

Managing uncertainty; coping styles of refugees in western countries

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Abstract:

This article presents the results of a research project whose objective was to describe and analyse how people seeking asylum in the Netherlands² make sense of their experience. The broader aim of this study was to provide information that could lead to improved mental health care (Kramer, Bala, Dijk van, & Öry, 2003). This article accordingly ends with suggestions to implement the study's findings in other countries where refugees face uncertainty.

Key words: asylum seekers, coping, qualitative research, refugees

Refugees, fleeing from countries where they have been confronted with war, persecution, violation of human rights, danger and threats, are sometimes stranded for years in long-drawn-out asylum procedures whose outcome is unpredictable. Which observations, expectations or memories do asylum seekers interpret as problematic and threatening? Which experiences are meaningful to them and help them cope with life in a centre for asylum seekers? Do people attach meaning to these dire circumstances in different ways? Do they develop different coping strategies as a result of the meaning they attribute to their predicament?

The life of refugees in centres for asylum seekers

On entering the Netherlands, refugees are referred to an application centre where they

stay for 48 hours at most. The Immigration and Naturalisation Board (IND) is responsible for these centres, where refugees can begin the procedure of requesting political asylum in the Netherlands. If access to the asylum procedure is granted, refugees are then transferred to an investigation centre, where the first extensive interview takes place within three months. If the IND grants permission to live in the Netherlands while awaiting the outcome of the procedure, the refugee is then transferred to an asylum seekers' centre run by the COA (Central Organisation for the reception of Asylum Seekers). People sometimes stay in such centres for a very long time - some of them for more than five years - because of rejections, appeals, new applications and related procedural delays. Sometimes refugees are stranded in these centres through bureaucratic ineptitude, or through the lack of official documents needed to repatriate them. A new law, dating from 2001, aims to limit the time spent in an asylum seekers' centre to about six months. While researching this article, however, the authors spoke with people who had spent years in such centres.

During their research, the authors found approximately 64 000 asylum seekers in more than 150 centres spread throughout the Netherlands. The centres for asylum seekers are usually old buildings, former monasteries, schools, new buildings or an interconnected system of prefab units,

usually situated on the outskirts of towns or cities. Each centre can accommodate an average of 300 refugees. The centres provide lodging, limited medical, educational and vocational facilities, including Dutch language lessons and employment for twelve weeks a year.

Residents have limited privacy and face restrictions such as the cancellation of Dutch lessons. Once their appeal for asylum has been rejected, many asylum seekers feel unwanted here. Refugees' view of themselves as second-rate citizens is heightened by their limited access to work and education, and their isolation in centres outside towns or cities. Throughout the world, prolonged periods of uncertainty, social exclusion, rejection, discrimination and lack of perspective make refugees feel like second-rate citizens. (Van Dijk & al, 2001) Refugees have to adapt to a lack of privacy, sharing their living space with strangers, facing prolonged periods of uncertainty about legal procedures and reception policies. They are confronted by ambiguous situations and a restrictive asylum policy. In concrete terms that means living for years under constant threat of having their request for asylum refused, or of being forced to leave the asylum seekers' centre and look for somewhere else to stay, without financial or social support. How do asylum seekers cope with these kinds of uncertainties and threats? How do they make sense of them? What do they do to preserve their strength? And what keeps them going?

Making sense of the experience: the research methodology

Under the title 'Making sense of the experience', four researchers, a cross-cultural psychologist, a psychologist/psychotherapist, a medical anthropologist and a medical doc-

tor developed a qualitative, exploratory research method, and gathered relevant data. The research took place between February 2001 and July 2002 in one of the 150 centres for asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

The researchers decided not to use standardised instruments and questionnaires, in order to focus on the unique experiences of refugees living in asylum seekers' centres. Without intruding on the refugees' stories, the researchers did rely on theoretical concepts of the construction of meaning (Brunner, 1990, De Ruiter, 1996), on coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), including as a search for significance in times of stress (Pargament, 1997) as a general frame for the study. The researchers wished to develop a model based on observations and definitions introduced by the refugees themselves, within their own frame of reference. The researchers strove to maintain intensive contact with as many of the asylum seekers in one centre as possible over a long period of time (February 2001 to July 2002). The management of the centre offered the authors the use of a small room, a former hut designed to accommodate one person, which was otherwise used by the inhabitants of the centre and considered a desirable place, despite its lack of running water, because it was a single-occupancy hut. This hut provided the researchers with a place to invite people, to write in and when necessary, to stay overnight. The first respondents were selected by snowball sampling. The researchers took advantage of occasional and incidental contacts to introduce themselves. They informed the residents about the study and invited them to a general introductory meeting and focus group. They spoke with refugees at several locations: in the recreation hall, at the reception office, in one of the units, in pub-

lic areas, and in their own room when they wished to interview a refugee.

