



Transcultural Issues in Regional Settlement of Refugees

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This article presents a review of some salient issues in working cross culturally with resettled migrants with refugee backgrounds. Using two teaching cases we demonstrate the advantage of refugee background migrants having mentors and being assisted to learn some skills. The cases also demonstrate the importance of workers understanding the cultural backgrounds of their clients. Rural and regional settings provide some unique challenges like limited services, while at the same time offering some opportunities like agricultural product processing and seasonal farm work. Some of the challenges and opportunities may apply across the board to migrants from different non-European backgrounds, but some may be unique to people with refugee backgrounds.



Introduction

It is now a fact of life that most countries are multicultural as migration and other drivers of people movement have led to a mixing of people and cultures. Australia and New Zealand are good examples of the impact of migration with very high proportions of the population either born in another country or children of migrants. This has led to one academic claiming that in such a situation all social work is cross-cultural social work (Williams, 2018). There is some truth in this assertion but nevertheless, there are still special issues for people who are marginal to the mainstream culture such as refugees, Indigenous people, gay, lesbian and transgender people, migrants from minority cultures and religious minorities. These diverse groups are often referred to as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people. Working effectively with these groups requires workers to engage in what is commonly referred to as ‘cultural competence’, the ability and confidence to work across cultures.

The foundation principles of social work are human rights and social justice and these principles are articulated in national and international codes of practice. These principles apply in practice across cultures, but social justice requires workers to address sources of disadvantage, so to argue, as Williams (2018) does, that all social work is cross cultural work, risks overlooking disadvantages like language, marginalised culture status and colonial domination. This point is made regarding working with aged CALD communities:

Social workers must not lose sight of the marginalised and disadvantaged groups that have lower life expectancy such as Indigenous Australians and members of CALD communities who have lower access rates for health services and are vulnerable to discrimination in mainstream services (Martin, 2014, p.210).

The objectives then of a culturally competent worker is to create cultural safety for all service users and particularly for those who are not from the mainstream culture. The concept of cultural safety has been used in work with Indigenous people in Australia and New Zealand but it is also accepted in other settings. Cultural safety is defined as:



‘An environment that is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity or who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience of learning together and truly listening’ (Williams, 1999, p. 213 cited Eckermann et al, 1994).

From a theoretical perspective the starting point is what Ife (2012) describes as a shared humanity. Having accepted the shared humanity then sharing culture, knowledge, meaning and respect becomes second nature. The issue of cultural safety needs to be appreciated from a historical perspective. Colonisation, marginalisation of ‘other’ cultures, violence and dispossession means that workers have to expect inequalities, mistrust and poor utilisation of services even when they are provided (Mortensen, 2010; Williams, 1999). Social workers working across cultural differences are therefore expected to exercise critical reflection on their own standpoints and the interactions between the identities involved (Hollinsworth, 2013). Social workers need to remember they too have cultures and worldviews that are not universally shared.

Culture is important as it refers to how people interpret their world. Culture is, however, hard to define. One definition is that ‘culture is a production, reproduction and transmission of relatively stable informational processes and their public representations, which are variously distributed in groups or social networks’ (Patterson, 2010, p. 139). Culture can also be seen as a process of making sense of the lived world that can happen at micro-, macro- and mezzo-levels. Culture develops over time and place and can therefore be regarded as an outcome of that process:

Culture develops within the process of a people wrestling with nature. They struggle with one another. They evolve a way of life embodied in their institutions and certain practices. Culture becomes the carrier of their moral, aesthetic and ethical values. At the psychological level, these values become the embodiment of people’s consciousness as a specific community. (Ngũgĩ 1993, p. 27).



For migrants that process is disrupted and they find themselves caught up between the culture they left behind and a new culture which they could also influence to a degree. Kumsa (2005) notes that Oromo youth from Ethiopia who have moved to Canada find themselves occupying three cultural spheres of identity: Canadian, Black/African and Oromo. The acknowledgement of multiple cultures is the formulation of the policy of multiculturalism in countries like Australia and Canada among others. In Australia the stated aim is to allow all citizens to practise the cultural traditions and languages in a social environment that is free from discrimination but within the law (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). There is some scepticism about the equality of cultures as it is noted that multiculturalism is ‘essentially an assimilationist programme of tolerance within a framework that values diversity of cultures so long as they fit within the framework of responsibility, respect and fairness’ (McMahon, 2005, p. 75).

Australia has anti-discriminatory laws that are supposed to ensure that no one is discriminated on the basis of their ‘race’, gender, religion or other attributes. This however, does not mean that there are no privileged groups and white privilege and dominance is often unacknowledged, especially by the privileged groups (Pease, 2010). For authentic multiculturalism then, any explicit or implicit superiority of some cultural groups need to be addressed (Forrest and Dunn, 2006). Acknowledging that some people are disadvantaged is a beginning step to addressing both privilege and disadvantage.

