An Illustrative Review of Protective Factors That Foster Resilience Among Refugee Populations

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Background

- Currently 70.8 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to war, conflict, and persecution (UNHCR, 2019)
- If given the opportunity to resettle in a safer country, many refugees still tend to experience psychological distress, often as a result of acculturative stressors in their new community.
- An abundant amount of research has focused on these negative factors (e.g., trauma, stressors, and distress) that follows a refugees’ path, but less work has concentrated on the protective factors that promote resilience.

Aims/Goals

- Review existing empirical research on protective factors that promote resilience (or the ability to adapt to challenge: see Masten, 2018) during resettlement among refugees.
- We relied on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and a strengths-based approach to understand how protective factors in various ecologies promote resilience during resettlement despite past traumas and current resettlement stressors.

Method & Analysis

- We searched scholarly databases (e.g., PsycINFO) using relevant key words (e.g., refugee, protective factors, resilience, etc.) where refugees were assessed (e.g., interviewed; surveyed) during resettlement.
- We limited our search to peer-reviewed journals that were published from the year 2000 to present.
- Thirty three (33) peer-reviewed articles were selected and reviewed.
- We created a table with participant characteristics, place of resettlement, variables (stress pathway of interest and protective factors), methodology used, and key findings for each study (available upon request).

Key Findings

- **Individual Protective Factor Themes**
  - Religion
    - Prayer was reported as a helpful method to overcome past trauma
    - Participants reported that religiosity allowed them to gain a sense of control
    - Participants reported religiosity as a valuable protective factor in a broad sense
    - Resilience was related to reduced psychological distress
  - Commonly Measured Coping Strategies
    - Problem-focused coping
    - Social support seeking
    - Engagement (active) and disengagement (avoidant)
    - Reflection and relaxation
    - Cognitive reframing (positive thinking)

- **Community Protective Factor Themes**
  - School connectedness led to resilience and increased wellbeing
  - Involvement in athletic clubs led to a greater sense of belonging
  - Friendships led to a greater sense of belonging and led to other connections
  - Religiosity was reported to be a healthy community function

- **Family Protective Factor Themes**
  - Participants reported that the presence of family members was a source of emotional support
  - Family cohesion was significantly related to decreased depressive symptoms
  - Participants reported extended family members to be a helpful support system

Future Directions & Implications

- Longitudinal research designs focused on protective factors, strengths, and resilience of refugees.
- Empirical research of protective factors among resettled refugee populations are important so improvements can be made to policies and programs.

Contact & References

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