

MEANING, ROLE *and* SOURCES OF HOPE AMONG REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUTH

PIN

**I WILL KEEP
FIGHTING
AND THEN THE HOPE
WILL ENHANCE**

Mirembe, 15, Somalia

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Names have been changed to protect identities.

The primary objective of this report is to provide data on the meaning, role, and sources of hope of children and youth who due to different reasons had to flee their home countries. For better readability and simplicity, the term refugee will be used throughout the text regardless of persons legal status at the time of this research.

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Executive summary

The aim of this research was to explore the meaning, role, and sources of hope among refugee children and youth. A qualitative methodology was applied and 11 full semi-structural interviews were conducted with children and youth from 15 to 24 years of age, from 8 Middle Eastern and African countries. Thematic analysis was used, and 4 main themes emerged throughout the interviews.

The first one, *Nature of hope*, pointed out that hope is mostly viewed as something that can be learned and gained throughout life, and not as something we are all born with. Moreover, hope is perceived as non-linear, meaning it has the capacity to fluctuate during the life course, it can be enhanced but also decreased or lost, and sometimes it is closely tied to life events children and youth are facing.

The second theme, *Hope-goal interaction* is mostly referred to the highly frequent perceptions that hope is closely tied to particular goals, and is not general and independent. Some of the participants viewed hope as the last resort when there is nothing else that can be done and some of them view hope as the most important when referring to goals that are highly controllable.

The third theme that emerged, *Two sides of the same coin – function of hope*, summarizes that the role of hope is mostly two-fold – on one hand, it can serve as consolation, peace and calmness, and on the other hand, it can motivate and encourage to finish the started activity and to find strength.

Finally, the last theme, *Keeping hope*, highlights who, what and how something can be done in order to keep hope in refugee children and youth. It is noted that, in most cases, common sources of hope (e.g. family, friends) are not available, while other refugees on the road do not have the emotional and physical capacities to lift hope. Hence, the only available sources of hope mentioned by our participants is self-reliance (e.g. proactive approach, emotional regulation) and professional support (psychologists, teachers, legal guardians). Support in lifting hope can be various: instrumental, informational and emotional, while some qualities of support are also stressed as important in lifting hope – how we talk, our presence and continuity of support, and strictly avoiding providing fake hope to refugee children and youth.

Practical recommendations are mostly focused on informing evidence-based and comprehensive psychosocial practice in direct work with refugee children and youth but are also useful to any person professionally and personally involved in their lives.

This study provides strong evidence on the importance of conducting psychosocial programs focused on enhancing hope, with respect to the individual needs of the child and the complexity of the phenomenon of hope (e.g. acknowledging both functions of hope - consolation and motivation). More specifically, strategies of coping and emotional regulation can be useful tools to enhance self-reliance with fostering their mental health. It is of crucial importance to show that sometimes the best self-help strategy is seeking professional psychological help and that they do not need to go through difficult situations alone.

Moreover, professionals may have in mind that hope often emerges in the context of particular goals. Instead of setting one “faraway” goal, it is better to divide it into few smaller and simpler goals that can be achieved sooner and easier, in order to preserve the feeling of control. Nonetheless, it must also be highlighted that the comprehensive model of care must incorporate instrumental, informational and emotional help. Thus, multisectoral cooperation is highly needed.

When communicating with refugee children and youth, it is important to adjust voice, words and body language to make sure that message of acceptance and understanding is being sent. Moreover, it is highly needed to show presence and continuity of support, especially in difficult and challenging situations or emotional crises, along with showing authentic concern and will to help.

Finally, if there is a need to tell unpleasant news, it needs to be tactful and empathetic, with preparing the child and offering space to digest adverse news, but also informing the child why the situation happened and what are the next steps that can be taken in order to overcome it.

Even though these recommendations are broad and can be subject to adjustment with respect to a particular child/young person, situation, context and nature of the refugee-professional relationship, the main guideline is to always work in favour of, in agreement with, and for the needs of the child.

Introduction

Introduction

There are 26 million people recognized as refugees worldwide (UNHCR, n.d.), while over the last three decades, the number of children living in conflict zones has nearly doubled, and the 'Stop the War on Children' report from 2020 has demonstrated that children are the ones who have been disproportionately suffering in modern conflicts around the world.

Numerous studies have been conducted with the aim to explore the mental health in refugee population. For instance, psychological screening conducted in 2022 in Serbia indicated that 80% of refugees were assessed as psychologically vulnerable, while almost 7 in 10 refugees are under acute distress (PIN, 2022). Moreover, almost 96% of refugees residing in Serbia stated that they have experienced at least one traumatic event during their travel (PIN, 2021). In addition to refugee and migration related risks, children and adolescents fleeing or being displaced are simultaneously faced with development challenges encountered by any growing person (Ajduković & Ajduković, 1993), which also represent risk factors for mental health and psychological well-being.

However, it is crucial to note that despite numerous risks they are facing, not all children will be traumatized by their experiences. The study conducted in Serbia showed that refugee children have the potential and strength to overcome current emotional hardships and establish high levels of productivity and future functioning, and that 83.2% of children from the refugee community in Serbia believe they are able to achieve great things in life, while over half of refugee children consider themselves happy and are proud of what they have achieved so far in life (Vukčević Marković et al., 2017).

