

CULTURAL EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF SOMALI REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL COUNSELING IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

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Introduction

- Growing number of refugees worldwide (20.8 million worldwide, according to UNHCR, 2006)
- Malaysia as a recipient of refugees
(Vietnamese boat people, Mindanao Muslims, Cambodians, Bosnians, Rohingya, Sri Lankans, Somali, Iraqi, Pakistani, etc.)

Status by 2010 (UNHCR)

- 86,800 refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR Malaysia.
- 70% of these immigrants/refugees are men, 30% women
- 18,500 children below the age of 18.
- 80,500 are from Myanmar
- 3,300 are from Sri Lanka
- 880 from Somalia
- 570 Iraqis, and
- 530 Afghans

(A large number of refugees is not registered with UNHCR)

Malaysia and UNHCR

- Malaysia is not a state party to the *1951 Convention* and its Protocol relating to the status of refugees.
- Malaysia continues to cooperate with UNHCR in addressing refugee issues on humanitarian grounds.

The Somali Problem

- Colonial legacy
 - Tribalism
 - Military dictatorship
 - Natural disasters (esp. drought)
 - Religious extremism – militant groups (al-Shabaab)
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- Mass exodus of Somalis – some of them to Malaysia
 - Why Malaysia?

The Problem

- Somali culture is very much different from Malaysian culture (more so than the other refugee groups in Malaysia)
- Given this cultural, linguistic, and racial difference, Somalis are expected to face significant cross-cultural adjustment issues
- This is exacerbated by the unique situation of people fleeing from war zones (issues of trauma, grief, etc.)

Objectives of the study

- To investigate the cross-cultural adjustment experience of Somali refugees in Malaysia.
- To explore the major cross-cultural challenges facing Somali refugees in Malaysia.
- To determine the main psycho-social adjustment and coping strategies of Somali refugees in Malaysia.

Method

- Phenomenological qualitative
- Observation, focus groups, and in-depth interviews with key informants
- Participants: 7 males & 3 females, aged between 19 and 45 years, five participants had been in Malaysia for only less than 10 month while the remainder had been in Malaysia between 1 and 7 years. 6 of the participants had lived in another country before coming to Malaysia.

Major Findings

- Key themes:
- post arrival experiences of the refugees,
- Challenges encountered in trying adapt to Malaysian life and culture
- coping skills/strategies

Post-arrival experiences

Theme 1: Malaysia's cultural diversity vs. Somalia's monoculture

- “Really, the first case is when I came to Malaysia the country is a Muslim country, and there is also other religions, and in that sense of religions there is something called many religions and with that these people with that different religions they live in peace together, and that is what makes me wonder. why, if I look I can take as example, I left Somalia where there is one religion, and whole population that is believing only that religion and they are not living in peace, and the people I came having three different religion and living in peace, it is what make me thinking, I came to notice, that became to be very wonderful, and I cannot measure it, and the people I left behind, we cannot say they are fighting over religion, and they are fighting and fighting, while having one religion they are taking onto each other guns and I met this place everybody is doing something, one is going to the church, another one to the temple, and another one to the mosque, and again everybody will go to his house peacefully, that is what really attracted me in Malaysia, and it is the first one.”

- *Theme 2: feeling peace and security*
- *Theme 3: style of relating and socializing not based on tribe*
- *Theme 4: Warm reception*
- “firstly it is the government of this country has welcomed us very much, because our passport where the very weak countries give visa with difficulty but we come here freely, when the government find some people whose visa expired the government do for us favor, it takes from us some few compound or sometimes no compound, now the government of this country has welcomed us very much and the society of this country are very good society, they are people of peace.”

- *Theme 5: The beauty of the country, cleanliness and many mosques*

Cultural Adjustment Challenges

- *Challenge 1: Difficulties with communication*
- “The language is the biggest things and with the biggest problem I am facing or all Somalis are facing, because if I could learn the language, or we could get some support how to learn, it could ease for us, we could get some jobs, we intermingle with people, and we do something good in this country, you get it, and we benefit them what experience we have, and we get experiences from them, so the biggest problem is, the key between Malaysian people and us is not there.”

