Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya.
UN Photo/Evan Schneider

COMMENTARY: ECOLOGICAL RELATIONAL SUPPORTS AS KEY RESOURCES FOR REFUGEE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

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Considering mental health outcomes of children and youth refugees is critical to ensuring not only future peace efforts in contexts of conflict, but also in supporting improved social and economic conditions domestically and internationally.[1] Failing to address the chronic stress and trauma that young people, their families and communities have been exposed to, undermines peace efforts and acts of repatriation. In this regard, and as stated by Emily Pelley, an interactive ecological resilience framework is an effective framework to guide to both our understanding of psychological responses to conflict experiences and to providing meaningful supports.

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[1] *War Child (2012).* From neglect to protect: Bottlenecks to inclusion and (re)integration for the most marginalised children in conflict *(A discussion paper). War Child UK and War Child Holland; World Bank Development Report (2011). Conflict, security and development. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available from https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf.*

Her discussion eloquently outlines the value of relational and physical resources in supporting improved and positive outcomes for children and youth. Her review also highlights the value of these resources as being both highly pragmatic (such as language classes) as well as healing (providing for example mental health supports). A recent review of cross-cutting consensual resilience elements supports this broad-based approach to facilitating healthy psychosocial outcomes.[2] This review has underscored the important role of personal meaning-making in directing how individuals will make sense of their experiences as well as how they will interpret the availability and relevance of support resources.

Meaning-making processes are therefore central to shaping how individuals will engage with contextually based resources within interactive resilience processes. Recognition of this central driving component within resilience processes (i.e. meaning-making frameworks) aligns with Emily Pelley's discussion of the complexity of experiences and outcomes found amongst refugee children and youth affected by armed conflict. The variation created by contextually specific conflict factors, temporal issues, cultural frameworks, national and international responses, as well as personal experiences prior to, during and following conflict exposure, underscore the ways in which universal responses to supporting children and youth are not an option. Here Emily Pelley astutely points to the need for youth to be engaged in the design of policy and programming that pertains to them. Indeed, many authors now point to the need for youth engagement if policies and related services and programs are to succeed.[3]

Similarly, the role of community-based interventions as critical supports to improved and increased positive outcomes has been exemplified across multiple studies. The extended informal social supports such an approach fosters, provide core prevention and intervention assets, extending formal resources on both fronts.[4] Additionally, however there is a need for resources to be provided in ways that are accessible, flexible and characterised by relational

2   Liebenberg, L., Joubert, N., & Foucault, M-L. (2017). Understanding core resilience elements and indicators A comprehensive review of the literature. Ottawa, ON: Mental Health Promotion Unit Population Health Promotion and Innovations Division Centre for Health Promotion Public Health Agency of Canada. http://lindaliebenberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PHAC-Resilience-Report-Final-Version-November-2017.pdf.

3   See for example Ford, N., Odallo, D., & Chorlton, R. (2003). Communication from a human rights perspective: Responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in eastern and southern Africa. Journal of Health Communication, 8, 519–612; Gaunle, S. & Adhikari, P. (2010). Youth in policy making. Sangam Institute; Hallett, C., & Prout, A. (Eds.). (2003). Hearing the voices of children: Social policy for a new century. London; New York: Routledge Falmer.

4   Liebenberg, L., & Hutt-MacLeod, D. (2017). Aboriginal ccommunity development approaches in response to neoliberal policy: The example of Eskasoni Mental Health Services. In P. Dolan & N. Frost (Eds.), The Handbook of Global Child Welfare (pp. 47-58). London: Routledge.

engagement. Such resource allocation ensures "a supportive socio-ecological context [which] is at least as an important – if not more important – determinant of resilience as individual variables".[5]

The work of Munford and Sanders[6] is particularly illuminating in this regard. Their work with youth facing extreme socioeconomic marginalisation across New Zealand has demonstrated the importance of approaches that meet young people where they are at; gain in-depth understanding of how youth understand their experiences, challenges and possible supports; and integrate these perspectives into learning opportunities where children and youth are able to try, fail and try again, all the while being consistently supported by adults that engage in enduring relationships with them. Importantly, drawing on these various components (i.e. youth engagement in designing and planning policy and related resources, development of community-based informal supports, and use of accessible, flexible and relational approaches to formal service provision) also means that a strengths-based approach can be more effectively integrated into supporting improved psychosocial outcomes for children and youth affected by conflict. It is in this way that resilience resources can be augmented and positive mental health outcomes can be better supported for child and youth refugees.

Linda Liebenberg, PhD., is a researcher and evaluator with a core interest in children and youth with complex needs, and the communities they live in. Her work explores the promotion of positive youth development and mental health through civic engagement and community development. As a key component of this work, Linda reflects critically on how best to conduct research and evaluations with children and their communities, including participatory image-based methods; sophisticated longitudinal quantitative designs; and the design of measurement instruments used with children and youth. Linda has presented internationally and published extensively on these topics of research and youth.

5   Tol, W.A., Song, S., & Jordans, M.J.D. (2013). Annual research review: Resilience and mental health in children and adolescents living in areas of armed conflict - A systematic review of findings in low- and middle-income countries. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 54(4), 445-460, p. 456.

6   Sanders, J., & Munford, R. (2014). Youth-centred practice: Positive youth development practices and pathways to better outcomes for vulnerable youth. Child & Youth Service Review, 46:160-167. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.08.020; Sanders, J., & Munford, R. (2015). Fostering a sense of belonging at school – Five orientations to practice that assist vulnerable youth to create a positive student identity. School Psychology International, 37, 155–171; Sanders, J., Munford, R., & Liebenberg, L. (2017). Positive youth development practices and better outcomes for high risk youth. Child abuse and neglect, 69, 201-212.