Observation, open and semi-structured interviews, in individual or group settings, were used to collect information. Focus groups were formed, comprising residents who spoke the same language and were willing to share their information with the researchers. Most of the contacts continued after the first encounter, and the researchers could intensively discuss topics relevant to their lives in the asylum centre. Issues that they found important were included in the study.

Out of 285 persons living in this asylum centre, the researchers spoke with 36 men and 14 women between 12 and 54 years of age, representative of the diversity of the resident refugee population. The research population was balanced according to age, gender, and country of origin (Balkans, Middle East, East and West Africa, the former Soviet Union).

The researchers began by asking the refugees what they were doing, what they had been doing the day before, what mattered to them, who was important to them and what they hoped would happen to them in the future. Each answer led naturally to new questions. The observations and interviews were written down, and this led to the development of more than 70 reports. After analysing the data, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 7 respondents in order to further explore the insights gained through the first part of the study.

During analysis of the research material, all transcripts of the open interviews were coded and ordered. The data were analysed according to the 'grounded theory analysis' (Glazer and Strauss, 1967). Concepts became clear after several rounds of reading and analysing the interview protocols.

Finally, the researchers could order these concepts into larger categories which formed a framework. Based on this process of classification, five domains that reflect important spheres of attribution of meaning, and four patterns of coping emerged. The authors unanimously agreed on the criteria for a given framework, in classifying the variety of asylum seekers' coping styles.

The diversity of the research team as to professional training, background and gender facilitated research and methodology. In the process of making contact with the residents, the researchers were able to make use of their own differences in gender, background and language. A male researcher might approach some of the men while a female researcher did so with some of the women. This did not lead to a strict division of labour - the male author also spoke with women, while the female author spoke with men - but the team valued its diversity and used it sensitively and effectively.

Ordering the attribution of meaning: the domains

The interviews with refugees revealed five relevant domains of their lives: self-image, social contacts, activities, perspective and balance. These domains reflect the main themes we found in the way refugees define themselves and search for meaning in everyday life. Making sense finally had to do with one or several of these domains. The researchers assume that the same domains will also be found in other refugee groups, but for the refugees in this asylum centre, three of the five domains were significantly restricted.

Many refugees reported feelings of loneliness. Their *social contacts* were limited, they missed members of their family, most of them had had minimal contact with other

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residents and rarely had any contact with Dutch people outside the centre. Refugees who managed to build significant relationships in these difficult conditions were in the minority.

Refugees have limited opportunities to engage in meaningful *activities* because asylum seekers in the Netherlands are forbidden to take permanent employment. The law allows them to work only twelve weeks a year, in a limited range of jobs, mainly seasonal labour. Language is another barrier in engaging in social activities, forming a psychological barrier to contact with Dutch citizens. Despite these restrictions, some refugees are creative in finding meaningful activities, opening a bar in the recreation room, organising creative activities for the children or delivering newspapers for a few hours a day.

Perspective refers to the refugees' attitude toward the asylum procedure, often experienced as blocked, because of the procedure's long-lasting uncertainty and unpredictable outcome. But *perspective* also refers to the people's objectives concerning the rest of their lives. The authors found that many residents had lost faith in the future, or could only think about the present and perhaps a day or so beyond. Few of them managed to think about the future in a broader perspective.

The restrictions on these three domains can affect refugees' *self image*, the way refugees experience and define themselves and how they are perceived by others. Many of the residents see themselves as second-rate citizens, worthless individuals, reduced to seeking asylum in a foreign land. They start to feel ill or depressed. Few of them manage to find inspiration in new contacts or experiences; others seem to wait, holding on to their former experiences and self-image.

Balance, the last domain, includes a general

evaluation that a person makes about him- or herself in the present situation. It is an all-encompassing attitude that includes the other domains. Balance is a dynamic process that changes continuously over time according to the experiences that influence the way people think and feel. For most residents, life in a centre for asylum seekers has become pointless. They resist and dislike the situation they find themselves in; some residents are more profoundly affected and begin to doubt the meaningfulness of life. Only a minority of the refugees in the Netherlands define their new experiences as positive challenges.

These five domains are sufficiently distinctive to cover and describe different aspects of the experiences of refugees in asylum seekers' centres. The researchers then examined the differences within each of the five domains, to identify patterns of coping with life in such centres. The following section of this article describes refugees' coping strategies and their practical implications.

