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The Role of Religion in Coping with Refugee Trauma: Agency and Resilience

Abstract: Research and general discourse represent refugees in terms of helpless-ness and loss. This representation consigns their bodies to a mute and faceless phys-ical mass. This paper attempts to build a more detailed picture of who they are and present the role of religion in the agency and resilience of forced migrants coping with refugee trauma.

Three different approaches to the mental health of refugees will be discussed. The first two are concerned with disorder etiology, and the third is concerned with getting well. The oldest of the three is the War Displacement Model, which directly connects disorders in migrants' functioning with experienced wartime trauma, violence and loss. A second approach, the Ecological Displacement-Related Model, emerged from research concentrated on both the conditions of military conflict victims living in their country during the conflict and after they have escaped. The third approach is the ADAPT model (Adaptation and Development After Trauma and Persecution): it focuses on the conditions that individuals, who have experienced warfare and persecution related trauma, must meet to get healthy again.

Results from my field research conducted during 25 years among various groups of refugees including Bosnians, Kosovars, Armenians from Upper Karabach, Chechens and Syrians will provide examples of the role of religion in supporting agency and resilience amidst different hardships inherent in refugees' situation.

Keywords: psychology of religion, refugees, resilience, agency

1 Introduction

My entire academic career has been connected—and still is—with the Psychology of Religion. This borderline discipline belongs to Psychology and Religious Studies

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but gets involved with Cultural Psychology at times. That border is not easy to cross, as it will appear from two real stories I will tell you.

I call the first one "The Knife".

In the late Nineties, I was about to leave for my research trip among refugees from Kosovo. When I was almost on the threshold of the University building, a colleague stopped me and asked: "By the way, Halina, do you have a knife?". That was kind of a shock. "A knife? For what?" "You know... You are going to do research... You are going to meet the Kosovar refugees... They are Muslims, and they might be dangerous: they might rape you".

The other story reports events that occurred some years later during my research among the Upper Karabakh people.

They were Armenian Christians who came to Poland because of the war in Upper Karabakh; they went to the local Roman-Catholic church to see a local priest and ask for a memorial service for their compatriots who perished in the war. The priest met them with this simple statement: "Go to your sheikh". He couldn't believe that people from Armenia could be anything but Muslims, so the sheikh had to be the best option.

Speaking more in detail about the refugee groups I investigated over the years, they consisted of subgroups I researched in Poland (Bosnian, Kosovar, Upper Karabakh, Chechens, and Afghan refugees) and abroad (Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan).

I also participated in the research among refugee groups of *Scholars at Risk* (scholars who fled to Western countries because of persecution suffered at their home universities) and artists hosted by the ICORN Network (International Cities of Refuge Network, a protection network aiming at supporting persecuted artists).

Religious identities of researched groups were very diverse: Muslims, Christians (both Assyrian and Armenian) and atheists.

Multiple research groups, as well as multiple sites of research, taught me a lesson, which could be summarised as follows: do not essentialise refugees, and be careful with general labels attributed to refugees irrespectively of their other characteristics such as age, gender, country of destination and social capital they can bring with them. Such a critical reflection gets applied when building the analytical network to investigate the role of religion in coping with refugee trauma.

2 The Concept of Refugee Trauma

In the 1980 definition by the American Psychiatric Association, two aspects of an event implicate trauma: unusual character and the strength of the stressor.

> The stressor producing this syndrome would evoke significant symptoms of distress in most people and is generally outside such common experiences as bereavement, chronic illness, business losses, or martial conflict. The trauma may be experienced alone (rape or assault) or in the company of groups of people (military combat). Stressors producing this disorder include natural disasters (floods, earthquakes), accidental man-made disasters (car accidents with serious physical injury, airplane crushes, large fires), or deliberate man-made disasters (bombing, torture, death camps) (American Psychiatric Association 1980, 236).

However, over time this definition has undergone some changes. In the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the definition of trauma included a response to a life- or health-threatening or physical integrity-threatening event that a person experienced, witnessed, or had to confront:

> exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (American Psychiatric Association 2000, 463).

Thus, for the first time, the component of subjective perception of an event was included, which implies that not every person experiencing the same event will perceive it as traumatic.

The fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* underlines secondary trauma also caused by learning that such an event

> occurred to a close family member or close friend (in case of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental); or experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (American Psychiatric Association 2022, 301).

3 Building the Analytical Framework

Why do we need a deconstruction strategy while analysing religion's role in coping with refugee trauma? The brief answer is that we need it because of the competing perspectives on the role of religion.

