Culturally Appropriate Interventions to Aid African Refugee Adolescents Acculturate
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I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance with this written work.
Introduction

42 million people have been displaced because of civil or political turmoil (Baird, Boyle, 2011). The United Nations has defined 10 million of those fleeing as refugees (Hadley, Zolhates, & Sellen, 2007). Half of all refugees are minors (Ellis, Lincoln, MacDonald, & Cabral, 2008). 70,000 refugees are resettled in the US every year and make up 10% of yearly immigrants (Hadley, et al., 2007; Singer & Wilson, 2006). 29,000 of those refugees are from Africa (Hadley, et al., 2007). Especially in smaller communities, refugees can make a big impact on the resident population (Singer & Wilson, 2006). Nevertheless, even big cities feel the impact of the resettling of refugees. For instance, war in Sierra Leone between the years 1989-2002, increased the number of refugees, many of whom were settled in New York City. The school system was radically impacted as a result (Davies, 2007). And still African refugees kept coming. Liberians began to be resettled in the US in 2000, after a seven year civil war (Hadley & Patil, 2009). In 2006, it was reported that the political unrest in Africa has caused Somali, Sudanese, Liberian, and Ethiopian refugees to comprise most of refugees’ admissions (Singer & Wilson, 2006). Heidi Boas (2006), highlights two special groups that gained media interest: the Lost Boys and the Somali Bantu. The Lost Boys were a group of Sudanese youth who fled war and the risk of being forced into becoming soldiers, most having experienced the murder of their families. Christian organizations played a crucial part in the aid extended to the Lost Boys and the effort to resettle them in the United States. They were an easily recognizable, smaller group who were relatively easy to resettle. The Somali Bantu are a population in Somalia that were institutionalized slaves and had been banned from participating in the mainstream society since the 1800’s. It is a small wonder that such a diverse population is characteristically vulnerable in western culture. Specific focus is drawn to the “think line between vulnerability and empowerment that refugee youth straddle” (Akbari, et al., p65, 2010).

The plight and solution for the refugee is a complex one that must take into account culture, pre-migration factors, post-migration factors, culture of the host country and development of the individual. Professionals should strive to base their practice on evidence but the challenges to marry evidenced based interventions and services to refugees are significant. Furthermore, applying evidenced based practice to adolescents at such a critical part of their development requires understanding their particular situations. A number of studies have been done in host countries to understand different aspects of acculturation and all the research about acculturation and adolescents has been published in the past ten years.

Literature Review

Evidence Based Interventions (EBI) “are treatments that have been proven effective (to some degree) through outcome evaluations” (University of Missouri, 2011). Because of increasing demand for EBI’s as well as increasing cultural diversity in the US, there is a need for EBI to be culturally informed (Castro, Barrera, & Steiker, 2010). Due to rapid growth in diversification of the population, EBI’s have not kept pace (Castro, et al., 2010). There are challenges to creating culturally appropriate EBI’s (Castro, et al., 2010). Developing a cultural framework is also difficult because of the tendency to equate culture and ethnicity or ethnicity with nationality (Castro, et al., 2010). Furthermore, even within ethnic groups, there can be considerable cultural differences (Castro, et al., 2010). There is a need to recognize that culture is dynamic (Castro, et al., 2010). Nevertheless, it is necessary to develop EBI’s because the degree of cultural competence will positively or negatively impact the effectiveness of the intervention (Castro, et al., 2010). Not only do researchers need to understand the necessity for EBI’s but
also, in studying African refugee youth, it is important that a foundational understanding of adolescence is acquired.

According to Barber in his study in 1997, there are three experiences which contribute to healthy development of adolescents: connection, regulation, and psychological autonomy. Connection to stable relationships provides a sense of security (Barber, 1997). Regulation teaches adolescents how to self-regulate and decrease impulsive behavior (Barber, 1997). Autonomy helps them to develop their sense of identity and self-worth (Barber, 1997). Unfortunately, not only do African refugee adolescents have to navigate this process; they also have to undergo the process of acculturation at the same time.

Acculturation is the “process of moving to, living in and adapting to a culture different from one’s own culture of origin” (Poppitt & Frey, 2007, p 160). Culture provides us a way to create meaning in our lives (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). People in different cultures acculturate differently because of different degrees of stress and risk factors and differing opinions about adopting values (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Adaptation rate is influenced by a person’s ability to engage in acculturation, status, desire to leave or remain in the host country, and personal strategies to adapt (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). There are four strategies for adaptation that have been identified: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Integration is identifying with both cultures (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Assimilation is leaving behind the old culture (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Separation is not accepting the host culture (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Marginalization is not identifying with either culture (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Several studies have been performed, each taking a different approach to understanding how African refugees acculturate.