Finding a way to adjust: coping styles

Refugees must stretch their capacity to attribute meaning to a new life of hardship and uncertainty, and to find ways to cope and adjust to it. The researchers found four different styles or patterns of coping: *the drifter*, *the hibernator*, *the fighter* and *the explorer*. People usually cannot be reduced to one single pattern, they tend rather to use various coping styles, context-bound and in combination. The researchers assume that new experiences, time and different surroundings can play a role in the selection of one coping pattern rather than another. To make this process more concrete, the authors will describe refugees' way of thinking and behaving that can be classed as a given pattern.

The pattern of the *drifter* is recognised in

refugees who believe that they have no power to influence the outcome of events. They drift in directions controlled by forces beyond their control. Feeling ineffective, drifters experience life as chaotic. The disruptions in their lives are many and the number of losses can be great. Refugees using this pattern of coping often do not see a way out; they tend to become desperate, believing that there are neither short-term solutions, nor opportunities for long-term improvement. Instead, their lives have become worthless. Sometimes they speak openly about the possibility of taking their lives. Social contacts and activities are very limited, often because they lack the energy and trust to invest in new contacts. The balance is negative, and this evokes existential questions. Sometimes other people notice the drifters' passivity and intense suffering and start to help them, or at least to give them some care and attention. Thus, despite overwhelming feelings of powerlessness, drifters are able to enlist the support of others.

For those whose behaviour resembles the *hibernator* pattern, time seems to be frozen. They remain fixed in their present situation, waiting for the future to arrive in order to go on with their lives. Refugees using this pattern live in the present but cling to what they had and who they were in the past. They try to preserve the image of themselves formed in the past. They make few new contacts, and, when they do, they choose familiar people, for example, refugees from their own country or others with whom they share their housing unit. Hibernators perceive their situation as temporary, and accept that their life is reduced to a minimum of meaningful activities and contacts for the time being. Hibernators avoid change; their balance remains neutral until they enter a new situation.

Fighters are active, looking for ways or pos-

sibilities of changing their situation. As long as fighters feel any control over their situation, their sense of personal efficacy stays positive. Fighters focus more on the external world and can be involved in all kinds of contacts and activities, some with an instrumental purpose only, and others with a larger scope involving the struggle for rights and justice. Fighters look for attainable goals; as a result, they can become narrow minded, seeking only one goal to achieve. This narrow focus can make fighters vulnerable because the loss of control may lead to a negative balance.

The pattern of the *explorer* is recognised in a few refugees who are open to new options and opportunities. They manage to preserve their positive self-image at least temporarily and/or in some areas of functioning. They are active and flexible, changing their strategies to achieve certain goals or even changing the goals themselves. Explorers usually think in terms of alternative perspectives. Through (re)interpreting situations and finding meaningful activities and contacts, explorers maintain a positive balance. Some even experience their time in a centre for asylum seekers as one of the most fascinating periods in their lives, because they meet and live with people from all over the world.

These four patterns that residents use to cope with their circumstances seemed to describe the variety of coping strategies adopted by refugees in an asylum seekers' centre in the Netherlands.

Similarities and differences within patterns of coping

How do the patterns of coping relate to each other? What connects and differentiates them?

During the search for answers to these questions, the researchers identified three

dichotomies which helped to explain the refugees' different styles of coping: chaos versus coherence, internal versus external locus of control, and low versus high degree of flexibility.

The first dichotomy that differentiates the coping styles among the refugees is *chaos versus coherence*, that is, to what extent people find their experience comprehensible, manageable and meaningful (Antonovsky, 1987). Antonovsky describes the sense of coherence as "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from internal and external environments in a course of living are structured, predictable and explicable (comprehensibility) (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by the stimuli (manageability) and (3) these demands are challenges worthy of investment (meaningfulness)". The *drifter* pattern differs from the other three types of coping because of the higher level of experiences of chaos, discontinuity, meaninglessness and isolation. In contrast, hibernators stick to old routines to keep chaos under control, fighters try to create predictable situations and outcomes, and explorers perceive their situation as explicable, meaningful and manageable.