Introduction

Despite, vast majority of previous research focused on indicators of psychopathology, so the evidence on positive capacities such as hope remains scarce even though there are findings indicating they are important contributors to refugees' mental health. For instance, hope can predict post-traumatic growth (Kroo & Nagy, 2011), a positive change that occurs as a result of highly stressful and challenging life crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Moreover, hope can predict psychological adjustment (Maden & Pakenham, 2014), while some findings indicate that the sole talking about hope and hopefulness can contribute to enhancement of hope (Yohani, 2008).

Therefore, the main goal of this study is to explore the topic of mental health of refugee and migrant children and youth in a different manner - through the lens of hope instead of through the lens of vulnerabilities. Namely, the goal is to understand and map the meaning, role and sources of hope among refugee youth in Serbia. Moreover, the goal of this study is to provide practical implications and recommendations on how to organize a comprehensive and evidence-based practice that would increase hope in refugee and migrant children and youth.

Method

Methodology

For the purpose of this study, a **qualitative methodology** has been used. Moreover, in order to get detailed insight into the experience of refugee children and youth, face-to-face **semi-structured interviewing** was used as a method of data collection. In order to map common threads of meaning behind participants' conceptualizations of hope, **thematic analysis**, as a method of data analysis, was used. **Emphatic interpretation** of the data has been adopted for the purpose of this research, in order to map the experiences of participants as they were describing it, without the elaborated interpretation of the meaning behind their story (Willig, 2013).

Ethical approval was first gained through the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade (Protocol #2022-032). The participants were first introduced with the Informed consent where all the relevant information about the research have been stated: the purpose of the research, the right for withdrawal, how is their confidentiality going to be ensured, and with whom can they talk to if they have any questions or complaints about the research or the researcher. Informed consent adjusted to the age of the child has also been provided in the case of minors, in order to ensure full understanding of the terms and rights in the interview. In the case of minors, Informed consent was signed by parents or legal guardians. Each participant (and their parents or legal guardians) gave written consent to be audiotaped in order to transcribe the interviews verbatim, after which only written material was used for data analysis, while audiotapes were deleted.

Methodology

The interview schedule was constructed of the following interview axes: meaning of hope, role(s) of hope, sources of hope, and follow-up questions (e.g. regarding feelings provoked during the interview). The full agenda can be found in Appendix A. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviewers were two psychologists/mental health experts with experience in the refugee context. The interviews were conducted in English, Serbian or with the help of interpreters for Arabic and Urdu language. During the interviews, child safeguarding procedures of Save the Children and joint procedures were followed to respond to any actual, attempted or threatened forms of child abuse and exploitation. There were no cases of child abuse and exploitation that emerged during the interviews.

A total of 12 participants agreed to take part in the study, out of which 11 interviews were completed. This has been the case due to the emotional distress of one participant, to whom first psychological assistance has been provided, instead of continuation with the interviewing process.

Participants were refugee children and youth between 15 and 24 years of age who expressed the intention to seek asylum in Serbia, or who have been granted asylum. Children and youth are privately accommodated in Belgrade, or accommodated at the Asylum Center Krnjača, Integration House “Pedro Arrupe” and the Center for the Protection of Infants, Children, and Youth, in the children’s home “J.J. Zmaj”.

Two participants were unaccompanied and separated children, while three participants were with their families. The remaining participants were young refugees (18 years of age or above) residing alone. There were three female participants.

Refugee children and youth who took part in the research came from the following countries: Afghanistan, Burundi, Guinea, Iraq, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, and Somalia.

The process of interviewing: Insights and lessons learned

Hope has an important and prominent role in the lives of most refugee children and youth. Yet it seems that hope resides *under the surface* in that way that in spite of its importance and the wide impact it has, almost none of the respondents had talked or thought about hope before. Some of our participants got confused when first asked to talk about hope, not because it was not important, but because they were never asked to layer their experience in this manner. Sometimes, the first answers were broad and general, and it took some time to verbalize their thoughts. But as the interview progressed it could be observed that refugee children and youth started to better articulate their feelings and thoughts, layer their experiences and even distinguish and comprehend subtle changes and details. It almost resembled *the unwinding of the film*.

Moreover, it seemed that the sole talking about hope had been significant and impactful. The interviewees reported that they experience *positive change as a consequence of the interview*. Those changes mostly encompass positive emotions, consolation, learning and encouragement.

I feel I can learn something from this and also if I have some worries they can be solved (...) In a way that I am improving my hope – we were talking and I came to my past and now I'm thinking – ok, I got out from what it was, now the future will be bright. (Omaid, 16, Pakistan)

I feel so happy. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

When I first came here, I was a little bit nervous, but now I feel good, really, I feel relaxed, it's like I took something off my heart and threw it. I feel very, very good. (Aasir, 18, Niger)

In the future, whenever I say "I hope...", this conversation will run through my mind. (...) I know I'm going to be smiling all day, like laughing and being positive, although I'm always positive, really. But I will be much happier (Baasim, 23, Iraq)