One established approach in supporting children and adults is mentoring which has been a feature of the most successful people (Herman, 2012). We suggest this approach for supporting migrants with a refugee background in recognition of the challenges of settlement. Mentoring is a way of promoting social inclusion. Policies that promote a socially inclusive society would go a long way towards meeting the settlement needs of people with refugee backgrounds (Correa-Velez, Gifford & Barnett, 2010). Mentoring is also one way of honing in on the strengths of the individual. A strength-based approach is gaining support in social work (Francis, Pulla & Goel, 2014; Pulla, 2013, 2017; Saleebey, 2006). In teaching, using teaching cases that show the strength and success of refugee migrants, moves away from problem



saturated cases that present them as helpless victims. We present two such cases that show what it is possible to achieve when given a helping hand.

Literature review

Due to its political and economic stability, peace and prosperity, Australia is attractive to refugees fleeing persecution or war from their home country. Since post Second World War, Australia has offered settlement to thousands of refugees and migrants (Karlsen, Phillips & Koleth, 2011). For more than a decade now, Australia has accepted between 10,000 and 13,000 refugees a year through its Refugee and Humanitarian Program (DIAC, 2011).

Resettling refugees in rural and regional parts of Australia comes many-challenges and opportunities for both refugees and the host community. To meet the required international refugee protection standards, Australia has over the years developed humanitarian assistance programs to support the settlement of refugees (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013). The Australian Federal Government is currently implementing humanitarian settlement services such as language translation and community support programs (Spinks, 2009). Despite these humanitarian interventions, refugees struggle with their settlement in Australia (Kabir, 2014). The problems of settling refugees in small rural and regional towns of Australia is further exacerbated by the limited experience of the host communities in supporting people from other cultural and ethnic groups (AMES, 2015). In addition, refugees from developing countries often have minimal formal education, poor or no English Language skills and lack necessary literacy skills which could make their community integration challenging (Kabir, 2014; Spinks, 2009). Improvement to ethno-specific humanitarian assistance needs to be studied further to enhance successful settlement of refugees in rural and regional Australia.

Literature reveals that a number of challenges such as inadequate English language skills can be significant barriers to successful settlement of refugees (Fozdar, & Hartley, 2013). Furthermore, some refugees encounter cultural challenges that require committed assistance to overcome. Burnett (1998) describes cultural difference as the major challenge which hinders a smooth settlement exercise. Increasing employment rate among the refugees is very fundamental in promoting their living standards and overcoming the risk of isolation. However,



refugees often encounter barriers entering the job market due to lack of required job skills, experience and even lack of knowledge of how to access the job market. Furthermore, employers are reluctant to hire newly arrived refugees partly due to the negative reporting by the Australian media, portraying them as different and a problem to society (Parker, 2015).

Some newly arrived refugees face complex trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] issues due to witnessing conflict situations in their countries of origin (Sawrikar, Griffiths, & Muir, 2008). To alleviate some of the challenges faced by newly arrived refugees we suggest mentorship programs where affected refugees are supported through a recovery and settlement process until they finally settle (Colic-Peisker, 2009). Hartley (2004) concurs and argues that mentoring refugees has been identified as a key national strategy to effective settlement. Sawrikar, Griffiths, & Muir (2008) support this idea and note that ‘mentoring provides holistic support for refugees because it can address emotional, socio-cultural and/or resource related settlement issues’ (p. 14).

AMES (2015) advocates the need to have local champions who can act as mentors to support the newly arrived refugees and to raise awareness and influence the local community to be more welcoming and accepting. These local champions can help advocate on behalf of new refugees with employers to provide equal opportunities to refugees and other migrants and to advocate in advance of the refugee arrival with service providers to make sure the right type of support is there for newly settled refugees when needed (AMES, 2015 p.27).

Research reveals that mentoring can also have negative consequences, if not well managed, as it has its own challenges. For instance, in a one-to-one mentoring model the mentor can dominate and as a consequence leave the mentee feeling disconnected and powerless (Clarke, 2004). Furthermore, one-on-one mentoring can be too overwhelming for the program organizers, mentors and mentees (Long, 1997). Despite all the weaknesses outlined above, one-on-one mentoring was found to be the most viable and effective program in fostering trusting and caring relationships between mentor and mentee for refugees (Sawrikar, Griffiths, & Muir, 2008). We acknowledge the potential harm, and hence the need



for vetting all who work with vulnerable people, while highlighting the potential for mentorship to bridge the cultural gap and provide cross-cultural support.