Religion is conceived simultaneously as a positive factor contributing to survival under traumatic conditions, a negative factor causing refugee trauma, and a factor contributing to recovery after refugee trauma.

Deconstructing competing perspectives and theoretical concepts is necessary to enhance further understanding of the problem.

The deconstruction of the concepts is in the service of diversity: we need to specify sub-categories of refugees (their location, age, background, gender, and family situation); we need to detail different periods in their refugeehood; and finally, we also have to be careful about which methodological paradigms and research methods are employed by researchers who approach refugees, and offer their findings after analysis of collected research material.

Conducting such deconstruction will give justice to the diversity of subgroups in the refugee population and contribute further to the theoretical, analytical framework of analysis.

Two theoretical concepts are particularly relevant here. They are resilience and agency.

Resilience, as defined by the Dictionary of the American Psychological Association (VandenBos 2007), is the successful adaptation through flexibility to complex or challenging life experiences creating mental, emotional, and behavioural demands. There are several factors contributing to resilience: just to name a few, how individuals view and engage with the world, the availability and quality of social resources, and the specific coping strategies employed by the individuals. In the case of refugee groups, one more contributing factor is the specificity of the reaction of a particular receiving country *vis à vis* refugees.

Agency is the capability to influence one's functioning and the course of events through one's actions (Bandura 1989). The pillars of agency are the following: intentionality—action plans and strategies; anticipation—ability and process to envisage an outcome of the action and act accordingly toward it; self-reactivity—self-regulatory processes that integrate thought and action; and self-reflection—ability to reflect upon own behaviours, awareness of motives and inspirations bringing desired outcomes. The individual intends to influence the situation in a certain way because of the specific output, intention, reflection, expectation of results of the one's action, and a reflection of what might happen as the result of an undertaken activity.

The concepts of agency and resilience are intertwined. Figure 1 demonstrates the intricate structure of this mutual relationship.
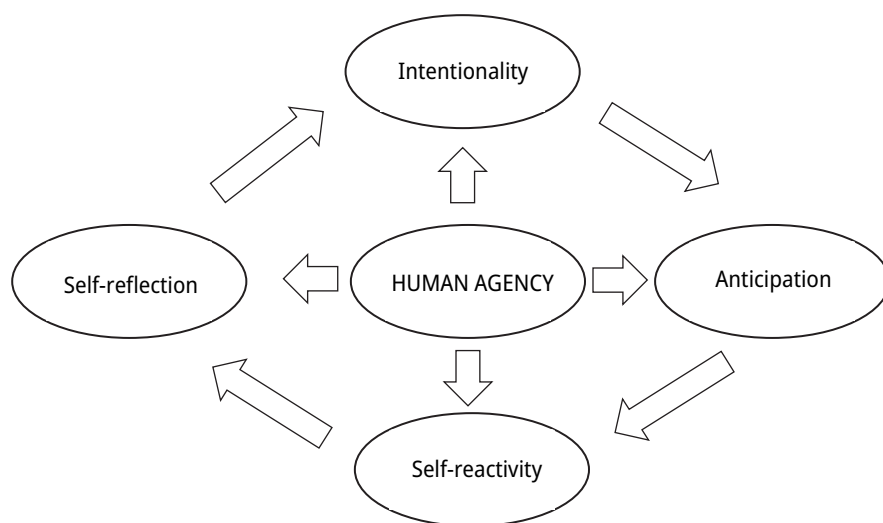
Fig. 1: Psychological Agency (Lima, Nassif and Garçon 2020)

Resilience after refugee trauma is a precondition for restoring agency. Agency will not be present if people do not end the process with adaptation. Therefore, agency demonstrates restored resilience and aims at getting control of and activity in the situation.

4 Defining Refugees

Many are the legal definitions of refugees provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and many other organisations. However, none of these definitions would help us get more information on or better understand from a psychological perspective who the refugees are.

To properly analyse the issue of diversity and understand why this category is beneficial, we need to look at specific sub-categories of refugees: their location, age, background, gender, and family situation.

Speaking of refugees, especially in the media, we often talk about a faceless crowd in which an individual is very hardly seen. The idea of a faceless crowd usually connects to a specific perspective on the refugees: a victim perspective, an attitude of someone passive, who is just a victim, and that is the very opposite of the active, resilient, and agentic perspective. This is the first reason why differentiation is worth being recognised.

The second differentiation is that of refugees' specific location and background. As an example, the definition of "Syrian refugees" can easily describe rural Syrian families on the Syrian-Turkish border in Hatay or urban, single, and educated male refugees in Berlin or Istanbul.