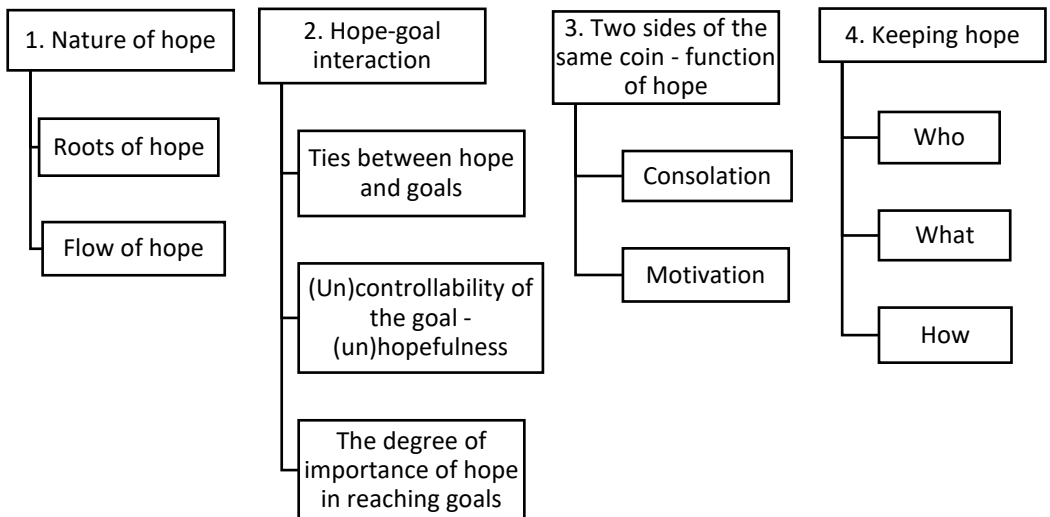
Results

Overview of the main results

During the analysis of the data, four main themes have been identified:

1. Nature of hope
2. Hope-goal interaction;
3. Two sides of the same coin: the function of hope
4. Keeping hope.

Schemes of main themes and subthemes are presented below, to facilitate following the structure of results.



These themes are going to be presented respectively, with subthemes by which they are constituted of. Each of the mentioned themes is going to be presented in the text respectively and with extracts from the transcriptions, while quotes from different participants are going to be presented under the changed name, in order for the anonymity to be persevered.

Nature of hope

The first theme that has been identified throughout the analysis of the data talks about the most fundamental aspects of hope: its origins, main attributes and characteristics. The theme nature of hope explains how do the refugee children and youth conceptualize hope in the broadest sense of its meaning. Not only does the theme describe what do the refugee children and youth think about the origin of hope and how come there are people who are hopeful in the first place, but it also talks about the hope as something that can change in its intensity and existence through the lives of people who are hopeful.

The theme about the nature of hope has been divided into two main subthemes: **roots of hope** and the **flow of hope**.



Nature of hope

Roots of hope

The subtheme **Roots of hope** refers to the notion of how do participants see hope: as something they were born with, or as something they have gained while growing up. Those who consider hope as something they learned to have had different experiences in terms of when they learned to hope. For some, hoping began when school began and when they had certain goals to achieve. For others, however, it began once they became refugees and were faced with extremely difficult circumstances in life. Although categories under this subtheme can be considered as mutually exclusive, this subtheme highlights the notion that hope is something that exists, although to different degrees of importance, in the lives of refugee children and youth.

Some, but not most participants, particularly those born in countries where religion and culture are closely interconnected, see hope as integral part of ones personality, something people have been born with.

We are all naturally hopeful. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

On the other hand, those participants who see hope as something they have learned how to have through life, which has been the case for the vast majority of participants, talked about the importance of other people who served as role models, someone who gave an example of how to hope and/or how to be (more) hopeful.

When I had exams, I was thinking „oh I’m going to fail, I’m not ready for that“. And then there was hope, my last teacher called me, and she said... she gave me hope. And after that, I tried again, and I learned, and I passed the exam. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

Nature of hope

Roots of hope

Other participants, however, shared that they became hopeful once they have been put in a refugee situation. This has especially been the case of those who went through extremely difficult journeys before reaching Serbia. For them, hoping began once they were separated from their families and familiar surroundings and when they had to face hardships and uncertainty alone.

90% of me becoming hopeful began on my journey. In my country I didn't have any experiences, nothing. I have never traveled; I have never been outside of my country, my home. We were all always together. I had everything, my family was there and I haven't had anything hard to work for, to reach some goal. I was still a kid of course, I didn't think about anything. So... but now of course you are on your own. (Aasir, 18, Niger)

Moreover, hope, being hopeful and hopefulness in general is being perceived by refugee children and youth as something that can be learned. Not only can hope be practiced through experience and through achieving smaller goals, but it can also be under the influence of other people who encourage you to continue aiming towards something that is important to you.

If we want or don't want, if we have a goal – we are practicing that automatically. For example, I want to get asylum here in Serbia and I want to improve my life. This is my practice, I am going to school and I am studying – this is my practice for that. (Omaid, 16, Pakistan)

Nature of hope

Flow of hope

The second subtheme **Flow of hope** refers to the changes in hope that happen throughout the lives of refugee children and youth. First and foremost, for children and youth from the refugee population, hope has been conceptualized as something that occurs gradually, step by step. Once someone achieves a certain, smaller goal, he/she begins hoping for a bigger one, and so on.