Teaching cases

Using case studies is popular in social work teaching and research. The innovation suggested here is to use cases that highlight success in order to promote a sense of acceptance and resilience. Teaching cases are commonly used in both research and teaching using hybrid or fictional data to help illustrate an issue (Yin, 2009). Jones (2003) explains that teaching cases still have to be rigorous and well researched and developed to demonstrate cases that could be generalized. King and Stevahn (2013) suggest that teaching cases are used in program evaluation to present situations or programs that are realistic whether they are real or not.

The cases can be used to stimulate discussion in teaching or they could be used for assessment tasks. In teaching students can be encouraged to discuss their own experiences of successful cases and explore what was done well to achieve the success. In assessment tasks the student can explore the conditions that led to success, what was done well and why, the strengths were identified and promoted, the social environment that promoted success and how it can be replicated elsewhere.

Table 1: Teaching case 1 - Abe Gwada

Abe Gwada is 23 years old and is from Sudan from where he fled with his family. They came to Australia in 2003 and settled in Blacktown, Sydney where he spent his teenage years. He trained in landscaping but he could not find any employment in that field. He decided to move to regional NSW to seek work opportunities. Grant Burbidge offered him apprenticeship as a shearer. Even though this is normally a seasonal job he proved to be such a good worker that he was offered an ongoing position so he has got work to do out of the shearing season. Abe is now mentoring his brother who wants also to become a shearer. This has been a win-win situation because Abe found that with his refugee background he was finding it hard to find work in Sydney. Farmer Grant was finding it hard to attract and maintain good shearers. Abe has also recorded some rap music though he is not pursuing that line of interest but treats it as a hobby.
Clarke (2017)

Additional notes on the history of the conflict

The war in South Sudan was in response to the attempt of Arabization and Islamisation of the African tribes of South Sudan by the Arab Muslims of Northern Sudan. The war of liberation in Sudan can be traced to a mutiny in 1955, just before independence. A full scale war, however, did not start until 1962, waged by the Anyanya guerrilla army. An interlude of peace occurred in the 1970s but war was resumed again in 1983. (Kebbede, 1997) In July, 2005, peace was achieved and John Garang became Sudan's vice president, and the state of emergency in force since 1999 was lifted. By then two million people had died and four million displaced in 22 years which



indicates the magnitude of the tragic recent history of Sudan. Some of the displaced people were resettled in countries like Australia and the United States of America. (Mungai 2008).

Table 2: Teaching case 2 - Deng Thiak Adut

Australia of the year 2016: Deng Thiak Adut

Deng came to Australia at the age of 14. He was born in a small village in South Sudan called Malek. His father was a fisherman and they also had a banana farm. At the tender age equivalent to a grade two child in Australia he was conscripted into the guerrilla army. He arrived in Australia as an illiterate teenager with no money and traumatised physically and emotionally by the war as a child soldier.

In 1987, together with other young boys, he was taken to the neighbouring country of Ethiopia for guerrilla military training. He endured extreme hardship including physical abuse by his superiors, disease and malnutrition. He benefited from the support of an Australian who did not expect anything in return, which for him illustrated human solidarity:

“One of my early Australian friends illustrates this point. He bought me my first bicycle and got me a job to mow lawns. Geoff died a decade ago, and I shall always remember him for his encouragement, his faith, and his investment in me”.

Deng taught himself to read and write before coming to Australia and in 2005 he got a scholarship to study law. He practices as a lawyer in Blacktown and was voted Australian of the year 2016 at the age of 32. (Adut, 2016)

Discussion

Do no harm

Becoming a refugee is a traumatic experience that involves multiple losses and trauma. While being resettled in a peaceful and developed country like Australia is supposed to open wide a door to opportunities, there are also many challenges. A ‘do no harm’ principle, developed by Mary Anderson in the 1990s and used in conflict areas, suggests that at the very least do not make the situation worse but aim to do some good (World Vision, 2017). To do the utmost to understand the client’s specific needs, cultural identification and orientation is a good starting point. Students in transcultural classes and workers in the field can be overwhelmed by the array of cultural backgrounds, even from one country of origin. The temptation is to have workshops on individual country or cultural groups. Hollinsworth (2013), however, cautions against that as generalisations risk oppressing individuals who don’t fit the general narrative. It would be seen as absurd to have a description of an Australian culture that applies to all Australians, yet we do that for other countries. Hollinsworth suggested that engaging and understanding individuals is a far better approach if workers encouraged individual clients to tell their stories and what cultural norms they subscribe to. Similarly working with families and communities would benefit from such honest enquiry that is not clouded by generalisations.



