

MEANING-MAKING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT FOLLOWING REFUGEE TRAUMA

Lisa Matos¹ (✉ lmatos@ispa.pt), Monica Indart², Crystal Park³, & Isabel Leal¹

¹ ISPA – Instituto Universitário / WJCR – William James Center for Research, Portugal;

² School of Applied and Professional Psychology, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA; ³ Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, Connecticut, USA

In 2016, the number of refugees worldwide peaked at 65.6 million, including internally displaced persons and asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2017), a small percentage of whom find safety in Western countries after long journeys frequently plagued with additional violence and torture. Once in resettlement, post-migration journeys include a multitude of stressors, such as discrimination, lack of economic opportunity and concerns about conflict and safety of those left behind, which are associated with mental health outcomes (Bogic, Njoku, & Prieve, 2015).

Extensive evidence has documented the negative long-term mental health effects of refugee trauma, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the main psychopathology associated with the refugee experience, often co-morbid with depression and anxiety in refugees resettled in Western countries (Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005). Despite the severity of trauma and ongoing distress, a growing body of literature suggests that survivors of refugee trauma often experience positive psychological adjustment and perceived growth (Chan, Young, & Sharif, 2016).

Traumatic events that are severe enough to challenge individuals' meaning systems, including beliefs about the world and their ability to envision future goals, cause enough distress to require meaning-making efforts to reduce discrepancies (Park, 2010) and rebuild shattered assumptions, leading to perceived positive life changes (Ramos, Leal, & Tedeschi, 2016). Perceived posttraumatic growth (PTG) then may occur

when individuals make sense of their trauma, with some studies showing it to be significantly related to psychological adjustment over time (Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). As with other populations, demographics, type of trauma, social support, religion and coping styles have all been found to be associated with PTG in refugees (Chan et al., 2016). In refugee populations, however, additional factors such as stage of the migration trajectory and culture also influence psychological adjustment.

The Meaning-Making Model

Survivors' efforts to cope with trauma often involve cognitive restructuring, which focuses on changing one's perspective regarding the traumatic event, and may lead to perceptions of benefits (Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007). According to Park (2010), all individuals possess general orienting systems – global meaning –, comprising beliefs, goals and a sense of purpose, which collectively provide them with cognitive frameworks through which they structure their lives and interpret their experiences. When faced with a potentially threatening or traumatizing event, individuals assign a meaning – situational meaning –, which is then compared to the individual's global meaning to determine its fit or discrepancy. Perceptions of discrepancy cause distress thereby initiating meaning-making efforts, requiring individuals to adjust views of the event or revise their goals and beliefs about the world to accommodate new information, and restore a sense of the world as meaningful and life as worthwhile (Park & George, 2013). Perceived growth is thereby precipitated by significant challenges to one's identity or to core assumptions that give one's life meaning, and develops as one goes through meaning-making process (Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007).

However, not all processes of searching for meaning nor all meanings made of the trauma are adaptive or result in perceived growth. Take rumination for example – if goal-directed, it can foster agency, whereas when focused on negative emotions, it is maladaptive and may lead to sustained distress (Michael & Snyder, 2005). On the other hand, for survivors of intimate partner violence, endorsing self-blame indicated acceptance of violence as normative, and represents an example of maladaptive meaning made of the trauma (Lim, Valdez, & Lilly, 2015).

Further, the literature highlights the need to examine all aspects of the meaning-making process (Park, 2010), because the processes of making sense of the trauma and the perceived growth may play independent roles in psychological adjustment (Schok, Kleber, Elands, & Weerts, 2008). This thorough examination may be particularly relevant in refugee populations due to the complexity of their experiences, journeys, and the role culture and community play in all aspects of recovery.

Refugee Trauma and Meaning

Refugees suffer unimaginable losses that violate beliefs and goals and rob them of much of what formerly gave life meaning and purpose. However, current theoretical frameworks of meaning-making are influenced by Western cultural traditions, examine single-event traumas, and conceptualize meaning-making as an individual process (Henrickson, Brown, Fouché, Poindexter, & Scott, 2013). Their applicability to non-Western individuals, who often belong to collectivist cultures, and who survive cumulative, community-impacting traumas, is uncertain. To understand how refugees make meaning following trauma, we conducted a literature review of empirical studies with refugee populations that reflect on different aspects of meaning-making processes, and attempted to organize them according to the meaning-making model and its different components.