First we get handed the title of refugee. But then, if you don't understand the system, you just want to achieve everything at once. I am here now; I just want to be here. I need to go to journey tomorrow. It is a dream that is not possible. Even if you are going through a jungle, you cannot get there tomorrow. You have to work towards it. It is a step by step journey and so when you find that out, you put it aside. And you hope for something (...) and then you get to that lower step and go "Okay, I am here now", and you say you prayed and hoped for it yesterday, and today I am there. What next? You hope for another thing and get there step by step, and when you get there you know that it takes time but eventually I got there. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

Nature of hope

Flow of hope

Moreover, hope has been seen as something that has the potential of decreasing or even getting lost over time. Some of the factors that contribute to hope being decreased or lost include hardships during the journey, pessimistic comments from other people, not achieving important goals.

They caught me (*on the border*), the police. When I came home, I thought a lot. I thought like there's hope. (...) I hope. I hope I'm going to try this one again. I was hoping a lot but when I tried again, second time, they caught me again. Third time, they caught me again. Fourth time, they caught me again, so I lost my hope. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

As an immigrant, when you go through some journey in life, at certain times you lose hope. You are not hopeful because you don't know where you are and how you are going to survive. (...) So, at some point in time you just lose hope. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)



Nature of hope

Flow of hope

Finally, participants perceived hope as something that branches and grows as they grow older, learn new things, find new opportunities and especially get to know themselves, their wants and needs.

When you are growing up, you understand what you want better. Growing up gives you the ability to think ahead in the future. It opens your heart to what you were ignorant of before. We gain knowledge every day. At some point in time, we expand a lot, we expand our expectations. So, we have stages in life and the stage we go to determines what we are going to see, to hope for in the future. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

The older you get, the dreams change, because the way you are eager for something is because you already have the experience. As you get older you just know how to control yourself, your mind, your thinking, and you know the solution will come or not because you already got through it before, but I think the dream will never stop, because you never stop hoping. Every day you have a new thing that you wish to have. (Kame, 19, Guinea)

Hope-goal interaction

The second theme, **Hope-goal interaction**, refers to the notion of hope as something that is localized in the future, and that is therefore inevitably attached to a certain goal. Even though hope is almost always in close interaction with what refugee children and youth aim to achieve in the future, those aims and goals have to have some qualities in order for hope to emerge. For refugee children and youth, the mere features of the goals dictate the (amount) of hope that is going to be attached to it. Finally, although almost every participant talked about the close interaction between hope and goals, which is in itself an argument in favor of the validity of the theme, there were in fact differences in terms of degree to which participants perceived the importance of hope in reaching their goals.

The theme Hope-goal interaction has been divided into three main subthemes: ties between hope and goals, (un)controllability of the goal – (un)hopefulness and degree of importance of hope in reaching goals.



Hope-goal interaction

Ties between hope and goals

The subtheme **Ties between hope and goals** introduces the topic of the existence of goals, and its close relations with hope. Participants stated that they hope only when they have a certain goal they wish to achieve. Over and above, they stated that they see other people who do not have set goals in their lives, as people who don't have anything to hope for.

A person needs to set a goal for himself and then, of course, hope appears. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

Hope exists when a goal exists. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

People who have no goal have nothing to hope for. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

In my country, I had no experience, nothing. I've never been away from my country, home, a week, 10 days. We were all together, all of us. To me, everything is fine, the family is there, there is no need to try hard, to do something in order to reach the goal. I was still a kid, of course, you don't think about something. But now of course you have to be your own man. (Baasim, 23, Iraq)

Hope-goal interaction

Ties between hope and goals

Finally, participants talked about how once you become a refugee, you go back to hoping for the most basic things, such as surviving or getting residence at a safe country. This shifts have to put on hold the dreams you had before.

First when you leave you have to think about your family before you think about yourself. Because, believe me, the travel is not easy. It is very hard. It's not like you can take an airplane and go wherever you want. I never wish for someone to do something like that, it's very hard. A lot of people who get injured, who cried or say I can't, or ... it's very hard. Sometimes it's very cold, or very hot, rain or snow. So if I don't have that hope and I don't think about my family... If I hope I push myself and that's why I am here. (Aasir, 18, Niger)

My dream was always to become a permanent resident. If I had permanent residency, I do not know what I would be dreaming about right now. Maybe I would be dreaming about something like going to another country, going back home or going to America, Australia, or Brazil. Whatever country I wanted to go to. But for now the thing that (*i think about the most*) is my status. (Kame, 18, Guinea)

Now I just hope to leave from here, to settle somewhere in a safe country where my dad will come. (Saada, 21, Somalia)

Hope-goal interaction

(Un)controllability of the goal – (un)hopefulness

Another important subtheme, **(Un)controllability of the goal - (un)hopefulness** explains several features of the goal itself, that are inevitably closely related to hope. Some participants mostly hope for things (goals) that they believe are within the scope of their control. Their perception of the probability of a certain goal being reached, dictates whether there are going to hope for it or not. On the other hand, some participants state that they hope most for the things that are completely out of their control, and that they have no influence on. For them, hope is something that remains, after other resources have been used.

