

# RESETTLEMENT CHALLENGES AND COPING STYLES AMONG REFUGEE WOMEN IN WINNIPEG, MANITOBA

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## Abstract

*This research is a phenomenological, inductive study of how refugee women think about and experience the challenges associated with immigration and the coping strategies they utilize as they deal with those challenges. Recent studies have shown that the experience of being a newcomer in a foreign country tests the individual's resilience and coping resources to the limit. Using Urie Bronfenbrenners' ecological system's theory and the Person in environment perspective, this research study explores the living experiences of five refugee woman in Winnipeg and the coping strategies they use as they navigate their new ecological contests. Ecological systems theory stipulate that individuals are engaged in an on-going transaction with their environments; mutually influencing and being influenced, shaping and being shaped by the world around them. Research participants identified challenges encountered in their resettlement journey which included dire struggles learning a new language and joining the Canadian workforce so that they could provide for their families, in ecological environments that were rife with racism, discrimination and devaluation of the knowledge and skills they had brought with them to Winnipeg. Coping and adaptation strategies included religion and spirituality, strong family ties, maintaining community connections and "finding it within yourself to endure."*

**Key Words:** Resettlement challenges, refugees, women, coping skills and strategies

## Introduction

According to Slobodin & Jong (2014) refugees are individuals who are forced to leave their countries of origin due to exposure to war and other traumatic events, natural catastrophes or fear of persecution due to race, gender, ethnicity, religion or membership to different political pursuits. Immigrants on the other hand are individuals who voluntarily leave their countries of origin for diverse reasons, some of which may be as traumatizing as those experienced by refugees. In an attempt to distinguish between refugees and immigrants, Pernice and Brook (1994) adopt the terms *push* and *pull*. According to the researchers, refugees are *pushed* out of their countries by forces beyond their control, while immigrants are *pulled* to the host countries by perceived or real opportunities for better jobs, higher living standards and greater possibilities for further education.

Tastasoglou, Baillie, Brigham & Lange (2014) discuss the problematic and stigmatizing use of the term refugee, arguing that the politicized label suggests “otherness and neediness” and is viewed as “threatening and uncomfortable” by the host countries (p. 68). The authors challenge this ill-advised view and recommend a complete ideological shift that will enable the government and the general population to appreciate that refugees are assets rather than liabilities to Canada’s social-economic systems (Beiser, 2009).

### *Why the refugee women?*

My research focused mainly on refugee women, in appreciation that the challenges of immigration, among refugees affect gender and generations differently (Garcia, Haemann, Bartels, Mutamoros, Olson-Dick & Guerra De Patimo, 2012. Watkins, Razee & Richters (2015) also observe that “Gender factors also shape the experience and effects of forced immigration, disadvantaging Women, who are at high risk of gender-based violence, exploitation and discrimination during all phases of the refugee journey” (p.127).

## *The Challenges of Immigration and resettlement*

Bhugra (2004) discusses eight factors that negatively impact the overall well-being of refugees. These factors include loss and bereavement, along with the shame and survivor's guilt that the loss generates, fatalism; the feeling that forces beyond one's control have predetermined your fate, negative life-events, limited social and economic supports and social skills deficits as prescribed by the host countries. Such negative factors are further compounded by devaluation and discrimination of refugees by the mainstream society, clash of cultural values and failed expectations (Bhugra, 2004; Tastasoglou et.al, 2014)

Beginning from the pre-immigration period, particularly for the refugees; direct torture, near-death experiences, starvation, poverty, disease and deprivation, being forced to watch relatives and friends being tortured and killed in war zones, severely compound psychological distress beyond description (Kidzie, 2006). Also, the painful outcomes of displacement translate to loss of family cohesiveness due to splitting and scattering of households (Dow, 2011). Other war experiences of torture, including rape, profound hunger, poverty, human degradation in over-crowded refugee camps, hallowing immigration journeys through perilous seas and forests, death of close family members and friends, physical and psychological disablement leave the freeing refugee population extremely vulnerable to the daunting process of settling in a new country (Bhugra, 2004; Dow, 2011; Falicov, 2007; Kirmayer, Narasiah, Munoz, et al, 2011; Kidzie, 2006). Beiser (2009) argues that trauma and post-traumatic stress continue to inflict most refugees even after ten years of resettlement.

