

CONNECTIONS TO PEOPLE, PLACES AND SELF: INNOVATIVE METHODS IN REFUGEE YOUTH RESEARCH

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Introduction

This poster describes some of the innovative methods developed as part of a feasibility study that aimed to explore the social factors underpinning healthy resettlement for newly arrived youth.

Research questions

- How do newly arrived young people from refugee backgrounds experience settlement? What are the social determinants of health and well-being among refugee youth?
- What are the social contexts and factors that promote academic and social achievement for refugee youth?
- What factors underpin good futures for young people from refugee backgrounds?
- What are the most effective strategies for promoting and supporting mental and social health in the context of change and transition?

Background

Little research has been carried out to investigate the above questions. There is a lack of evidence to inform the development, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies which aim to optimize outcomes for youth from refugee backgrounds.

In the area of social epidemiology, there has been increasing interest in researching the factors that *support* and *promote* health, at both the *individual* (micro) and *community* (macro) level. At the *individual* level, there is strong evidence that social support and social connections^{1,2}, in particular the presence of a significant close relationship³, connections to community and place^{4,5}, a sense of optimism⁶ and the building of trust⁷, are all important determinants of physical and emotional well-being. At the *community* level, a solid body of evidence links aggregate measures of social capital with both individual and population health and well-being^{8,9}. A focus on social determinants, which promotes health for adolescents¹⁰, and more specifically among newly arrived refugee youth¹¹ shifts the emphasis away from risk factors (resulting from torture, trauma and forced displacement), towards understanding how to rebuild a "shattered life". Research also highlights the importance of current environments in shaping and promoting health, with a number of studies suggesting that this may be a stronger influence in young people's lives than past experiences^{12,13}. From a *methodological* perspective, investigating both individual and community factors and processes over time, especially among refugee youth, requires a combination of innovative approaches.

Aim of the study

The overall aim was to develop specific methods of sampling, data collection and follow-up in order to lay the foundations for a 5-year longitudinal study of the social contexts and determinants of health and well-being, with a specific view to:

- Identify the social factors that assist refugee youth in making a healthy start in their new country and
- Describe *in depth*, the contexts, settings and social processes that support, enhance and facilitate health and well-being amongst this dislocated and often traumatized population of youth.

A particular focus was on *successful transitions* during resettlement, for example, the first year in Australia, from the English language school to mainstream school, and from mainstream school to tertiary education or to the workforce.

Study design and methods

A feasibility study was carried out in 2000-2001 by the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture and Deakin University. The study was participatory and used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods including social circles, social status ladders, place maps and self-portraits in order to gather information about young people's health and well-being and settlement experiences. Information was collected about social connectedness, social support, connection to place and subjective social status.

Procedure

Data collection was incorporated into the classroom curriculum. Students were given "Settlement Journals" and information was collected through a series of exercises over four classroom sessions. Bi-lingual teacher aids and assistants worked with young people in small groups to complete the exercises. Follow-up information was collected using a variety of methods including personalised greeting cards, certificates, reunion parties and project reports.

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About this project:
This project is about finding out what helps young people who have recently arrived in Australia, settle well. We will be asking young people to participate in activities and provide information about their experiences since arriving in Australia, as well as their hopes for their future, so that we can learn what helps young people settle well in their new country. This will help us understand how we can better support young people and their families, to help promote their health and wellbeing.

This Settlement Journal:
This Settlement Journal is yours to keep, once the project finishes. We will collect all the yellow question sheets for our information, and will record the other information, but you will keep your photos, drawings and activity sheets. The information we collect will not have your name on it and it will be used to write a report for the project.

