

Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Mental Health

Telling it like it is

"(I) have been to four different counsellors, but they don't have a clue. I never had anybody who had experience of people who have been in concentration camps. I felt that I was teaching the counsellors a lesson about Pinochet. By the time I explained about it, the counselling sessions ended... they had no concept of what it means to be forced to exile."

(Female, Latin American, living in Wales),
A safe place in Wales, Mind Cymru, 2013/14, unpublished

Finding a shared voice

We know that limited English language skills can hamper migrants from accessing services, but it is also clear that a lack of a shared cultural understanding is a significant barrier. By working with refugees and asylum seekers to enable their voices to be heard, we want to create a shared discourse which acknowledges differences, but rejects unhelpful stereotypes.

"Foucault (1980) describes how the prevailing social discourses shape our relationships with each other and the rules that we make which govern social behaviour. If discourses concerning refugees are negative, then society becomes structured in ways that respond to this perception."

Finding a voice through 'The Tree of Life', Gillian Hughes, 2014

Storytelling and mental health

Narrative and storytelling play an important role in a number of therapeutic approaches. They are particularly helpful in relation to the kinds of complex trauma faced by forced migrants who are often poorly served by more traditional Western treatments which tend to focus predominantly on their vulnerability factors.

"... there are many stories that a person can tell about one's life. The principle behind double-listening is that it opens spaces for the telling of both the trauma story and the response to trauma ... [which] provides space to validate and dignify the trauma experience while also creating opportunities to uncover and illuminate the skills and knowledges embedded within the responses that individuals and their associated community have enacted."

Using a narrative approach of double-listening in research contexts, Jay Marlowe, 2010

In short, we need to recognize that refugees are competent interpreters of their own lives, rather than, as one person noted, asking them "to prove that I was damaged goods" (Ibid)

"I don't like the term immigrants. We're people, it makes you feel uneasy."

"... in our culture you can't look at your elders in the eye, it's rude."

"What people find interesting to talk about in Zimbabwe, and what people find interesting to talk about here, are completely different."

"My solicitor referred me to a doctor. The doctor was a man; he asked me some questions but not what I wanted."

Storytelling and creativity in a time of conflict may seem like a frivolity, but they couldn't be more important. Human suffering is real, people are becoming displaced, and being killed and tortured. Storytelling can make audiences understand.

www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/why-refugees-need-tell-their-stories