On arrival in the host countries, the challenges and stressors are further compounded by loss of social capital and economic status, changes in family status, role reversal/role shifts, especially in domestic situations where men find themselves performing tasks that were formally relegated to women, family hierarchies and family violence (Falicov, 2007; Dow, 2011). Other post-immigration stressors include; uncertainty about residency and legal application status, vulnerability and fear of

being apprehended and deported, language barriers, accented speech and religious apparel that lead to devaluation, prejudices and racism (Dow, 2011; Kidzie, 2006).

Unemployment, underemployment, difficulties in having credentials recognized, exploitation by employers, discrimination at work, social and economic inequity, loss of culture, cultural shock, cultural alienation and failed dreams, hopes and aspirations have also been extensively cited as acculturation stressors that make resettlement very challenging, indeed, for refugees (Abebe, Lien & Hjeld, 2014; Beiser, 2009; Bugra, 2004; Cross & Singh, 2012; Kidzie, 2006; Kirmayer, Narasiah, Munoz, et al, 2011, Tastsoglou, Baillie, Brigham & Lange (2014).

### *Coping and adaptation strategies*

Bala & Kramer (2010) observe that understanding the coping and adaptation strategies of refugee families, particularly those that are culturally oriented, aids in the development of service delivery modes that favor successful resettlement. Arguing that there are strengths and coping strategies inherent in all newcomer families, Bala & Kramer (2010) assert that the helper's task is to identify, support and activate those innate and functional coping skills in order to facilitate successful transitioning.

Khawaja, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade (2008) identify five main coping strategies that refugees resort to pre-immigration, while on transit and post -immigration. These strategies include strong religious beliefs, cognitive re-framing of challenging situations, relying on inner strength and resources, focusing on hope and aspirations and social supports from families and the communities at large. Matheson, Jorden & Anisman (2007) categorize the range of coping mechanisms among a group of refugees from Somalia into active problem-solving coping (cognitive restructuring, active distraction, social-support seeking and religious faith), emotional engagement (rumination, emotional expression, other-blame and self-blame and avoidance coping, emotional containment, passive

resignation and cognitive avoidance). Their findings indicate that most refugees report collective and personal trauma experiences; including exposure to violent wars, personal assaults and losses from strangers or familiar perpetrators, which make them prone to trauma symptoms and poor health outcomes. Participants who relied on emotional engagement (self and other blame) and avoidance coping mechanisms had elevated levels of cortisol, 30 minutes following their waking hours, an indication of diminished coping abilities (Matheson, et. al., 2007) Participants with decreased cortisol levels, 30 minutes into their waking hours, reported use of problem-solving mechanisms.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

#### *Theoretical Framework for the Research: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems' theory (EST)*

According to Probst (2012), ecological perspective is considered to be the “essence, core and heart of social work” practice, where seeking to understand the person's environment “widens the lens, fosters empathy and a deeper, richer and fuller understanding of the crisis,” (p. 691). The approach also widens the helper's scope so that they are able to explore the precipitating, perpetuating and protective factors influencing the presenting challenge.

EST postulates that human development and behavior is shaped by multiple, nested, interacting environments (Probst 2012). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), human development and behavior are shaped by five multi-layered, nested, reciprocal environmental systems that include, the individual, nested in an arrangement of structures, each contained within the next, which must however be examined as an interdependent, inter-related whole, in order to understand the internal and external forces influencing the individual.

#### *Person-in-environment approach (PIE)*

Germain & Gittermen further developed the ecological perspective to the person-in-environment approach, breaking down environments into social and physical spaces from which the person could not be isolated (as cited in Probst, 2012). The person-in-environment approach embraces empathy, recognizes and appreciates the person's strengths, seeking to empower individuals with whatever positive resources that may be available in their environments.

The social environments, according to Germain & Gittermen (1973), involve individual relationships as dyads, social networks, bureaucratic institutions, geographic neighborhoods and cultural communities. Physical environments include geography, climatic and natural events like hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis. Economic and political environments include war, global recessions, exposure to acts of terrorism and the social media impact. Probst (2012) also describes environments as the political climate that the individual is living in and has lived with in their past. In the refugees' cases, according to Probst (2012), environments are mostly characterized by the culture of poverty, chronic unemployment and lack of adequate housing, forcing families to live in crowded and unsanitary conditions. The environments are also rife with racism, power hierarchies, personal crisis, exposure to violence, drugs, crimes, discrimination, lack of social supports and marginalization. Environments, according to Williams (2012) may be positive, especially in cases where the individual experiences social support, a sense of belonging and safety, availability of appropriate community resources, mentors and the experience of connectedness.