But we need to be realistic. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

I know that there is no possibility of seeing my father in this period, so I don't hope for it. (Mirembe, 15, Somalia)

To me, there are two types of situations. Ones I can't do anything about, that are not up to me. Then I hope more often because there is nothing else I can do. Like now, I can't do anything but to wait if I will be granted asylum. But for other things I can try harder, I can do something. (Saaid, 21, Afghanistan)

You can only hope for something that is not in your control, I think. Because if it is in your control, you will do it. You do not have to sit down and wait for it. (Kame, 19, Guinea)

Hope-goal interaction

(Un)controllability of the goal – (un)hopefulness

Moreover, participants talked about the role of socio-economic backgrounds of different countries, its connection to goals, therefore its connection to hope itself. Children and youth from the refugee population perceive countries with more economical power to have more to offer in terms of opportunities and dreams they hope to achieve.

If you take all (...) my country's people and you bring them here (*in Serbia*), they will all hope. Here (*in Serbia*)... If you have some wish and you push yourself here, something can happen. If you take Serbian people and put them in my country, they wouldn't hope anymore. Because if you hope, nothing happens. (Aasir, 18, Niger)

We don't have equal privilege. We are all born from different background. Some they are born from wealthy home, some they average, some are born poor, you know. Those that are born poor can only dream. To actualize their dream will be very difficult for them. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

I have a lot of friends who want to be a footballer, they hope, they are really good. They see that it is not possible. So now they try to be something, some are going to the police, some are guards, in the army. Because in my country the only job you can get is in the army. And it's just... I don't know how to say that thought. It is something ... you just do that and it is not interesting to you, don't have nothing inside. (Aasir, 18, Niger).

Hope-goal interaction

The degree of importance of hope in reaching goals

The last subtheme, **The degree of importance of hope in reaching goals**, presents the differences in perception of refugee children and youth of how much is being hopeful important in achieving goals. For some, hope is crucial, for others hope is mere an asset that makes achieving goal more easier, whereas for couple of participants hope has been perceived as having no importance in reaching goals. It is beneficial to note that the perception of hope as an asset that makes achieving goal more easier has been most salient, while two „extreme“ percptions – that hope is crucial and that hope is not important or wanted were more rare among our participants.

My father told me that if you want something, you must hope for it. Without hope you can't get anything. (Omaid, 16, Pakistan)

The goal is 70%, you know why you are doing those things to reach the goal, and 20-30% is maybe hope to help. (Baasim, 23, Iraq)

Before, when I was a child, then I studied and hoped - both. And now that I think about it, some things have nothing to do with it. If you hope to pass this exam and it will help you like that, then why are you studying? There's no need to just waste your time and just hope, pray, and then take the exam to see if you can pass. And then next time try to study without hoping, don't spend time on it and let's see if you can do it now. (Saaid, 21, Afghanistan)

Hope-goal interaction

The degree of importance of hope in reaching goals

What has been discovered is that two participants who stated they do not hope frequently exhibited some distinguishing characteristics that can be an important factor to understand their worldview.

The first one, Saaid, 21, from Afghanistan, stated at the beginning of the interview that he is an atheist, and mentioned that hope is more prominent among people who are believers. In the spontaneous speech, he even used verbs “to hope” and “to pray” as closely tied. He talked about how he felt hope was not changing the outcome, so he cannot see it as useful.

The second participant, Kamaria, 23, from Burundi reported that she has a diagnosis of dysthymia - a persistent depressive disorder. The symptoms of dysthymia encompass feelings of hopelessness, and that is why we can interpret her perception of hope at least partly in the light of her psychological state. Nonetheless, she committed a lot of time in the interview explaining that she is not hoping because hopefulness can be extremely painful if it turns out to be fake hope. She is not hoping because she wants to protect herself from unpleasant feelings that may emerge. What was important is that she described that her strategy of being unhopeful is having *the same function* as someone’s strategy to hope. She stated that those two are only different strategies to accomplish the same goal – psychological calmness.

Two sides of the same coin

- function of hope -

The third theme that emerged refers to the role and function that hope has in the lives of refugees. Hope often emerges as a resource to turn to in the situation of emotional crisis, when the person is scared, exhausted, in a depressed mood, or lonely. Hence the function of hope is most clearly seen in those situations.

The function of hope is seen as two-fold: consolation and motivation, and these two functions of hope were almost equally salient during the interviews, which implies their equal importance. Moreover, it is observed that sometimes the function of hope depends on the characteristics of the goals that are set in a way that reachable, realistic and probable goals more often provoke hope in the function of motivation, while unreachable, unrealistic, and improbable goals provoke hope in the function of consolation.

Thus, the two subthemes are: consolation and motivation.



Two sides of the same coin

- function of hope -

Consolation

This subtheme refers to providing comfort, protection from sadness, calmness, and the feeling that everything will be fine when a person encounters a stressful situation.

Hope is protecting you from sadness. (Kamaria, 23, Burundi)

It makes me calm. For example, I've just finished school and now I hope my dad will come and that makes me calmer. (Mirembe, 15, Somalia)

If you have some goal and you fail, you say "I hope everything will be fine" (..) and it makes it easier for you. (Baasim, 23, Iraq)

Within this, it is noted that participants mention two "actors" that bring these feelings – themselves with their own thinking and strategies of comforting, and others who provide support and comfort them.