In the two cases it is possible for the students to explore what worked and why. In both cases the two young men from refugee backgrounds found people who were prepared to give them a chance or what Australians call 'a fair go'. Being offered apprenticeship was a fair go for Abe Gwada and he proved himself not only capable but exceptional. That was missing in his previous attempts at finding work. For the man who was to be Australian of the year, it was his Australian friend Geoff who got him a bicycle and access to a job mowing lawns. The scholarship to study law came later but it is the early support that he acknowledges as laying the foundation. The crucial people supporting both Abe and Deng had not stopped to do a workshop on Sudanese culture before embracing them.

A friend not just a worker

The codes of ethics are very restrictive on friendship and encourage social workers and other helping professions to remain professional, ethical and observe boundaries always. There is clearly a need to be ethical and to do no harm, but boundaries could also be barriers to engaging with people from other cultures (O'leary, Tsui & Ruch, 2012). Social workers have to ensure that boundaries are not there to hamper connection and create separation but instead they should strive for solidarity and to serve a shared humanity and valuing all people. This is consistent with both national and international codes of ethics.

There are no social workers involved in the two cases above but the role of friends and friendship is clear. Geoff was for Deng what a good social worker would have been. He became a friend, provided material resources and linked him to employment. Geoff also provided motivation and demonstrated his trust in Deng and that contributed to putting him on the trajectory that led him to him becoming a lawyer and Australian of the year.

A focus on strength

While refugees arrive with a range of deficits including loss and trauma, it would also help to identify their many strengths. They would not have found their way to Australia without having abundant strengths. Saleebey (2006) proposed that a strengths approach promotes hope and possibility, the vision of a better future and working towards attaining these goals. Francis, Pulla and Goel (2014) also support this approach in working in the field of mental health and



argue that it is consistent with anti-oppressive social work, principals of partnership, mutuality and empowerment in the process of recovery and building hope and resilience.

In leaving Sydney to seek work in rural New South Wales, Abe demonstrated his determination. By changing his occupation from landscaping to shearing sheep he showed how resilient he was. Similar strengths and resilience are evident in Deng who rose from being a child soldier in Sudan to a lawyer in Sydney, Australia. While these strengths are obvious in retrospect from the biography, strengths focused assessment by a social worker could have identified the strengths on arrival as well.

Everyone needs a mentor

It is normal for professionals to be mentored as they develop their careers and people arriving into a country as refugees or on humanitarian visas would also benefit from such support as they negotiate the complex process of resettlement. A migrant mentoring program in Austria showed that mentoring had a positive impact but it was important to match the mentees and mentors according to their attitudes (Neuwirth & Wahl, 2017). In Australia the Lebanese community has started a mentoring program with new migrants and refugees to impart entrepreneurship skills for those who wish to start their own businesses (SBS, 2016).

Deng does not refer to Geoff as a formal mentor but the high regard he has of him would suggest he acted as a mentor who made a significant difference to his life. Abe also had apprenticeship rather than mentorship but the two concepts can at times overlap. A mentor assists and guides someone in life skills with their wisdom and advice. Apprenticeship on the other hand means someone who tutors you in the particular craft you want to gain skills in. Someone can therefore be your tutor and also impart wisdom. Abe found in Grant a chance to be an apprentice but was further supported with a job and opportunity to provide mentorship to his own brother.

Rural and regional Australia

To ease congestion in metropolitan areas new migrants and refugees are being redirected to rural and regional areas in Australia and other settlement countries. Rural and regional areas are not as well-resourced as metropolitan areas and the range of employment and education is



also narrower (Mungai, 2014). There is shortage of skilled personnel so while there are challenges there are also opportunities (Chida, 2014). The people in rural and regional areas tend to be predominantly of Anglo-Australian culture while the new migrants and refugees come from a very wide variety of cultures and backgrounds.

Identifying the strengths of the refugee migrants and matching them with the opportunities available benefits both the new migrants and the host community. Abe being linked to farmer Grant produced such positive results. The commitment to work helps to overcome any real or imagined cultural differences. Social workers can play such linking roles. For students, the case of Abe can demonstrate the positive outcomes and what is possible when the right intervention is implemented.

Conclusion

In this article we have demonstrated how innovative approaches in transcultural training can shift from a focus on deficits to one that identifies strengths and promotes hope and resilience. Using positive cases with demonstrable positive outcomes shows what can be achieved. It is also shown that it is not necessary to collect an encyclopaedia of a particular group in order to work effectively with members of that ethnic group or community. Instead, it has been argued that letting the individuals inform you and together identify the strengths and dreams of a better future lays the foundation of a productive and positive engagements.

The cases can be used for teaching as well as assessments. The traditional approach is to present problem saturated cases with poor intervention and the students can identify what was done wrong and how to do it better. While the students can still learn from that about a whole range of issues such as racism, whiteness and privilege, poverty, disadvantage and structural deficits, the concept of the strengths of migrants and refugees is lost. A focus on the strengths and possibilities starts on a footing of hope and resilience without ignoring the challenges that must be overcome.



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