Refugees' global meanings

All individuals possess global meaning systems that provide them with consistency, predictability, and a lens through which to see and interpret life. Since the manifestation of mental health symptoms and the meanings made of trauma are informed by culture (Schubert & Punamaki, 2011), the study of meaning-making in refugee populations requires rigorous examination of each population's culturally-informed pre-trauma beliefs and goals and sense of purpose. To further complicate the task, refugees recover from trauma and make meaning of their experiences throughout their journeys of displacement, whether they are living in protracted situations in refugee camps or have reached a country of resettlement, and

that process occurs in settings and cultural contexts different from those that previously informed their global meaning systems.

The refugee trauma literature has given some attention to aspects of refugees' belief systems, namely the role of religion and spirituality that anchor global meaning systems, or assumptions about the world, self and others (ter Heide, Sleijpen, & van der Aa, 2017). However, this work has focused on how those beliefs inform coping strategies or meanings made of trauma, rather than on pre-trauma meaning systems. By that point of the journey, goals and beliefs have inevitably been impacted, through varying degrees of acculturation, by place and setting, which are crucial in restoring refugees' sense of meaning and ability to live hopeful lives (Sampson & Gifford, 2010).

Situational meaning of refugee trauma

The persecution and subsequent forced migration to which refugees are subjected is plagued with potentially discrepant events, whether individually experienced, witnessed or feared. Those may require constant appraisal to determine consistency with refugees' global meaning systems.

As with other populations, resilience, coping styles or social support play fundamental protective roles from the adverse effects of trauma in refugees (Chan et al., 2016; Weine et al., 2014). However, there are aspects specific to the refugee experience that need to be carefully considered, namely how post-migration contextual stressors impact resilience, how refugees' cultures determine their coping strategies, or how protective agents and resources within refugee communities may frequently be overwhelmed and unprepared. Of note, protective factors that speak to the normalcy and expectation of violence in the refugee experience, such as 'psychological preparedness for trauma' in survivors of politically-motivated torture in Turkey (Başoğlu et al., 1997), have also been identified in the literature.

Search for meaning

But what prompts meaning-making process(es) in refugees? And which point(s) in their journeys? Although very little is known about what

initiates automatic and/or deliberate meaning-making in refugees, one aspect that has been addressed in the literature is the benefit of narrative processes to reorganize memories and integrate discrepant events (Morkved et al., 2014).

Additionally, studies with refugee populations indicate that searching for and finding meaning are ongoing processes of resolving discrepancies, and that strategies that were at one point adaptive, might become maladaptive under different circumstances, prompting a new search for meaning. Goodman (2004) found that the avoidant behaviors that had allowed the Lost Boys of Sudan to survive years of continuous danger and violence in Sudan, Ethiopia and then Kenya, were likely to become maladaptive long term in resettlement, while Southeast Asian unaccompanied refugee minors, who had successfully adapted to life in refugee camps, showed increased distress in resettlement due to lack of familiarity with cultural norms (Bromley, 1988).

Despite it being essentially an individual process, the literature also points towards the need to look at the role of community in meaning-making and recovery after refugee trauma. As such, social support seeking was found to be ineffective in reducing distress in resettled refugees from more than 30 countries, due to their often small, equally traumatized social networks (Huijts, Kleijn, Emmerik, Noordhof, & Smith, 2014), while resettled Karen refugees required their coping processes to be framed collectively by repairing damaged community structures, cultural beliefs and values, and strengthening indigenous strategies for problem-solving (McClearly, 2016).

