. This research study interwove migration, resettlement and identity formation into an understanding of psychosocial well-being of adolescent refugee children.

There is a paucity of research and literature specifically concerned with refugee adolescents and an even smaller proportion focusing on refugee adolescent school-based interventions and programmes. This is in spite of schools playing a central role in the initial adjustment and psychosocial well-being of refugee youth.

This project examined psychosocial well-being from the perspective of refugee adolescents in four government schools in Perth, Western Australia. Focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 45 students from Intensive English Centres within the government schools. All students had entered Australia within the last 2yrs under the refugee or special humanitarian visa categories. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with IEC staff and support workers, appropriate government departments and community services.

The aims of the study were: first, to investigate perceptions and anxieties about escape, flight, migration, resettlement, acculturation and future goals; and second, to identify the multiple stressors that refugee adolescents and youth have to cope with during the process of acculturation. Here the researchers conversed about everyday experiences at school, struggles with language and skill acquisition and formation of emerging identities. Finally, recommendations for school-based strategies to promote psychosocial well-being among refugee adolescents were outlined and areas requiring further research were identified.

Interpretation of the data was underpinned by a conceptual framework of individual psychosocial well-being which has three core domains: human capacity (mental health and

well-being); social ecology (relationships linking individuals within and between communities); and culture and values (the value and meaning given to behaviour and experience).

The research highlights the vulnerability of adolescent refugees and the gaps in current service provision and support. The multiple stressors this group faces as individuals attempt to acculturate and attain their high career aspirations can lead to decreased psychosocial well-being. The current support programmes in schools need to be reviewed in light of challenges the current cohort bring with them. There is an identified need for interventions that reach not only the adolescents but also the families of these children in order to maximise their opportunities for successful educational outcomes and improved psychosocial well-being.

While the focus of the study was on refugee adolescents' perspectives, the research also explored the perspectives of those working closely with them in the school environment. Teachers, support workers and IEC principals provided insight into challenges they face in meeting the educational, social and psychological needs of their students.

The challenge for schools, the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Health and the Department for Community Development is to further develop their efforts to address the social, cultural, economic and educational realities experienced by newly-arrived refugee adolescents and their families.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DET	Department of Education and Training
DIMIA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
DCD	Department of Community Development
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
IEC	Intensive English Language Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
SHP	Special Humanitarian Program
ESL	English as a Second Language

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	2
Executive Summary	2
List of Abbreviations	5
<hr/>	
Chapter 1: Introduction & Overview	1
1.0 Introduction to the Chapter	1
1.1 Background to the Study	1
1.1.1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Basic Facts	1
1.1.2 Australia's Humanitarian Refugee Policy	1
1.1.3 Australia and Psychosocial Health	2
1.2 Research Design	2
1.2.1 Aims	2
1.2.2 The Approach	3
1.2.3 Outcomes	3
1.3 Significance of the Study	3
1.4 The Research Process	4
1.5 Outline of the Report	5
Chapter 2: A Review of Literature	6
2.0 Introduction to the Chapter	6
2.1 Theoretical Underpinnings	6
2.2 Pre-migration Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being of Adolescent Refugee Children	7
2.3 Refugee Resettlement	10
2.4 Acculturative Stress and Inter-generational Stress	11
2.5 Psychosocial Health Promotion in Schools	12
Chapter 3: Methodology	14
3.0 Introduction to the Chapter	14
3.1 The Conceptual Framework used for the Study	14
3.2 Research Design and Procedures	15

3.2.1	The Study Approach	15
3.2.2	Methods of Data Collection	15
3.3	Study Participants	16
3.3.1	Refugee Adolescents	16
3.3.2	Key Informants	17
3.4	Development of FGD and Key Informant Interview Schedules	17
3.5	Data Analysis	18
3.6	Rigour in the Study	18
3.7	Ethical Considerations of the Project	19
Chapter 4: The Adolescent Experience of Resettlement in Perth, Australia		20
4.0	Introduction to the Chapter	20
4.1	Demographic Background	20
4.1.1	Life in Transition	21
4.1.2	Refugee Resettlement	22
4.2	The Experience of Resettlement	22
4.2.1	Social Ecology	22
4.2.1.1	Family	23
4.2.1.2	Friends	24
4.2.1.3	Cultural Support Networks	24
4.2.1.4	School and Community Activities	25
4.2.2	Human Capacity	26
4.2.2.1	Mental Health	26
4.2.2.2	Language Acquisition	26
4.2.2.3	Knowledge and Skill Acquisition	27
4.2.3	Culture and Values	29
4.2.3.1	Cultural Conflict at Home	29
4.2.3.2	Cultural Conflict in School	30
4.2.3.3	Cultural Identity	30
Chapter 5: The Perspectives of the Staff in Intensive English Language Centres		32
5.0	Introduction to the Chapter	32
5.1	IEC Staff Profile	32
5.2	The Perspectives of the IEC Staff	33

5.2.1	Perceptions of IEC STaff	33
5.2.2	Impact of Trauma, Loss and Grief	33
5.2.3	Academic Expectations of Parents and Students	34
5.2.4	Partnership with Parents/Guardians	35
5.2.5	Transition from IEC to Mainstream	37
Chapter 6: Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations		39
6.0	Brief Discussion	39
6.1	Limitations	40
6.2	Recommendations from the Study	40
6.2.1	School-based Recommendations	40
6.2.2	Recommendations for Government Department	40
6.2.3	National Level Recommendations	41
6.3	Conclusion	41
References		43

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The interlocking circles of human capacity, social ecology and values	14
Figure 2: Participants' country of origin	20
Figure 3: UNHCR-assisted resettlement by country of departure 2001-2005	21

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Arrival into Australia	22
---------------------------------	----

LIST OF BOXES

Box 1: Social ecology influences	25
Box 2: Human capacity influences	29
Box 3: Cultural capacity influences	31
Box 4: School support needs	38

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Information Sheet	48
Appendix B: Consent Forms	49
Appendix C: Guiding Assessment Questions for Focus Group Discussions	51
Appendix D: Key Informant Interview Questions	53