The picture presented in figure 2[1] explains a lot about the category of refugees and the meaning of religion for them. This is a picture of twenty-five years old Iman, a Syrian mother forced from her home: when the photo was taken, she lived in a refugee camp in Turkey with her children. Her most precious possession was a copy of the Qur'an, which she said connected her to God.

Religion conveys not only a connection to God, but it can also connect refugees with their new locality.

Fig. 2: Iman, 25, with her son Ahmed and daughter Aishia, in Nizip refugee camp, Turkey.
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For example, a group of Syrian women who were urban refugees in Turkey told the interviewer that teaching their Turkish neighbours to read the Qur'an was a way of building a connection with the new locality (Grzymała-Moszczyńska 2019b). In this sense, religion supports resiliency as an adaptation to

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1 See also: https://www.unhcr.org/spotlight/2019/05/most-important-thing-global/

a new situation and helps to regain agency in building bridges towards new neighbours.

However, a word of caution. We must be careful and remember that sometimes a local situation might contribute to a lack of support for refugees despite the shared religion between the refugees and locals. I am referring to my research in Aqaba (Jordan), where Syrian refugees living outside the camp were not supported, even in the way of offering some jobs to the boys or men by the local population. When asked why this happened, locals answered, "Well, you know... We have such hardships with finding jobs because of the economic situation in Jordan: we cannot afford to support refugees as well" (Grzymała-Moszczyńska 2019a).

Further on, another aspect that helps grasp the differences among refugees relates to the moment when the refugees are researched. Generally speaking, we can divide periods of refugeehood and the role of religion into three different time intervals: location, dislocation, and relocation. Location is when people are still in their place of origin. Dislocation is when people are running to safety. And relocation means people try to get new placement and get rooted in the new placement. Each of these contexts requires, supports or constricts resilience and agency of refugees and employs religion in a different capacity.

As field researchers, we very often encounter refugees just at a specific moment of their lives. We keep forgetting that they are connected to much more extended periods and more differentiated locations they went through before we met them, and that we have just a peek, a snapshot of their situation; we hardly ever follow the dynamic of the refugeehood process.

Speaking of location, the role of religion in the location where future refugees used to live is often boundary-making and stigmatising. Among people involved in ethnic cleansing, religion is the factor that causes them to be labelled as enemies; persecution and sometimes retaliation makes people fly from their local place. Also, religion can be used as an oppression tool to restore proper moral norms (e.g. in Chechnya, where military forces loyal to the pro-Russian government kidnap women and torture men because they call them infidels and justify their deeds by restoration of proper moral norms) (Grzymała-Moszczyńska 2018). Moreover, religion could be a tool for persecuting religious dissenters and atheists. The groups I have mentioned earlier, those of refugee artists and Scholars at Risk, are connected to this role of religion.

If people decide to flee the country, they enter the second period of refugeehood: dislocation. Different models help us understand the role of religion during dislocation (Miller and Rasmussen 2010).

The first one is the War Displacement Model. In this model, which is chiefly connected to disorders in migrants' functioning because of wartime trauma,

violence, and loss, there is no referral to religion. Therefore, religion is not a factor which is taken into consideration.

In the second model, the Ecological Displacement-Related Model, religion appears in two roles, as the cage and as the bridge: it can help refugees join the new community, or it can act as a restrictive tool that keeps them on the side of enemies. Also, during the escape route, religion is often vital—and sometimes the only way—to help people retain hope in a hopeless situation. The Ecological Displacement Model considers not only dangerous flights but also dangerous refugee camps: once again, religion plays a double role as the bridge and the cage.

The third situation is relocation, described by the ADAPT (Adaptation and Development After Trauma and Persecution) Model created by Australian psychiatrist Derrick Silove (2013). Silove is the only scholar paying explicit attention to the role of religion as a possible tool, helping reconstruct the meaning of life through bridging past and present, old and new life. I think that is very important because religion gets its placement, which helps to understand why people need religion to get meaning in life after the traumas they experienced.

Figure 3 presents another picture which illustrates the value of the ADAPT Model[2]. This is a picture of a war refugee Elizabeth from Angola, living in the Democratic Republic of Congo, holding a Bible. She had been a refugee for fifty years, and the Bible was always with her. She explained that the Bible represented the connection to her previous life (she ran to safety from her hometown when she was only twenty) and also provided her with an explanation for all atrocities she experienced in life. She said: "In this world, bad things happen, but in the Bible, you can find words which will help you".

Elizabeth's story demonstrates how, in a situation of massive dislocation and relocation, religion can be a helpful tool in building a connection between the old and new life.

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2   See also: https://www.unhcr.org/spotlight/2019/05/most-important-thing-global/.

