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Broadening the Horizon: Incorporating the Convention for Multicultural Mental Health Carers

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Concurrent Session: Cultural Consideration

**Working to Support the Mental Health of Traumatized Refugee Communities through
Group Work**

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Refugee Migration

People migrate from one country to another for a variety of reasons. The term 'refugee' has been used to describe a particular category of migrants. Immigrants, for example choose to migrate from their homeland to settle in a country of their choice knowing they can return whenever they wish. For refugees, migration is not a choice; they flee from their homeland usually for fear of persecution, assault, abduction or death in search of safety. They leave behind families and friends knowing it is very unlikely they can ever return or see them again. They do not have a choice of which country they can migrate to; they simply resettle in the closest or which ever country is willing to receive refugees under the UNHCR convention.

Resettlement & Trauma

Resettlement in a different country with totally different culture is challenging and can be traumatic and stressful. For refugees, the trauma they have experienced in the past makes those challenges even more pronounced.

Judith Herman, in her book Trauma and Recovery states:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to

human existence. They violate the victim's faith in natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

Resettlement and adaptation to a new cultural environment is known to be a factor of psychological stress; **Samarasinghe K., Fridlund B. & Arvidsson B. (2006)**. Socio-environmental stressors such as learning new parenting styles, having unprocessed traumas, change of family roles, attitudes of the host country and social segregation within society can be detrimental to the well-being of newly arriving refugee families and communities. Acceptance and a clear place in society as well as clearly defined family roles are crucial in facilitating a healthy transition for refugee families.

The mental health of traumatised refugee communities is challenged when making a transition from a collectivist culture to one which is much more individualistically based; including the type of society they originate from and the type of society they settle in. Relationships are often challenged and strained to breaking point exacerbating feelings of alienation, isolation and despair within newly arrived refugee families and communities. Bhugra D (2004), states that when individuals migrate from one type of culture to another it is likely that depending upon their own personality traits they may develop psychiatric disorders. Often the time of new settlement is anything but that, with refugee families being required to operate in the new environment very soon after arrival. The pressure to immediately function within and as the host culture results in lots of family disintegration. Any form of social support can provide a buffer against mental illness in refugee communities.

The intervention required by refugee families who are usually from a collectivist culture differs from that of mainstream clients. Because of the traumatic experience, and the anxiety of living in constant fear, refugees are keener to have a life of normalcy than dwell on the past traumatic experiences hence the kind of intervention they may require is more related to social support and functioning.

Small group counseling has been found to be one of the core mental health interventions for collectivist communities and has the potential for significant social change. The Center for

Victims of Torture in West Africa for example successfully provides group counseling to refugees; displace persons and returnees in West Africa. This takes place for approximately 10 weeks, and clients are divided into groups by gender or age.

This paper /symposium discusses this and how communities whose members have experienced traumatic events can be supported towards recovery through group work such as the Families in Cultural Transition program (FICT).

The Families in Cultural Transition (SGP-FICT) Program at ASeTTS

ASeTTS is a non government organization incorporated in 1992 to respond to the psychosocial and physical needs of torture and trauma survivors and their families. The organisation is a member of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

Our identity is formed not only by the family in which we develop but by the experiences and changes of environment which happen to us along the way. For refugees these changes may occur through:

- ☆ Imprisonment and torture
- ☆ Loss of loved ones, belongings and displacement
- ☆ Resettlement in one or more countries where customs, language and way of life is very different from that in their home country

The Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) Project was first developed in 1996 by the Service for Treatment & Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARRTS) in NSW. The project grew from a need to “maintain an essential integrity and functioning of refugee and immigrant families” after their arrival in Australia. To this end, the Families in Cultural Transition program is educational rather than therapeutic and supports other clinical services, which help refugees in the trauma recovery process.

Using this program as a base, ASeTTS has been conducting FICT with communities in Perth over the last three years. The program underlines the need for programs to be interactive in order for participants to integrate new knowledge and understandings with those gained through their

own life experiences; acknowledging that refugees have developed coping strategies and resilience in their life experiences.

This program has been modified to be conducted in WA and has been funded by Lotterywest for the past three years. FICT successfully gained funding from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) under the Settlement Grant Program (SGP) to be conducted for another three years. Although there is no limit to its usefulness, the program focuses on people from refugee and war like background within two – five years of arrival in WA.

The series of workshops are designed to assist family members to feel valued and supported, whilst having fun and gaining access and assistance in an interactive way. This strengthens the identity of the families and reduces the effects of socio-environmental stressors of settlement. They are designed to make it easier for people coming to live in Australia to understand their new environment and adjust to it; not patronizing their previous knowledge and experiences but acknowledging them and supporting adjustment to the new culture.

Bilingual members of the same ethnic community are trained to facilitate the groups with supervision by ASeTTS staff. The facilitators guide rather than lead the groups to allow them to build upon and extend their competencies that they already have in place. The use of bilingual facilitators supports the language and cultural needs of group participants. Service providers are invited to participate in groups as requested by the participants and to speak on topics that require professional input.

The FICT modules are structured in what is termed a “solution based approach, it targets changes in behavior and allows the participants to leave the room with something”. The module allows group members to learn from each other through the exercises and activities, this enable them to share strategies that they have found effective and helps the participants to own the group and feel competent and empowered. The three hour modules incorporate activities designed to build familiarity and trust within the group. They begin with introductory activities then include modules focusing on the following:

- ☆ Settlement
- ☆ Support Systems / Accessing Services
- ☆ Managing Money

- ☆ Trauma and Healing (Grief & Loss)
- ☆ Families
- ☆ Children
- ☆ Gender
- ☆ Youth
- ☆ Enjoying the Environment
- ☆ A new module on Nutrition has recently been developed

Learning activities are varied and include use of board games and Perth Walkabout games which has been modified for the Perth scene.

In the last three years we have conducted groups for Liberians, Sierra Leoneans, Sudanese, Grand Lacs (Congolese, Rwandese and Burundians), Former Yugoslavians, Ethiopians and Afghans. Some of these groups have been mixed gender wise and others have been women's groups. Groups are conducted in various locations around the metropolitan area as dictated by the need of the participants. At the end of the training, participants are awarded with certificates of participation. This increases their confidence and boosts their self esteem that has been damaged by the refugee experience.

Issues arising from the groups have varied but most of the African groups have indicated that challenges persist around parenting such as discipline styles, role maintenance, children leaving home and loss of respect. This is well covered in the FICT program modules. Many agencies are also now running targeted programs to support this need.

Gender has also arisen as issue for families, with groups being concerned about domestic violence in their communities and how this is viewed in the wider community. The government through DCD in WA has made funds available to develop cross culturally appropriate programs and materials for many communities. The African communities have also been active in organising community forums with support from DCD and the Domestic Violence Unit. There is a FICT module on gender to address some of these concerns for newly arrived families.

Budgeting has always proved a very successful module with many participants being confused with issues from using an ATM to negotiating the Centrelink and banking system.

Issues have arisen within some communities around cultural and political sensitivities and consideration of these tensions has needed to be taken into account when forming and facilitating groups.

This program was evaluated by Curtin University at the end of 2005

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