The second criterion, *internal versus external locus of control* (Rotter, 1954), refers to the extent to which people believe they can influence the outcome of events, and whether they believe these outcomes are controlled by internal or external powers. Locus of control is about subjective experience, the level of control people feel they have in a given situation. Refugees in centres for asylum seekers have less control over their circumstances than do most Dutch citizens, but they still experience their limited influence in different ways and

to different degrees. Both drifters and hibernators feel dominated by external sources of control, and believe that they have limited influence over events, their situation and life course. Hibernators believe further that they have some limited influence in their immediate surroundings, but not in the outside world, where their perceived level of control is very low. Fighters and explorers, on the other hand, believe that they have control over much that happens, and can influence the course of events. Fighters have a strong sense of internal control and believe that they can change their situation because justice is on their side. Explorers see control and influence over events as relative concepts, and appreciate the limitations imposed from without on their abilities to manage their situation. They try to use opportunities as they arise, both when they feel powerful and when they feel dependent on others

The last criterion, *flexibility* or plasticity, is an "index of an individual manifest and latent change potential" (Staudinger, et al., 1995). People need to be flexible to adapt to new situations. Sometimes they need to revise their self-image and add new elements to their identity. Flexibility enables people make new contacts and find new activities. Flexibility provides a broader perspective that allows people to see possibilities in constrained circumstances, and to evaluate novel experiences in different times and contexts.

Fighters and explorers are more flexible than drifters and hibernators, and explorers are even more flexible than fighters. Fighters focus on finite targets, for example, legal status or an appointment with a medical specialist. In contrast, explorers change their targets, choices and strategies depending on circumstances and context. Flexibility is a core asset of explorers, and

contributes to their success in other situations and times.

Patterns of behaviour can be functional or dysfunctional depending on the possibilities of a given situation. People rarely find it easy to change patterns, especially if they have relied on them throughout their lives. There is also a range of flexibility within each pattern that allows it to be used more or less functionally. The best options for adaptation involve both flexibility within preferred patterns and the ability to shift from one pattern to another in response to changing circumstances.

Living with uncertainty: practical implementations

Uncertainty can have many meanings and effects on people. People in refugee camps outside Europe or in comparably unsettling situations may face various degrees of uncertainty combined with other difficulties that limit their functioning in everyday life. They can define different situations as uncertain and deal differently with this uncertainty according to the attributed meaning. The research described in this article looked at the experiences of refugees in asylum seekers' centres in the Netherlands. Researchers in other countries may adapt the implications of this research to their own circumstances.

Refugees live in centres for asylum seekers for prolonged periods, with limited opportunity to contact family members in their country of origin. Refugees often have insufficient information about the procedures that determine how long they stay in these centres. It is mostly beyond their power to influence their situation. At the core of the refugees' experience is a double dependency: others make decisions about their right to stay and force them into passivity. This unavoidable dependency

restricts refugees' abilities to organise their lives in their usual ways. Refugees often lack the crucial information necessary to make decisions. One of the respondents said that living in the centre for asylum seekers felt like living under a damp blanket.

People in refugee camps outside Europe may face different situations. Those facilities might be more crowded, afford less privacy, or pose more danger. But they might also offer greater possibilities for contacts, more room for initiative, and increased opportunities to earn a living and be in control of one's destiny.

Help providers³ can apply the results of this study in work with residents of asylum seekers' centres or refugee camps by using the concepts described in this article: the five domains, the four coping styles and the sub-categories that differentiate the patterns of coping. They will need to modify these concepts to fit the specifics of the refugees' temporary setting and their experiences and patterns of adaptation in their countries of origin.

Information and social support

Chaotic, unpredictable, indefinable, uncertain situations have different meanings for different people and circumstances. Some people can handle a lot of chaos and uncertainty while others may be unable to cope when their daily rituals have to be changed. Regardless of the range of individual tolerance, all refugees benefit from information and social support that reduce unpredictability, ambiguity of meaning and interpretation. Information gives people the hope of making more grounded decisions and increasing their sense of control. Information about arrangements made on their behalf, the rights and obligations of refugees, political position of refugees, and the availability of services can help people

come to grips with their lives and problems. Social support can help people to share and validate their experience and perception of their situation. It facilitates interaction with trusted others, which is the basis of interpretation, attributing and verifying meaning. Refugee centres should find trustworthy professionals and volunteers, with whom the refugees can build relationships so they can recover the belief that "there are still good people" who care (Kos, A & V. Huzejrovic, 2003), and who can become guides for the refugees as they try to make sense of their ambiguous environment. Trustworthy people can provide an oasis in an ambiguous and chaotic environment, and help people to make sense by sharing meaning.

