

Deakin Research Online

This is the published version:

M'Crystal-Fletcher, C. and Schmidt, Rachael 2009-02, Together we are empowered : occupational therapy's role in the refugee and asylum seekers' lived experience, *Connections*, February.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30020413>

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright : ©2009, Australian Association of Occupational Therapists

Together we are Empowered: occupational therapy's role in the refugee and asylum seekers' lived experience

Have you ever tried to imagine the life of a refugee?

A refugee can be any age or gender. As a refugee, people are completely separated from their homeland and families, having fled their country. This person, often alone, must find a new way of living in order to create a meaningful life. There is only one certainty: the journey to resettlement is long and difficult. For many people, their 'foreignness' can leave them feeling left in limbo, due to the social and personal barriers within their new life.

Refugees (and Asylum Seekers) do not choose their destination

based on languages they know or the opportunities of employment and education it may afford them. They are instead escaping ongoing persecution due to their ethnic group, social, religious or political beliefs, and do not have the luxury of a choice. As the risks to their families' and their own lives are so severe, refugees escape under duress and are unable to return to their persecutory homeland. Refugees usually enter Australia through the Refugee Program, via refugee camps where the average stay in 2007 was 17 years (Hewett, 2007), and require special considerations to assist with their integration.

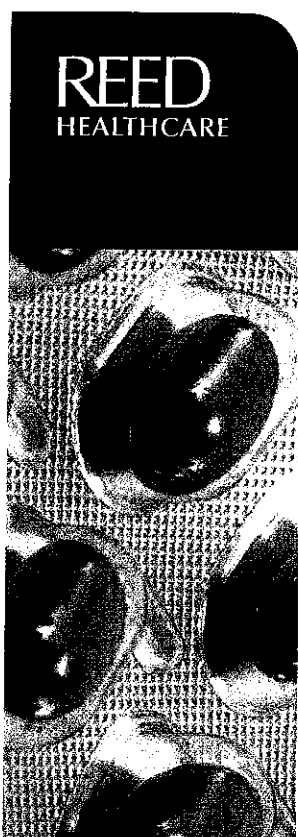
One example of the intersection of occupational therapy and the

refugee experiences occurred at the OT Australia National Conference held in Melbourne in 2008. OOFRAS* members Judith Long, Natalie Smith and Natasha Layton facilitated a workshop to raise awareness of the issues they experienced whilst working with refugees settling into Victoria. The focus was on the personal stories told by two men; Yousif Koua and Akon Deng Shok who arrived in Australia as refugees after surviving years of waiting in African refugee camps and racial and religious conflict in their homeland of Sudan. Yousif and Akon relayed their seemingly matter of fact life stories with humility and, remarkably, with gratitude, serving to reinforce that 'a refugee is not a statistic or

a phenomenon, but rather a "me – with a long story" (Whiteford, 2005, p.85).

Judith, Natalie and Natasha, with the two men, investigated the occupations required to manage their everyday lives, whilst retaining their cultural identities. The men placed a very high value upon maintaining traditional Sudanese gender and occupational roles within their families, but also appeared to have incorporated subtle Australian rationale into their everyday attitudes and behaviours.

A new land of peace and safety is not necessarily guaranteed or unconditional. Challenges are faced by both the refugees and the existing communities. Differences



Home & Away.... Working in the UK free seminars

Whether you're planning a working holiday to the UK or seeking to advance your career as a Health Professional, the smartest move you can make is to register with Reed HealthCare.

Our friendly, experienced consultants will guide you through the necessary paperwork and give you all the help you need to become a front runner for the best jobs available in your field. We have opportunities in Australia, New Zealand and across the UK right now.

Positions can be short term and flexible or we can provide you with career development permanent opportunities in both the public and private sectors. For some positions, relocation or short term accommodation assistance can be provided as well as professional registration assistance.

Reed HealthCare Working in the UK Free Evening Seminars

Reed HealthCare are holding free evening seminars on working in the UK as a Healthcare Professional.

To be held in March the seminars will be covering visa eligibility (including the new "Youth Mobility" visa) professional registration, work prospects and living in the UK.

Melbourne 5th March - Brisbane 11th March - Sydney 12th March - Perth 19th March 2009

If you are an....

- Audiologist
- Hospital Pharmacist
- Radiographer
- Sonographer
- Medical Scientist
- Physiotherapist
- Registered Nurse
- Speech Pathologist
- Occupational Therapist
- Podiatrist
- Social Worker

and you would like to attend, (or you know someone who may be interested) then we would love to see you there. It won't cost you anything to come and get all the facts from one of the UK's leading suppliers of healthcare professionals.

To book your place and get full details of the seminars or to discuss local recruitment opportunities please call us on freecall 1800 677 948 or email globalresource.melbourne@reedjobs.com
Website www.reedhealthcare.com.au

Part of Reed Specialist Recruitment

reedjobs.com.au

in language and habits can create barriers between the two groups, sometimes leading to civil unrest. The granting of permission for refugees to live in Australia does not automatically serve as sufficient justice to either the newcomer (refugee) or the receiving community into which they are placed. Refugees are often attempting to live with experiences of violence and persecution, and loss of everything familiar to them (Herman, 1992). The ongoing change and requirement to adapt may result in their loss of individual spirituality, the loss of their sense of self, the lack of opportunity for meaningful occupation, challenges of traditional roles within the family structure and community. All these issues place stress on the wellbeing & mental health of both the individual and their families (Porter & Haslam, 2005).