Meanings made of the refugee experience

What, then, are the outcomes of the search for meaning? As we have seen, culture and community shape the subjective and collective meaning of trauma during refugees' trajectories, to the point where meaning-making may not even be possible in isolation (Henrickson et al., 2013). To the extent that refugees are able to regain control over their histories and journeys, and as agents with authority over their own narratives, refugees are also able to make different adaptive meanings. As an example, Burmese refugees made meaning of their suffering and ongoing persecution prior to fleeing through political resistance, whereas their

flight process was subsequently imbued with a sense of purpose (Shakespeare-Finch, Schweitzer, King, & Brough, 2014). Further, in some of the few studies that specifically looked at the meanings made of refugee trauma, refugees from Burundi resettled in Australia, endorsed silence as a meaning made (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2014), whereas in Armenian survivors of collective trauma, the presence of meaning was endorsed through forgiveness (Toussaint et al., 2017).

DISCUSSION

The ability to make meaning and thrive despite adversity is, as we have seen, an intricate process. In refugees, meaning-making is further complicated by added layers of complexity associated with the refugee experience. And yet, refugees are able to achieve growth and psychological adjustment, making it all the more urgent to thoroughly explore all aspects of their meaning-making process. However, very few studies have specifically investigated the construct of meaning. The processes and outcomes identified above were, by and large, from research aimed at identifying factors contributing to psychological adjustment in refugees, such as aspects of coping or resilience, but provide rich insight into the complexity of the process and pave the way to exploring different aspects of meaning-making in refugees.

There is a long road ahead in understanding the full complexity of meaning-making processes in refugee populations throughout their trajectories of flight and perceived posttraumatic growth. The literature gives us clues towards considering meaning-making a journey rather than an endpoint, which may be particularly relevant in the case of refugee populations. If refugees are able to make different meanings throughout their flight journeys as the literature seems to suggest, a good starting point for researchers will be to investigate what triggers search for meaning. Above all, insight into how these survivors, individually and collectively, make sense of their trauma requires of us, as researchers, the ability to recognize in refugees their own agency and the wealth of personal and

community resources that allow them to thrive and grow despite the trauma and violence.

REFERENCES

- Başoğlu, M., Mineka, S., Paker, M., Aker, T., Livanou, M., & Gok, S. (1997). Psychological preparedness for trauma as a protective factor in survivors of torture. *Psychological Medicine*, 27(6), 1421-1433. doi: 10.1017/S0033291797005679
- Bogic, M., Njoku, A., & Priebe, S. (2015). Long-term mental health of war refugees: A systematic literature review. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 15(29), doi: 10.1186/s12914-015-0064-9
- Bromley, M. (1988). Identity as a central adjustment issue for the Southeast Asian unaccompanied refugee minor. *Child and Youth Care Quarterly*, 17(2), 104-114. doi: 10.1007/BF01261353
- Chan, J., Young, M., & Sharif, N. (2016). Well-being after trauma: A review of posttraumatic growth among refugees. *Canadian Psychology*, 57(4), 291-299. doi: 10.1037/cap0000065
- Davis, C., Wohl, M., & Verberg, N. (2007). Profiles of Posttraumatic Growth Following an Unjust Loss. *Death Studies*, 31(8), 693-712. doi: 10.1080/07481180701490578
- Fazel, M., Wheeler, J., & Danesh, J. (2005). Prevalence of serious mental disorder in 7000 refugees resettled in western countries: A systematic review. *The Lancet*, 365(9467), 1309-14. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(05)61027-6
- Goodman, J. H. (2004). Coping with trauma and hardship among unaccompanied refugee youths from Sudan. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14(9), 1177-1196. doi: 10.1177/1049732304265923
- Henrickson, M., Brown, D., Fouché, C., Poindexter, C., & Scott, K. (2013). 'Just talking about it opens your heart': Meaning-making among black African migrants and refugees living with HIV. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 15(8), 910-923., doi: 10.1080/13691058.2013.790076
- Huijts, I., Kleijn, W., Emmerik, A., Noordhof, A., & Smith, A. (2012). Dealing with man-made trauma: The relationship between coping style, posttraumatic stress, and quality of life in resettled, traumatized refugees in the Netherlands. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 25, 71-78. doi: 10.1002/jts.21665