Every night I go to my bed and I cannot sleep. I'm lying in my bed. Two, three hours, I'm just thinking what I'm going to do. I cannot decide (...) So, I just hope that everything is going to be good. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

In these situations, it is so hard, exhausting, you need someone to talk to you, to make it easier for you, it would mean a lot. (Baasim, 23, Iraq)

Two sides of the same coin

- function of hope -

Motivation

The second subtheme is mostly referred to the way hope enables you to maintain motivation, to keep on with a started activity, to retain self-esteem, encourage you and remind you of your strengths. That is perhaps why refugee children and youth talked about hope in the context of achieving a certain goal.

And I think that it can finally motivate you to try again and do your best. (...) Because without hope, you cannot do anything. You're just a failure then. You're unmotivated. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

Sometimes I get scared, how will I do this, how will I do that... But because I have hope, I have capacities that I will accomplish it, somehow it encourages me to move forward. (Haasim, 16, Syria).

Given the specificities of the refugee situation, the role of hope is sometimes recognized as that prominent, even as a factor that contributed greatly to the achievement of the goal – e.g. border crossing.

Because I had hope to reach to (...) this destination. I had hope to go to Turkey – I reached Turkey. Then I had hope to reach Greece. I was with my cousins – they tried 10 times to cross the border and they didn't succeed. But they lost hope. They went back to Pakistan. I had hope and tried once more and succeed to cross the border. (Omaid, 16, Pakistan)

Keeping hope

It is already described that most children and youth perceive hope as something that can be changed – enhanced but also lost. Moreover, hope is recognized as a positive quality and its benefits for psychological state and behavior were discussed. Thus, it is not surprising that the fourth theme that emerged refers to keeping hope or preventing its loss in difficult situations on the road. Here, hope was strongly tied to support.

Subthemes within **Keeping hope** are: Who can help in keeping hope, What can keep hope and How to keep hope.

Who can help in keeping hope

The core of this subtheme is understanding the available resources to turn to in the situation of crisis or a problem, that can lift hope of refugee children and youth. Participants generally talked about different support systems that can provide hope and comfort such as family, friends, religion and popular culture (books, music). But during the travel these resources are highly limited – often children and youth travel alone, without any person of trust.

In these journeys, no one can help you. Not even your family (...) your siblings. (...) Because your family's somewhere else, your friends are somewhere else. People you like or you love are not with you. (...) You are on your own self, you are alone. There are people around, you're in a group. But you are alone in that. No one can help you. No one. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

It is just like that – cops and beatings, nothing else. (Baasim, 23, Iraq)

Keeping hope

Moreover, it is reported that refugees on the road do not have the capacity to be supportive of others, since they are emotionally exhausted and under the same pressure to ensure their physical safety.

People are strangers, they are worried, afraid, they're scared, they're... catastrophic situations. No one can help. They're all worried about their own situation. They think of themselves. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

On the road, no one can help you and give you hope because they all have their own problems and they think about themselves and it's not selfish (...) they really don't have time and strength and motivation to give me hope. (Saaïd, 23, Afghanistan)

It comes to the conclusion that on the road, common resources are not available, and other refugees on the road do not have the capacity to be relied on because of their emotional exhaustion. And the question is what is left to refugee children and youth? Are there any other resources that can keep their hope on the road?

During the interviews, the most salient resource mentioned to turn to in keeping hope is – the person himself/herself.

Self-reliance is often mentioned as their own effort and improvement as a way to retain hope. Some of them mentioned proactive approach, empowerment, developing and motivating himself/herself:

I will keep fighting and then the hope will enhance. (Mirembe, 15, Somalia)

Improvement and development is my way to find hope. (Omaid, 16, Pakistan)

Keeping hope

Others mention their “inner talk” as a strategy of lifting hope through emotional regulation and personal expectation adjustment.

When I lose hope I’m thinking “I’m going to jump from that building, I’m going to do this, I’m going to do this...” But there’s one thing, sometimes it directly comes into my mind – “Wait. No. Everything’s going to be good. I hope so.” (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

And then you say (to yourself) okay maybe what I was hoping for I cannot achieve it now. Maybe I can divert and hope for another thing that I know is closer (...) You have to go step by step. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

Besides self-reliance, the only other source of hope left for refugee children and youth is **professional support**. The biggest gap identified is the limited access to professional support during travel. When present, professional support mainly referred to the role of legal guardians, teachers, psychologists and other people professionally involved in the lives of refugee children and youth. However, the importance of psychological help was recognized and highlighted by refugee children and youth.

Keeping hope

I had a lot of help from X. (*his psychotherapist*). The first time we talked, I felt like some kind of connection and I feel very very good with her. I trusted her completely. When we first talked I felt better. We had a good connection and I trusted her. When I am speaking to her I feel happy and better, because she knows how to speak to me. I don't know, she has something that makes me feel better. When I just call her sometimes I just say hello, how are you and explain her something, she always knows how to resolve something in 3 or 4 words. I really feel better when I speak with X. (Aasir, 18, Niger)

A psychologist, I., she gave me a lot of motivation and hope when I first got here and I had some problems in camp. It was terrible there. She made my life easier (...). (Saaid, 23, Afghanistan)

I don't know if you know Y, from UNHCR. I am in Serbia now, and big part is because of her. (Aasir, 18, Niger)



Keeping hope

What can keep hope

This subtheme is dedicated to the types of support identified as something that can lift hope. It is mostly focused on answering *what can a person* do in order to support refugee children and youth in maintaining or lifting hope.