Elizabeth, 72

"It was a gift from my pastor on the day of my baptism."

Elizabeth says her Bible is the most important thing she brought with her when she fled war in Angola. It's the only thing she has from that journey 52 years ago. "It was a gift from my pastor on the day of my baptism," she says. Although she found safety in the country now called DRC, living in exile has been difficult. The mother of seven children, she has been separated for years from various family members and struggles with the feeling that she doesn't have a real home. "In this world, bad things happen, but in the Bible you can find words which help you."

Fig. 3: Elizabeth with her bible, Angola. © Brian Sokol/UNHCR/Panos.

We shall now look at how resilience, agency, and timing are interconnected.

Resilience is a precondition for restoring agency in refugees. Agency is a demonstration of resilience which—and that is interesting—is either wanted or refused at different stages of refugeehood. Agency is perceived as necessary at the moment of leave-taking and flight. It is desired when refugees arrive in the host country: they must be agentic to find a location and get the first safety measures. On the contrary, when the refugees are located in the reception centres or refugee camps, they are deprived of agency: refugees acquire an attitude of helplessness because an agentic refugee is a refugee who might be difficult to manage and might even expect some pressure and persecution from the camp personnel.

Finally, if agency is explicitly refused during the application procedure for humanitarian status, it must be again restored and become even wanted after receiving humanitarian protection.

If we look at agency from the perspective of refugees, intentionality, anticipation, self-reactivity, and self-reflection need to be recognised.

There are ongoing questions in the refugee interviews: "Who am I? Why am I here? What are my history, culture, and religion? In which way could I contribute to the community and other refugees? How can I remain myself? How can I oppose de-selfing (the erosion of agency due to external situations), and how can I oppose negative stereotypes because of my religion?" (Grzymała-Moszczyńska 2018).

The following example is about a sewing workshops conducted with Chechen women living in Poland[3]. In Chechen culture, how women dress is critical; therefore, helping them retain stylish attire despite poverty and limited funds is a way of helping them retain some agency. Sometimes refugees contribute to creating open local communities. Exquisite dresses, made for the female members of the choir of a Polish city, were jointly prepared by Chechen women relocated to that city and local ones. Chechen and Polish women were also sewing decorations for their houses on the Day of National Flag. Women were photographed even with the mayor of Gdansk, one of the cities where refugees retained agency the most by becoming recognised and legitimate partners of the City Council.

When the Covid19 pandemic started, Chechen refugees started crafting face masks and antiseptic gear for hospitals. It was when face masks were almost impossible to obtain in pharmacies or clinics. When I asked them, "Why? Why do you do so not just for yourself, but also for the community?" they answered, "We do not want to be forgotten; we still want to be present" (Grzymała-Moszczyńska 2020).

Back to deconstruction, one more step that has to be made in the service of diversity is the deconstruction of methodological paradigms and research methods from the perspective of resilience and agency.

When we talk about models of research among refugees, we can either refer to the so-called fly-in, fly-out approach or the approach based on the development of the relations. The fly-in, fly-out approach characterises quantitative methods. In this case, research methods aim to verify the hypothesis design to capture the Western understanding of religion, stress and copying using questionnaires and tests.

The second way of analysing religion and conducting research among refugees is based on developing relations. In this approach, research methods aim at understanding refugees' experiences and the role religion plays for them through interviews, focus group discussions, and drawings. Research, in this case, is much more oriented towards emic understanding or even indigenous cultural understanding from the point of view of a specific group of refugees.

Thanks to qualitative research, we are getting a better understanding of the role of religion in building resilience and agency; we can capture the simultaneous presence of multiple and contradictory experiences of refugees and, finally, make sense of the chaotic worlds that refugees are living in.

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3   Foundation Women on the Road: https://www.kobietywedrowne.org/o-nas.

5 Conclusions

Religion contributes in both positive and negative ways to refugee trauma. Theoretical approaches tend to ignore such different kinds of impact because they are primarily grounded in quantitative research and do not accurately describe the context of cultures or religions outside the Western perspective.

The first important thing to remember would be not to assume who refugees are religion-wise because of their country of origin: we can recall the examples I already mentioned while speaking of Armenian Christians who come from a Muslim country, the Upper Karabakh enclave, or the Assyrian Christians coming from a Muslim country, like Syria.

A second important recommendation is always to check big data on refugee flows if you wish to understand their religiosity and look for additional sources of information.

And a final recommendation. Check the research methodology and methods behind findings about the relationship between the role of religion in coping with refugee trauma: respect diversity because it helps avoid simplistic assumptions, simplistic measures, and simplistic conclusions.

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