- Hussain, D., & Bushan, B. (2011). Posttraumatic stress and growth among Tibetan refugees: The mediating role of cognitive-emotional regulation strategies. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 67*(7), 720-735. doi: 10.1002/jclp.20801
- Lim, B, Valdez, C., & Lilly, M. (2015). Making meaning out of interpersonal victimization: The narratives of IPV survivors. *Violence against women, 21*(9), 1065-1086. doi: 10.1177/1077801215590670
- McCleary, J. (2016). Applying a collective resilience framework to refugees' perceptions of recovery from harmful alcohol use. *Traumatology*, Advance online publication. doi:10.1037/trm0000086
- Michael, S.T. & Snyder, C.R. (2005). Getting unstuck: The roles of hope, finding meaning, and rumination in the adjustment to bereavement among college students. *Death Studies, 29*(5), 435-458. doi:10.1080/07481180590932544
- Morkved, N., Hartmann, K., Aarsheim, L., Holen, D., Milde, A., Bomyea, J., & Thorp, S. (2014). A comparison of Narrative Exposure Therapy and Prolonged Exposure therapy for PTSD. *Clinical Psychology Review, 34*, 453-467. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2014.06.005
- Park, C. (2010). Making sense of the meaning literature: An integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life events. *Psychological Bulletin, 136*(2), 257-301. doi:10.1037/a0018301
- Park, C., & George, L. (2013). Assessing meaning and meaning making in the context of stressful life events: Measurement tools and approaches. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 8*(6), 483-504. doi:10.1080/17439760.2013.830762
- Puvimanasinghe, T.; Denson, L.; Augostinos, M.; & Somasundaram, D. (2014). Narrative and silence: How former refugees talk about loss and past trauma. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 28*(1), 69-92. doi:10.1093/jrs/feu019
- Ramos, C., Leal, I., & Tedeschi, R. G. (2016). Protocol for the psychotherapeutic group intervention for facilitating posttraumatic growth in nonmetastatic breast cancer patients. *BMC Women's Health, 16*, 22. doi: 10.1186/s12905-016-0302-x
- Sampson, R. & Gifford, S. (2010). Place-making, settlement, and well-being: The therapeutic landscapes of recently arrived youth with refugee backgrounds. *Health and Place, 16*(1), 116-131. doi:10.1016/j.healthplace.2009.09.004
- Schok, M.L., Kleber, R.J., Elands, M., & Weerts, J. (2008). Meaning as a mission: A review of empirical studies on appraisals of war and peacekeeping experiences. *Clinical Psychology Review, 28*, 357-365. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2007.04.005

- Shakespeare-Finch, J., Schweitzer, R., King, J. & Brough, M. (2014). Distress, coping, and posttraumatic growth in refugees from Burma. *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, 12(3), 311-330. doi: 10.1080/15562948.2013.844876
- Schubert, C. & Punamaki, R-L. (2011). Mental health among torture survivors: Cultural background, refugee status and gender. *Nordic Journal of Psychiatry*, 65(3), 175-182. doi:10.3109/08039488.2010.514943
- ter Heide, F., Sleijpen, M., & van der Aa, N. (in press). Post-traumatic world assumptions in treatment-seeking refugees. *Transcultural Psychiatry*. Accepted for publication June 2016.
- Toussaint, L., Kalayjian, A., & Diakonova-Curtis, D. (2017). Forgiveness makes sense: Forgiving others enhances the salutary associations of meaning-making with traumatic stress symptoms. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 23(1), 85-88. doi:10.1037/pac0000187
- Updegraff, J., Silver, R., & Holman, E. (2008). Searching for and finding meaning in collective trauma: Results from a national longitudinal study on the 9/11 terrorist attacks. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(3), 709-22. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.95.3.709
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2017). Global trends: Forced displacement in 2016. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf>
- Weine, S., Ware, N., Hakizimana, L., Tugenberg, T., Currie, M., Dahnweih, G., ... Wulu, J. (2014). Fostering Resilience: Protective Agents, Resources, and Mechanisms for Adolescent Refugees' Psychosocial Well-Being. *Adolescent Psychiatry*, 4(4), 164-176. doi:10.2174/221067660403140912162410
- Wright, M. O'D., Crawford, E., & Sebastian, K. (2007). Positive resolution of childhood sexual abuse experiences: The role of coping, benefit-finding and meaning-making. *Journal of Family Violence*, 22(7), 597-608. doi: 10.1007/s10896-007-9111-1