First, participants identified **instrumental and informational support** as a tool that can help in lifting hope. This referred mostly to providing relevant information or connecting with relevant actors that can help, advising a person, and offering physical help and the information and the means to overcome adversity or a challenge (e.g. transferring to camp in a different city that better suits the needs of a young person, help from the school in taking the exam).

The second type of support that was perceived as being helpful in lifting hope is **emotional support**. When refugee children and youth talked about emotional support, they mentioned the situations when someone offered them comfort and encouragement, reminded them of their qualities and previous success in achieving goals and appreciated their past experience and adversities they went through.

They say “Keep on doing it. Still have hope (...) keep that courage”. They see that courage in you. “Just don’t lose hope”. (Kame, 19, Guinea)

She said “I believe in you, I think you can be something (...) you are smart, you are good”. (Aasir, 18, Niger)

“You’ve been a lot of bad stuff (...) but think about it - that you came from Afghanistan to Serbia!”. (Eessa, 18, Afghanistan)

Keeping hope

How to keep hope

This subtheme refers to the form and characteristics that support need to have in order to lift hope in refugee children and youth. First, it is perceived that **how we talk** with refugees needs to be gentle and adjusted to the situation.

You can't talk to someone that needs hope and be laughing. You need to talk emotionally. You need to talk hopefully. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

Moreover, the interviewees recognized that it is important for a person that is offering support to be **present in a situation of crisis**. Not merely a presence, but also a **continuity** of that support is highlighted, especially because some refugee children and youth had encountered people that have betrayed their trust (e.g. smugglers), and continuity is an important indicator that a person is really there to support the child.

At first, I thought it was "Bla bla bla" because she doesn't know me, she had just met me for the first time. But then every week she comes once, in a few weeks she comes another time. (...) And she is always there for me. Always. (Aasir, 18, Niger)

Additionally, it is noted that refugee children and youth respond well to the support that is perceived as **unconditional** and when they feel that the person **tried their best** to help.

You literally tried your best (...) Everyone here does it from their heart, it is not like "who cares, I do it for my salary, I have my own things to do", they all really care a lot. (Haasim, 16, Syria)

Keeping hope

How to keep hope

It is also noticed that the person **must not give fake hope**. Fake hope is perceived as the other, potentially dangerous, side of being hopeful. When a person promises an outcome that is unlikely to happen, it can have counterproductive consequences in that way that refugee children and youth end up hurt, disappointed, emotionally exhausted, and are losing trust in people and this may impact their future behavior and engagement.

People who hope, in my opinion, can get that big dose of sadness like BOOM, it's not ok. (Kamaria, 23, Burundi)

If you want to give someone hope don't just push them. You are in the poolside, and someone tells you "hey I don't know how to swim". And you say "ok I will teach you". And then you get the water, and you say "go like this" and you leave the person in the pool. How do you expect that person to get out? If the person does not drown, if the person is lucky, they will get out. But then the person will think "no one will ever teach me how to swim again" because the first person pushed and disappointed him or her. So, all hope is lost. For that person to trust another person to teach him or her how to swim again, it will be really really hard, and it will take a long time. Or that person may decide they will never learn how to swim. So that is how people lose hope. (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)

Keeping hope

How to keep hope

Nonetheless, in the lives of refugees that are full of stressful situations, sometimes there is a need to inform them about some outcome that is not desired or expected. But, as the participants described, there is a way to do this in a way that can prevent losing hope that the situation can improve in the future. Being **tactful**, empathetic, gentle, preparing the refugee and offering space to digest adverse news can be helpful. Moreover, the emphasis is put on **informing** the refugee why the situation happened, why that was necessary and what are **the next steps** that can be taken in order to overcome it.

I think the best thing do with those people is to get them seated before telling them they cannot achieve this now. Let them see the reasons. (...) Tell them (...) “this is the system”. (...) So, you have to give them the right information with the hope that if you don’t achieve this now you will achieve something else that will make you achieve that (*the goal*). (Leeda, 21, Nigeria)



Recommendations for future practice

Recommendations

The refugee children and youth conceptualize hope as something that is learned throughout life and subject to the influence of various life events. As such, hope is perceived as something that changes, which offers us a space to create an environment that would provide refugee children and youth a safe space to thrive and increase their hopefulness. Moreover, it is shown that sole talking about hope can have some important benefits for children and youth – it can increase hope and provoke positive feelings, and offer consolation and encouragement.

Thus, these results imply that it would be highly beneficial to refugee children and youth to provide individual or group psychosocial support programs that would focus on increasing hope. In the process of program creation, the professional must acknowledge that the role of hope is two-fold, offering both consolation and motivation and this complexity of hope must be mirrored in the program curriculum. Moreover, it also needs to be acknowledged that the cultural background of the child may be shaping the conceptualization of hope.

It is shown that being hopeful is strongly tied to goal setting and particular characteristics of the goals. This means that in direct work with refugee children and youth, it is important to make sure that the goal that is set is not too unrealistic, unreachable and uncontrollable. We need to divide big and complex goals into smaller and simpler ones, in order to maintain refugee children and youth's sense of achievability and control.