- *Challenge 2: Financial difficulties and lack of employment*
- “what shocked me is that here I am refugee, and normal with a refugee there are problems he will face, when he is worried about his basic daily life, like what shall you eat, what shall you drink, where shall you sleep, when this happens and someone gets confusion in this domains the person will feel less confident and low self-esteem, his confidence 80% will go down.”

Challenges.... Cont..

- *Challenge 3: Cultural distance and difficulties to integrate with the mainstream society*
- “Yes, ‘That is the biggest problem’, so without connection have caused we keep in within ourselves, and we connect only with the other foreigners. Many things happen, like the most of the problem we are facing as Somalis, we and the hosting population there is not connection at all.”

Cont...

- *Challenge 4: Difficulty with food*

“When we go to this ones, (pointing to a new local restaurant), we eat from this one, we are not the same pattern, it is full of spicy and something I don’t understand, now that are some of the problem that are there, you cannot go to that (meaning Arabic restaurant at Idaman) because of the economy, and this one we are not same pattern.”

Challenge 5: dress codes

“In reality the dress its good, ever people they have culture and tradition, their clothe is their concern and mine is my concern, ee there is any complication, but in the real sense they way they dress, like the Muslim women when they put on trouser I really wonder, and really it is a culture that is different to the one we knew.”

- *Theme 5: difficulty in using technology*
- “Also astonished me is the train – LRT that is not driven by someone, and you will just guide yourself, with you intention where you are going, you will buy the ticket, you will manage yourself, and the train no one manages, you are seeing no driver, that also astonished me.”

- *Theme 6: Security concerns - Provocation by some gangs*
- “Really many things, they are many, the problems are many, they are very very many, ee sometimes accident happens, but because of few young boys, who are stupid and are four of them we cannot blame population of 26 million and now after that there some accidental happenings, ee that we cannot judge that but we mostly like those issues to be addressed, in the area Somalis are residing.”

Coping Strategies

- **Acquiring Knowledge and Understanding Malaysian Cultures**

1. *Trying to learn local languages*

- “yes, particularly the language, for me when I came here I put more effort to understand the Malay language, I tried a lot and now I am able to ask what I need, aaa I can hire or board the bus, I am able if I go to restaurant I can order some food, I am able to rent house using the language, I am able to ask question.”

Coping Strategies...cont..

2. *Previous experiences in other countries*

“Really it is too many, it is must once if you are not in your country you must have high patience, and you must be ready for both benefit and problems, obviously if I could not pass through those countries and not gathered experiences it could be very hard for me to be here now, when I came I could just run away straight away, my former experiences and the different cultures I have seen, the good and bad people I have met has allowed me to live with these people.”

3. Financial support from family and friends

4. Psycho-religious factors (esp. optimism)

“When I was coming, we came because of two reasons, the first one is that the UN will relocate people from here to Europe, and it has relocated some people recently, during of one year and less, the second thing, as you are waiting you can get education, and you can learn.”

Implications for Cross-Cultural Counseling

1. Multicultural competency

New emphasis of counseling profession (ACA Code of Ethics, 2005; AMCSD, etc.)

Multicultural Competencies:

Understanding own culture

Understanding client's cultures

Knowing effective multicultural interventions

Understanding unique situation of refugees

- Trauma
- Loss and grief
- Feelings of displacement

- Understand clients' day-to-day stressors (limited resources, a need for permanent shelter, lack of employment, or frustrating interactions with agencies) --allow time to understand and provide support related to these immediate needs, or help the client locate resources related to specific needs
- Knowledge of refugee groups: pre-migration traumas, and psychological strategies used to cope with stress
- Look out for symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and other mental disorders that may arise from experiences of war, imprisonment, persecution, rape and torture

- Allow time for clients to share their backgrounds, their pre-migration stories, and changes in their lives since immigrating
- Inquire about client belief's regarding the cause of their difficulties, listening for sociopolitical, cultural, religious or spiritual interpretations
- Carefully explain the therapeutic approach that will be used, why that approach was selected, and how it will help the client make desired changes

Counselor Roles of

- Consultant
- Outreach
- Advocate
- Liaison
- Change Agent

Thank you