Family is the key to how well a refugee is able to acculturate and cope. A study examining the compound effect of trauma and extended separation looked at refugees migrating from two different geographical locations (South America and Africa) to the West, specifically, Canada (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, & Moreau, 2011). A major part of the refugee process is the separation that occurs in families (Rousseau, et al., 2011). Separation can bring feelings of worry about those left behind as well as guilt (Rousseau et al., 2011). Additional stress is caused because families are working individually rather than as a group on adaptation to the new culture which can increase feelings of isolation (Rousseau et al., 2011). The hypothesis put forth by the researchers was two-fold: refugees with traumatic experiences before migration are more negatively impacted by separation than those that did not experience trauma (Rousseau, et al., 2011). Secondly, it was proposed that culture affects the way families deal with separation (Rousseau, et al., 2011). Researchers found that separation was a huge stress on families and negatively impacted marriages (Rousseau, et al., 2011). Refugees who were separated from their family were not able to benefit from the comfort of relationships to relieve some of their distress (Rousseau, et al., 2011). Separation also influenced feelings of identity and it was found that being with family is critical to constructing cultural identity in a new place (Rousseau, et al., 2011). On the other hand, it was observed that trauma may positively impact families in strengthening them for adaptation in high stress circumstances (Rousseau, et al., 2011).

A study was performed regarding the wellbeing of Dinka refugee women from Sudan (Baird & Boyle, 2011). In interviews, these women reflected on the difficulty of upholding cultural traditions and adapting to an American lifestyle (Baird & Boyle, 2011). They expressed distress regarding their children who were also struggling with adaptation and as a result, adopting values that are not acceptable such as substance use and becoming sexually active while unmarried (Baird & Boyle, 2011). They were also worried their children’s identity crisis would
cause them to be unable to identify with either culture (Baird & Boyle, 2011). Another study done in Australia recognized the supportive role families play as their children go through the process of acculturation. Renzaho and Vignjevic (2011) proposed that parenting challenges are one of the main sources of stress because of the change of values and perspectives between generations. Pre-migration, group identity and authoritarian and corporal discipline is the norm in African culture (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Older children are expected to watch the younger children. Extended family is involved in child rearing and conflicts (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Group harmony and loyalty are the most important as well as respect of elders (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Migrations to places that have a higher level of income tend to be problematic because the new culture frowns upon many of these values (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Self-identity now is valued over the group (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Children are drawn to independence and family breakdown and distance are likely to occur (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). In light of this, an evaluation of a parenting intervention called the African Migrant Parenting Program was conducted (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). There were a couple of findings. Firstly, due to the intervention, parents had more realistic expectations for their children; there was increased empathy and less of an inclination for corporal punishment (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). However, parents did not change their perspectives about group identity and continued to discourage the independence of their children (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011).

The perspective of the adolescents themselves is highly important. Researchers interested in the impact pre-migration and post-migration factors have on the educational ambitions of adolescents in Canada engaged the experiences of African, Afghan and Karen adolescent refugees (Akbari, et al., 2010). The adolescents tended to recognize that pre-migration they did not have as many opportunities to further themselves (Akbari, et al., 2010). Many of them had a school history that was interrupted and progress was slow at best (Akbari, et al., 2010). Post-migration the youth were excited to be continuing their education (Akbari, et al., 2010). They shared three challenges they face as they try to complete their schooling: family responsibilities, information barriers, and language barriers (Akbari, et al., 2010). However, the youth seemed generally optimistic and feeling supported was identified as key to helping them persevere (Akbari, et al., 2010).

A case study method was used to study helpful strategies for Sierra Leonean’s transitioning to a western public school setting (Davies, 2007). The sample population was Sierra Leonean students in a transitional school in New York City that was helping to prepare them to mainstream into the regular public school setting (Davies, 2007). Davies (2007) found that school had a huge influence on adaptation. School support was crucial in managing stress (Davies, 2007). From the teachers’ perspectives, the small size of both the school and the classrooms helped them to be able to implement a variety of teaching methods to meet the needs of their diverse population (Davies, 2007). Several factors were found to promote the ability to adapt: “personal resilience, high self-esteem, high aspirations, and strong family support” (Davies, 2007, p. 375).

