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University-based services for asylum seekers on Guam: Empowerment, culture learning and community

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical frameworks addressing social support, community building, and the affective, behavioral and cognitive factors in coping with acculturative stress, guide an analysis of two interventions by University of Guam faculty, in support of Kurdish and Burmese asylum seekers on Guam. The article provides insights concerning the potential contributions of non-refugee specialist university faculty to services for refugees: persons in the most stressful of cross-cultural transitions. The authors discuss the ways in which both findings from traditional acculturation studies, and needs assessment studies of Kurdish and Burmese asylum seekers, guided intervention services rendered to both groups.

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“A unique source of support, often overlooked in the cross-cultural literature, are those providers who will remain forever on the fringe of the sojourners' social network. . . [These ties] are extremely functional without developing into more intimate relationships; yet their support is deeply felt in coping with daily survival” (Adelman, 1988, pp. 193–194).

“Words seem to be so inadequate to express our heartfelt thanks to you, but that is the only thing we can do. . .” (excerpt from a letter written to University of Guam volunteers by the Burmese asylum seekers on Guam, quoted in Peang-Meth, 2009a, 2009b).

1. Overview and purpose

An estimated 34.3 million refugees throughout the world present critical and daunting challenges to governments in receiving nations, United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and volunteers (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2009). These challenges often arise with little warning, and in regions that lack personnel and resources dedicated to the needs of refugees. This article draws on insights and experience from work with two such waves of refugees on the Micronesian island of Guam, to outline a role for non-specialist university faculty in addressing the psychological impacts on refugees of forced migration and transitions to receiving culture. The article also considers the roles of research in such initiatives.

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1.1. Refugees in the Western Pacific

Guam, a U.S. territory in the Western Pacific, with an ethnically diverse permanent population in 1990 of over 130,000 (U.S. Census, 1990) and an economy dominated by tourism and the presence of large U.S. military bases, hosted two waves of refugees during the late 1990s through 2002: 6600 Kurdish Iraqis evacuated to Guam by the U.S. military in 1996 and 1997, and over 1000 Burmese nationals who in 2001 overstayed tourist visas and sought asylum in the United States. The two waves differed in many important respects. The Kurdish evacuees were housed at Andersen Air Force Base and at a Marine Corps base in Tiyan, north central Guam. Though detained at these bases, the evacuees were drawn from pro-U.S. Kurds in Northern Iraq who were under imminent threat of attack or arrest by the Iraqi military and security forces under the direction of Saddam Hussein. These evacuees had received guarantees of eventual asylum in the mainland United States. Operation Pacific Haven, which coordinated the work of the U.S. Air Force and Marines with U.N. agencies and with NGOs specializing in services to refugees, along with volunteers in the Guam community, was relatively well funded (Global Security, 2005; U.S. Department of Defense, 1997). In contrast, the Burmese asylum seekers did not experience detention, being housed in the community, and did not receive services from government or U.N. agencies or from NGOs. They had no assurances of being resettled in the mainland U.S., and faced the strong possibility of involuntary repatriation to military junta-led Myanmar. Despite these differences, both groups evidenced strong needs for ways of coping with high levels of psychological stress; for information about the United States; for community; and for maintenance of personal and cultural identity, among others: needs that might go largely unmet without intervention from qualified volunteers.

1.1.1. Bridging potential gaps in services to refugees: roles for university faculty

Optimal responses to refugees derive from large networks of United Nations-affiliated agencies, government officials, NGOs, volunteers, and experienced professionals affiliated with permanent centers for refugee services (Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit, 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2009). Yet even these networks must address refugees' many needs by giving greater priority to some—including needs for protection from physical attack, disease, and hazardous natural conditions—over others. A partial list of needs among refugees, as identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2009) and by the Reach Out Refugee Protection Training Project (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2005) follows.

1.1.1.1. *Needs among refugees.* Refugees' physical and practical needs include protection from attack; safe housing; food and water; medical evaluation and health care; access to official agencies and to NGOs that may assist them; financial assistance; freedom of movement; legal counsel and information on policies in a language the refugees understand; and family tracing in cases of separation. Refugees' social and psychological needs include access to other family, to community members, and to other support networks; community organization; psychosocial recovery; emotional support; facilitation of self-reliance; information on the receiving culture; and gender-sensitive accommodation and social services (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2005). Of these, material needs and needs for protection from imminent physical threat frequently of necessity become relief agencies' priorities, leaving the possibility of gaps in the protection system: particularly, gaps in social and psychological services (cf. International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 2005).

1.1.1.2. *Resources available to universities.* Although some university faculty contribute services to refugees, such services often come from specialists, or apply the work of non-specialists to particular categories of needs. University faculty, students and staff involved in services to refugees may work through established centers such as the London Metropolitan University's Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit, and Oxford's International Migration Institute, or as individuals, to program and conduct research, and/or to provide services to academics fleeing persecution and to refugees having high levels of education or professional qualification; training for advisers working with refugees and asylum seekers; or coursework for refugee students (Council for Assisting Refugee Academics, 2008; Higher Education Refugees and Asylum Seekers Network, 2007; International Migration Institute, 2008; Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit, 2009). However, even universities lacking special facilities and specialists in work with refugees frequently have resources appropriate to occasional social and psychological services for refugees.

1.1.1.2.1. *Universities' missions, networks, and services.* Many universities have expressed institutional commitments to non-profit service, as outlined in mission statements, and have access to or networks with community leaders and the media (e.g., through public information officers). A university's faculty as well as its students will to some extent typically reflect the cultural and ethnic characteristics of the host community. To the extent that a university has some or all of these characteristics, we would argue that it has the potential to provide critical services to refugees in the same vicinity.

1.1.1.2.2. *Contributions from non-specialist faculty.* Non-specialist university faculty also frequently possess skills and expertise that may be applied to services for refugees, in support of structures and services in place, or in substitution for official service providers. These attributes include ethnic, national and religious diversity³; content specializations in applied cultural, cross-cultural, gender, historical, and political theory; in language training and translation; and in community

³ University faculty are also often drawn in part from outside the receiving community. This can have the advantages, including access to faculty with cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds similar to those of the refugees.

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