Exploring options

Cultures vary in their attitudes toward and preferences for an internal or external locus of control. The belief that one's fate is in the hands of God or is predetermined in some other way may relieve anxiety and help people to accept and tolerate difficult conditions, including long-term uncertainty. But the belief that one's fate is in the hands of the authorities may increase the incidence of a sense of helplessness and powerlessness among refugees in asylum seekers' centres or refugee camps. Especially if they have been in situations where they could not do anything to change a threatening experience, they might become convinced of their own powerlessness, and respond according to "learned helplessness"

(Seligman, 1975). Thereafter, these people believe that they are powerless in both changeable and unchangeable situations. As a result, staff in refugee centres should help refugees to distinguish the changeable from the unchangeable, and assist them to channel their energies into influencing their circumstances and daily life, however limited the

possibilities. As F. Walsh (2003) formulated it: "Master the possible, accept what cannot be changed." How to survive long-term, limited or difficult conditions is a question about the art of living. Those refugees who manage to value the love of family members, enjoy the moments of meaningful contacts with others, take pleasure in walking through a nearby forest, feel good after meditation, after learning something new or doing something familiar, have already mastered elements of the art of living. Help providers should be ready to explore with refugees the hidden or undiscovered options that could make a few moments of the day meaningful; this would be a small but significant step toward the well-being of refugees living in limbo, and further their education in the art of living well in adverse circumstances.

Setting attainable goals

Flexibility refers to openness to change, resilience, the ability to reorganise and adapt to new challenges, and to maintain a degree of stability despite disruptions (Walsh, 2003). It combines continuity and change in a productive way. Awareness of one's feeling of continuity and belonging helps people to venture, to be open to new experiences. Flexibility can be the result of experience, but it can also be culturally influenced. Refugees have been forced to be very flexible because they have lost their familiar lives and have been forced to start a new one, usually under very difficult conditions. There are many stories of refugees whose lives had been well planned and goal-directed, and had included social and financial status, who then had to start all over again. How much capacity remained for change? How much energy was left to start a new life? How can help providers use flexibility to help refugee clients redefine their identity, roles and professional

skills? Flexibility can be connected to the strategies and targets that people consider important in their lives. Some people are more flexible than others and can change goals and the strategies necessary to reach them. When thwarted in pursuit of one target, they are able to search elsewhere for small attainable goals. Other refugees believe they are not ready or able to change further. Help providers can help refugee clients acquire the flexibility necessary to face new challenges by encouraging them to consider options and alternatives, to set small, attainable goals, to reach goals by changing strategies, or to change the goals themselves. One of the respondents in this study had experienced his life as blocked and without perspective until he started working at a farm to earn some money. After a while he began to enjoy the work itself and think with pride of what he had achieved during the day. Through this work, even though it differed greatly from his profession, he also made contact with Dutch people and started to believe that he could find satisfaction in the work. This made his daily life more meaningful.

Help providers working in refugee camps can use the patterns of coping to find out their clients' coping strategies; they can then use this information to tailor their interventions to those patterns of coping. They can further gauge their clients' functional or dysfunctional application of each coping pattern in various situations. After analysing how and when each strategy is successful, they can help their clients learn to use a strategy better, and to adopt other strategies better suited to a given situation. The hibernator's acceptance of a period of "frozen time" with equanimity, or the explorer's search for short- and long-term goals and alternative perspectives may be useful ways to deal with difficult conditions and uncertainty.

Conclusion

The study "Making sense of experience" may help providers with their thinking and work. Concretely, this means that help providers would try to find out the refugees' specific problems in a given context, how the refugees evaluate themselves within the five domains, which patterns refugees use to cope or adjust, and how useful those patterns are in context. The help providers could discuss with the refugees seeking help the kinds of changes within the domains that would help them to feel a little better. They could ask the refugees what they need to keep or re-establish a positive self-image or balance. They could help their clients develop meaningful contacts with others and become engaged in meaningful activities. They could introduce concepts of thinking in terms of small but attainable goals and multiple perspectives. They could encourage refugees to find new identities by becoming caring fathers, trustworthy friends or members of a religious group. Meaningful contacts and activities increase the quality of life under difficult conditions and should be fostered by clinicians. Further, they may explore with refugee clients both short- and long-term perspectives, things that can be done today or tomorrow to feel a bit better despite the conditions and dreams that cannot be realised at the moment, but which offer hope for the future. At times it may be necessary to create new dreams. Help providers can challenge patterns of coping by helping clients to see when their chosen coping styles are adequate and when other strategies might work better. Exploring the hidden possibilities within limitations, redefining and postponing dreams can be ongoing challenges, not only for refugees but for help providers as well.

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² We use the term refugees instead of asylum seekers because the latter term reduces people to a juridical position. The study focuses on refugees living in a centre for asylum seekers unless otherwise stated.

³ We use the very general term 'help providers' because we think that all kinds of professionals, mental health professionals, social workers, counsellors and others, could translate the findings to their own situation.