Recommendations

In line with that, instead of setting only one “faraway” goal such as starting higher education in the current country of residence, let’s first try to divide that one goal into a few more reachable ones. For example, the first goal can be getting to know the legal system regarding asylum granting, having a first meeting with the lawyer, etc. Most importantly, we must not promise outcomes that we know are not possible, probable, or in our control. For example, a lawyer must not promise a child that he/she will be granted asylum if we are not entirely sure it will happen.

Self-reliance is a highly salient source of hope among refugee children and youth, meaning that it would be beneficial to further promote their strategies of emotional regulation and coping strategies in a way that would foster their mental health. More importantly, there is a need to show them that sometimes the best self-help strategy is seeking professional psychological help. In addition, self-care can encompass relying on different non-formal sources of instrumental, informational or emotional support that are available (e.g. from teachers, legal guardians, etc.) depending on the challenges the child/young person is facing. It can sometimes be hard for refugee children and youth to let someone else in their lives, after months and years of relying only on themselves, but continuous effort need to be made to make them understand they don’t need to be alone in difficult or challenging times (for more guidelines on how to be supportive of a child/young person, see page no. 41).

Recommendations

This study also highlights that the complete model of care for refugee children and youth must incorporate each of the three types of support: instrumental (e.g. physical), informational and emotional. Regarding emotional support, the recommendation is to include, but not limit to the appreciation of past hard and difficult experiences, reminding of past success and present strengths, providing consolation and encouragement. In order to provide a comprehensive model of care, multisectoral cooperation is needed.

The research shows that refugees may face many challenges when providing emotional support to each other, due to exhaustion and concern. Therefore, if the professional is considering applying or developing peer support interventions in a transit context, it is necessary to consider these challenges during the selection of potential peer supporters and provide continuous support and supervision to peer supporters throughout the entire process. Peer support interventions need to be carefully planned in accordance with the need of each child, in order to prevent any potential harm and should not be seen as a default option for every child, every issue, and every context.

Recommendations

Finally, the whole subtheme *How to keep hope* can be used as a source of valuable insights on qualities of support offered that were brought up by refugee children and youth.

Each person professionally involved in the lives of refugee children and youth need to adjust their communication style and make sure that their voice, words and body language are sending a message of acceptance, understanding, and appreciation of emotions.

Moreover, it is highly needed to show presence and continuity of support, especially in difficult and challenging situations or emotional crises. Professionals also need to show that they are authentically concerned with the best interest of the child and that they will do everything they can to help and support them.

Finally, if there is a need to tell some unexpected and unpleasant news, it needs to be tactful and empathetic, with preparing the child and offering space to digest adverse news. Additionally, we need to inform the child why the situation happened and what are the next steps that can be taken in order to overcome it.

Even though these recommendations are broad and can be subject to adjustment with respect to a particular child/young person, situation, context and nature of the refugee-professional relationship, the main guideline is to always work in favour of, in agreement with, and for the needs of the child.

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Appendix A – Interview agenda

Meaning:

1. What is hope to you?
2. How do you perceive hope - as something you have always had or something you have gained throughout your life?
 - a) Do you think that some people are born hopeful, and some are not or this is something that can be learned or practiced through the life?
 - b) Do you think that being hopeful can be practiced in some way? If yes, how? If not, why?
3. Do you think that as you grow older, the things you hope for will change? If yes, how?

Role:

1. How do you perceive the role of hope in your life?
 - a. Have you ever thought or talked with someone about hope/hopefulness/being hopeful?
2. How important is being hopeful to you?
3. Have you noticed any changes in the importance that hope has had in your life before and throughout the journey?

Sources:

1. When faced with difficulties, where do you “find” hope?
 - a. How self-reliant are you in challenging situations?
 - b. Are there any other sources that bring you hope? E.g. family, friends, religion, education, societal norms and expectations, the wider community.
 - c. Which of these sources are most important to you?
2. Do you remember someone saying or doing something throughout your journey that has helped you feel more hopeful? (E.g. your lawyer, guardian, caregiver, CSO representatives)
 - a. Who was it?
 - b. What did he or she say or do?
3. Among those people, have you ever felt like you needed something more from them that would make you feel more hopeful?

Follow-up questions:

1. How do you feel now, after the conversation about hope?
2. Do you have any additional questions or something you would like to add?

WHEN YOU LEAVE YOU
HAVE TO **THINK ABOUT**
YOUR FAMILY
BEFORE YOU THINK
ABOUT YOURSELF BECAUSE
BELIEVE ME, THE
TRAVEL IS NOT EASY
IT IS **VERY HARD**...
A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO
GET INJURED, WHO
CRIED OR SAY: "I CAN'T",
OR... IT IS **VERY HARD**
SOMETIMES IT'S VERY
COLD, OR VERY HOT,
RAIN OR SNOW SO IF I
DON'T HAVE THAT **HOPE**
AND I DON'T THINK ABOUT
MY FAMILY AND EVERYTHING...
IF I HOPE I PUSH
MYSELF
AND THAT'S WHY I AM
HERE.

Aasir, 18, Niger



Psychosocial Innovation Network