Attention has been given to factors that are liable to cause stress and the factors that are actually experienced as being stressful throughout the acculturation process. Sudanese make up the largest population for humanitarian aid in Australia but up until 2007 there had been no published studies on adolescents (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). The study by Poppitt and Frey (2007), focused on the stressors adolescents face and what causes stress. The sample population was 20 Sudanese youth in two different schools, ten male and ten female (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). The
themes of the questionnaires covered topics of ethnic identity, optimism regarding the future, language, feelings of being between cultures, parental control and relationships (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). All of the students identified ethnically as Sudanese but half of them also identified as part Australian (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). There was a strong desire to acculturate and optimism about the future was high (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Language was a major source of stress as they needed it both for school and for socializing (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Relationships were a source of conflict at home because it was expected that they would not have friends of the opposite sex per their old cultural norms (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). The students both wanted more Australian friends and missed family and friends they had left behind (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). The acculturative stressors felt were caused by ongoing situations such as constantly having to be between cultures and by single events such as incidents of discrimination (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Parental control was said by the majority to be the largest cause of stress (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Again, it was found that “the ability of adolescents to adapt to new social context has been shown to depend on the perceived security of family atmosphere and of parental-adolescent relationships” (Poppitt & Frey, 2007, p. 169).

The study by Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder (2006), looked at whether or not acculturation is experienced by adolescents the same as by adults. More specifically there were three aspects of acculturation studied: the experience of living between cultures, coping mechanisms, and the strategies adolescents use to engage both cultures (Berry, et al., 2006). Early studies assumed eventual absorption of adolescents into the host community (Berry, et al., 2006). However, Berry, Phinney, Sam and Vedder (2006) and Poppitt and Frey (2007), outline four strategies refugees and immigrants choose to acculturate. Four strategies are: Separation, National, Integration, and Inconsistent (Berry, et al., 2006). The sample population was 7,997 youth from 26 different countries, resettled in 13 countries (Berry, et al., 2006). Youth fell into one of the four categories. It was found that separation includes low assimilation and a high level of support for family values (Berry, et al., 2006). The national strategy refers to those youth with a high level of national identity, that is, identity with the host country, a high level of assimilation and a low ethnic identity (Berry, et al., 2006). Integration was characterized by high involvement with both cultures (Berry, et al., 2006). The inconsistent youth were those who had both a low ethnic identity and a low national identity (Berry, et al., 2006). Furthermore, it was found that “no relationships were found between adaptation scores on the one hand and age, length of residence, neighborhood ethnic diversity and parents occupational status on the other hand” (Berry et al., p319, 2006). Three additional findings were that adaptation methods of youth were similar to adults; integration is a quicker way to adapt; and discrimination correlates with poor adaptation (Berry, et al., 2006).

All of the studies reviewed were not randomized which would ordinarily be seen as to limit findings. However Ellis, et al. (2008) provides reasoning for not randomizing the sample size: refugees are in “hidden communities” which make it near impossible to reach except through the resettlement agencies (Ellis, et al., 2008). Additionally, much of the data kept by government agencies is not based on nationality but ethnicity (Ellis, et al., 2008). There is also the risk that out of fear and mistrust for government agencies, some refugees do not report accurate information (Ellis, et al., 2008). Lastly, there is a low level of response to surveys by refugees (Ellis, et al., 2008). There was a common usage of snowball sampling. Research tends to be qualitative with only a couple of studies using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. All of the sample sizes tended to be small except for the study done by Berry, et al. (2006). There were no longitudinal studies.
Suggestions for future research with African refugees include upholding cultural tendency for group identity and including the community elders and family in the decision making (Renzaho, & Vignjevic, 2011). Keeping the cultural framework will be helpful when developing new strategies (Renzaho, & Vignjevic, 2011). Additionally, religious practices should be considered as part of new interventions as they strongly correlate with wellbeing as well as promote community and identity (Baird & Boyle, 2011).

**Research Question**

As guidance for this study, it should be noted that there is no literature published about African refugees in North Carolina despite the fact that North Carolina has several resettlement agencies settling a diverse group of African refugees from many countries. Referring back to the points about EBI’s, it is important that the gap in this research start to be filled so that effective culturally informed practices can be created. Because of the dependent nature of adolescents on their families when trying to acculturate successfully, there is a need for interventions that address both adolescents and their families to strengthen bonds. The following research question is proposed: will interventions that include both parents and adolescents increase successful acculturation of adolescents?

It is hypothesized that the more successful interventions with parents are, the more successful the interventions with adolescents will be.

**Agency of Focus**

In January of this past year, agencies that serve refugees and immigrants in Greensboro came together to form the African Youth Development Task Force. The group formed in response to a growing concern for African refugee youth who were not adapting to life in the US in a healthy way. They face significant challenges as refugees and unique challenges because, although their skin color is black, they do not identify as African American and African Americans do not always accept them easily. The task force began meeting monthly to discuss strategies to engage the youth. In May, an African refugee young male was shot to death in a gang related shooting. The community was devastated. As a result, the task force began to plan a day retreat for African refugee youth that includes workshops, a soccer clinic, and a fashion show. The African Youth Development Task force and events such as this one will be the focus of this research.
References