#### *Methodology: Phenomenological Approach*

In order to capture the very essence of this on-going lived experience with and within new overlapping contexts, I have utilized the phenomenological approach to research. Creswell (2013) describes Phenomenology as the study of the conscious lived experience of persons and the descriptions of the “essences of these experiences” (p. 77). The approach, Creswell (2013) continues

involves identifying a phenomenon that is a common lived experience for a group of individuals; an experience that has essentially a common meaning for that specific group of individuals. In this specific study, the common phenomenon is the experience of being a refugee woman who is consciously navigating a new landscape, with all the complex realities of letting go of the past history and re-inventing a new life, so to speak: “What greater grief than the loss of one's Homeland?” (Davis, Kennedy & Austin, 2012, p.144).

### **Research Instruments**

*One-on-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews* on the experience of being a refugee woman in new landscapes that include multi-layered and sometimes overlapping contexts were conducted.

*Personal journal:* Throughout the data collection phase, I have been journaling personal reflections on my values, prejudices, biases and assumptions that were surprisingly, dismantled in almost every interview encounter.

#### *Research Participant, selection & Recruitment process*

This research involved five refugee women from five different African countries that are still reeling in war and civil strife. The rationale behind this number of participants was to provide space and opportunity for in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, in line with phenomenological approach.

### **The Findings**

#### *Finding a home, literally and figuratively*

Four out of five research participants presented housing as one major resettlement challenge that caught them off-guard, mainly because of the high expectations they had prior to immigration.

*Financial Challenges: “Where is the money? Where is the money we need for daily use?”*

Financial burden of paying rent and the bills and generally running a home was a challenge that all my participants struggled with whether they were sponsored by the government or by private sponsors.

*Barriers to Employment: “we are willing to work but nobody is willing to take us”*

Employment was another strong theme that emerged in all the discussions I had with the participants. All five participants came across as hardworking women who were convinced that their families would be well-provided for in the new country because they would start working immediately. However, there were barriers that made looking for work and getting hired a real challenge.

*Language: “they don’t know the language, they don’t ask for what they don’t know...”*

Language was a recurring theme not only a barrier to employment but to all the other aspects of life affecting the research participants. Most of them shared how challenging it was to find their way around, do grocery shopping, and enroll children in schools, access health and other services without the English language.

*Parenting: “it’s like I don’t have power over my kids anymore.”*

Parenting is one poignant theme that was extensively discussed by all my research participants. Apart from P3R, the other four participants had raised and were continuing to raise children in a culture that was considered totally different from everything they had known there on.

*Culture: “That’s a big cultural crash right there!”*

Cultural differences/cultural shock/ alienation/ isolation or exclusion seemed to be the overall

explanation why the challenges that participants dealt with were too complex. Parenting issues arose because the cultural expectations on how kids should be disciplined clashed directly with what my research participants were used to.

*Disability: "You can't go to Canada unless you have a private sponsor; you're disabled."*

Two of my participants' narratives were dominated by the sense that they experienced unique struggles as newcomers who were living with a disability themselves or who were accompanied by family members who had a disability.

### **Coping and Adaptation Strategies.**

#### *Religion and spirituality*

Significant statements regarding religion and faith in God illustrate that my research participants relied on spirituality to get them through the tough times. It was also clear that despite highlighting faith and prayers as the main coping mechanism, the participants did not just sit and hope for miracles. They still went out and worked very hard. They did not depend on handouts from the network of believers who were sometimes described as angels. There was a realistic faith that was apparently backed by actions.

#### *Family ties and social support networks.*

Strong bonds of kinship provided the participants with the courage and motivation to continue fighting despite the challenges. Those who had established social support systems through church communities and friends shared that their social and emotional needs would be met through those connections.

#### *Resilience and meaning -making*

They each described what seemed like insurmountable barriers, their mental and physical well-being was tested to the core, yet they found ways of coping and not only survived but thrived.

## Conclusion

The findings that the same struggles that made resettlement very challenging for my participants were ironically turned into chief precipitating and perpetuating factors for successful integration could be further explored; rather than viewing refugees as vulnerable individuals who need long years of experience before they can join the Canadian work force or the academia, the strength and resilience markers that propelled them forward through perilous times should be identified, dignified, affirmed, validated honored and supported, in order to alleviate the pain of displacement and enhance successful reintegration.

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