Results

Session 1: Who I am

The aim of this session was to gather information about the student's background, and information about self-esteem and identity, current living situation and subjective social status. Methods included:

- Self-portraits¹⁵
- Ladders of life designed to assess subjective social status¹⁶

Sample

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO TOOK PART IN THE PROJECT:
50 young people
12-18 years old

COUNTRIES YOUTH WERE BORN IN:
Bosnia
Burma
Cambodia
Chile
China
Colombia
East Timor
Ethiopia
Iraq
Italy
Kuwait
Lebanon
Poland
Saudi Arabia
Somalia
Sudan
Turkey
Vietnam
Yugoslavia

SCHOOLS/GROUPS THAT TOOK PART IN THE PROJECT:
Western English Language Centre - Maribyrnong
Breadmeadows English Language Centre
Young people from the African community

LANGUAGES YOUTH SPEAK:
Amharic
Arabic
Assyrian
Bosnian
Burmese
Cambodian
Cantonese
Kurdish
Polish
Portuguese
Somali
Spanish
Swahili
Tetum
Tigrinya
Turkish
Vietnamese

Activity: This is Who I Am 01
On this page, make a picture of all the things that would describe who you are. On the top of each ladder draw a picture of the person you are. Use your own drawings or words to describe who you are.

Activity: Ladders of life 10
Think about the people who you believe are most important to you. On top of each ladder draw a picture of the person you believe would be most important to you. On the bottom of each ladder write the name of the person. Use your own drawings or words to describe who you are.

The three most important things I want to have for:

This is where I am now on these things:

Session 2: Connections to people

The aim of this session was to gather information about social connectedness including family, friends, and important others¹⁷. Methods included:

- Photo essays of family, friends and important people in their life¹⁴
- Social circles¹⁷

My family, friends and other important people
Please place a photo of a family member in the box below and use the box at the bottom of the page to tell us about this person.

MY FAMILY

This person is:

Words that describe this person:

Activity: Social Circle
This activity is about all the important people in your life. Use the large piece of paper at the back of your binder for this activity.

Write in each piece of the circle, the names of the people with whom you have a close relationship in your life now. Next to each name write their relationship to you (eg. mother, sister, teacher, neighbour, cousin, and whether they are male or female).

Mark with a pink highlighter the people who are the most important to you; these are the people you can turn to at times of trouble or who will help you make important decisions. Mark with a blue highlighter the people you help or are responsible for on a regular basis (eg. sister, brother, grandmothers). Put a circle around the people who are from the same cultural background as you.

Activity: Me in 2011
Draw a picture of yourself in 2011 and draw around you pictures or words that describe you and your life in 10 years time.

This is ME in 2011! I will be 25 years old!

Activity: Me in 2011
Draw a picture of yourself in 2011 and draw around you pictures or words that describe you and your life in 10 years time.

This is ME in 2011! I will be 22 years old!

Connections to self: Me now and Me in 2011

Me now

Me in 2011

Activity: This is Who I Am Now
On this page, make a picture of all the things that would describe who you are. On the top of each ladder draw a picture of the person you are. Use your own drawings or words to describe who you are.

Activity: Me in 2011
Draw a picture of yourself in 2011 and draw around you pictures or words that describe you and your life in 10 years time.

This is ME in 2011! I will be 21 years old!

Session 3: Connections to place

The aim of the third session was to gather information about connections to place and the meanings of these connections^{18,19}. Methods included:

- Photo essays of favourite places, home, least liked places and places where young people felt they belonged.
- Place maps of young people's neighbourhoods.

Activity: My neighbourhood
Draw a map or diagram of your neighbourhood, in the area where you live. Name each place. Put a pink circle around the place you like best. Put a blue circle around any places you do not like.

Activity: My neighbourhood 01
Draw a map or diagram of your neighbourhood, in the area where you live. Name each place. Put a pink circle around the place you like best. Put a blue circle around any places you do not like.

Session 4: Hopes for the future

The final session focused on the young people's experiences over their settlement period and their hopes and thoughts for the future. Methods included:

- Self-portraits (based on them in 2011).

Lessons learned

- Innovation is critical for researching the social contexts and determinants of health and well-being among refugee youth.
- Both meaning and measurement is critical.
- Qualitative methods can be used for both meaning and counting.

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