Along with these challenges, refugees arrive with "a common thread of uncommon courage – the courage not only to survive, but to persevere and rebuild their shattered lives" (Guterres, 2005) – a resilience to move on and develop new lives. This was clearly demonstrated within the workshop, as both refugees and the workshop facilitators explained the importance of being engaged through social activities such as shopping, religious attendance and picnics. Social engagement provides an important opportunity to assist with the understanding of common values and those that appear different.

Yousif spoke about issues relating to working in his new country, which highlighted the importance he placed on his role as the family provider. It also exposed issues surrounding educational qualification, lack of choice in jobs and work locations,

plus difficulties due to language and cultural expectations. As a Sudanese-trained electrician, Yousif is unable to register within Australia without undertaking a four year electrical apprenticeship to upgrade. This training is not economically viable in his situation. The available employment choices provide him with a basic living, offer poor career opportunity and very little personal meaning. Refugee parents work to invest in their children's future.

It is human nature to fear that which is unknown. Some people may misinterpret the actions and outlooks of refugees and separate themselves from any engagement, simply because they do not know how to react. Difference from the perspective of gender roles, as viewed by the Sudanese-Australian perspectives, was discussed. Gender roles are clearly defined in Sudanese culture and are a determinant of respect within that community. When considering the refugees' integration into Australian culture, numerous barriers may be found, unless there is a shifting of focus to search for commonalities for all members. Could the very Australian outdoor activity of a BBQ provide a common activity of value to explore with men from both cultures? Such activities that are family centred could provide an entertaining and fun way to engage, whilst creating a sense of belonging as each group (refugee and host) learns to appreciate both their cultural commonalities and diversities.

OT's assisting refugee communities in becoming engaged participants within Australia. The occupational therapy profession is well equipped to raise awareness of the occupational deprivation and injustice that may be experienced

by refugees when settling into their host communities. Our professional strength is the evaluation of an individual's occupational perspective of occurrences in their environment and/or culture. OTs are well placed to identify and acknowledge these occupational issues through a client-centred approach to practice. Being focussed on the person highlights their occupational disruption, dysfunction, deprivation or alienation.

As Natasha, Judith and Natalie's experiences demonstrate, occupational therapists can "act on a broader social and cultural level" (Whiteford, 2000, p.203) in raising the awareness of what living as a new refugee in Australia is like. Understanding the daily occupations of the refugee is an ideal position in which to "embrace occupational justice" (Whiteford, 2000, p.204) and as a member of OOFRAS, it is possible to influence social and institutional structures and policies collectively, to include refugees and their families in meaningful occupational participation.

Occupational therapy has the knowledge to guide humans as occupational beings who need and want to participate, in order to develop and thrive. The role of advocacy, in this concept of being a refugee and wanting to belong to a community, favours access to opportunities and resources. It acknowledges individual differences resulting from human biology and human interaction with their natural and human environment (Townsend and Wilcock, 2004).

Thank you Natasha Layton, Natasha Smith and Judith Long for initiating and driving the workshop. Workshop content available through OOFRAS Victoria: "Occupational opportunities

for refugees: a lived experience" (2009), Deakin University: Geelong.

Thank you Yousif Koua and Akon Deng Shok for giving us a glimpse into your story and the refugee experience.

For more information or to become involved, see www.oofras.com.

**OOFRAS – Occupational Opportunities for Refugees and Asylum Seekers: is a network of OT's working together to develop a field of practice that responds to the occupational needs of refugees. OOFRAS is a non-profit, volunteer-run organisation coordinated and supported by OT's for OT's.*

Catherine M'Crystal-Fletcher
Masters of Occupational Therapy Practice
La Trobe University Melbourne

Rachael Schmidt
Occupational Science & Therapy
School of Health and Social Development
Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and
Behavioural Sciences
Deakin University Geelong Victoria

REFERENCES LIST:

- Guterres, A. U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.html?tbl=NEWS&id=42afdc154> on 22nd January, 2009
- Herman, J. L., *Trauma and Recovery*, Basic Books, New York, 1992
- Hewett, A. (2007). Integration is a two way street. Retrieved from <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=6539> on 26th January, 2009.
- Porter, M., Haslam, N. (2005). Predisplacement and postdisplacement factors associated with mental health of refugees and internally displaced persons. *JAMA American Medical Association* 294(5).
- Whiteford, G. (2000). *Occupational Deprivation: Global Challenge in the New Millennium*. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 63(5), 200-204.
- Whiteford, G. (2004). *When People Cannot Participate: Occupational Deprivation*. In C.H. Christiansen & Townsend, Elizabeth A. (Ed). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Whiteford, G. (2005). Understanding the occupational deprivation of refugees: A case study from Kosovo. *The Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 72(2).