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A narrative approach to dealing with trauma in refugee children through social casework practice

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ABSTRACT: According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNHCR), India has two million people of concern or refugees residing in India and over 25,000 asylum seekers in Delhi alone (Sharma, 2009). For reasons such as human rights violations, lack of freedom and protection, and widespread poverty, many refugees and asylum seekers chose to migrate to different countries. India is a refuge for individuals from several nearby countries. The refugee people face layers of crisis, such as financial, psychological, and political, in terms of citizenship and rights. This paper highlights the risks of isolation, identity crisis, and several mental health issues that young refugee people and asylum seekers face. Studies show that social work methods, especially social casework interventions, focusing on the narrative approach, are an effective method in resolving the issues faced by the refugees. This paper deals with the narratives where the practice experiences of child refugees and asylum seekers were studied using methods with 12 caseworkers. The paper also lists challenges and opportunities for caseworkers subscribing narrative approach.

Keywords: social work, social casework, narrative approach, refugees, stories, children, counselling, symbolism, externalization

In the twentieth century, the UNHCR (adopted in November 1989) re-focused international attention on rights-based approaches to research with children and young people. Bessell (2009) identifies the Articles (12, 31, 33, and 36) of the Convention as especially pertinent to the development of respectful approaches to child-centred research. In India, security concerns have led to a restrictive impact on asylum space. However, it grants asylum to many refugees from countries such as Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Myanmar. Each year a vast number of people leave their homes in search of safety and stability. In 2019 alone, the UNHCR counted some 42 million forcibly displaced people worldwide (Di Tomasso, 2010, p. 244). It includes 15.2 million refugees, 827000 asylum seekers (pending decisions in host countries), and 26 million internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2009, p. 2). Once in the new country, the children get registered in

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schools, parents look for jobs and join language classes, and seek out professional help in different forms, mostly counselling. Many find themselves in refugee camps, which can be extremely hostile and frightening places, with shifting populations and little, if any, personal space. Substantial evidence supports an association between parental Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and offspring mental health issues due to exposure to continuous psychological distress. During the casework process, the children and youths share their stories and traumatic experiences, including anxiety, fear, family disruption, lack of social contact, depression, grief, and several stress disorders (Back Nielsen et al., 2019).

Review of Literature

The literature review found that there is ample literature of narrative approach in the western literature, but the narrative approach to casework interventions with refugees lacks literature, and the narrative approach is discussed more in counselling practice than casework which is a key tool in social work.

- Narrative approach:

The interest in narrative research spread rapidly into the humanities and social sciences. Catherin (Riessman, 2008) traced the narrative turn to the United States and to Chicago School of Sociology, where a group of researchers studied letters from Polish farmers and immigrants, urban boys, and deviant groups from the beginning of last century (Lawlor, 2009; Squire, 2005). The Chicago school was central to the development of narrative research in anthropology, ethnographical writings (Atkinson et al., 2018; Riessman, 2008). Many studies (Garvis et al., 2015, p. 33) of communities, social, political, and economic aspects of everyday life and social relationships were written as narrative analysis.

Narrative refers to a language form in which events and happenings are organized into a temporal unity employing a plot (Garvis et al., 2015, p. 21; Riessman, 2008).

There are several approaches to narrative methodology. Following the model of Aristotle, the sequential, and chronological, and completeness in narratives are central (Garvis et al., 2015, p. 24). According to the editors of a recent book in the series, '*Studies in Narrative, Beyond Narrative Coherence'* in narratives, meanings are made in a social context, and the researcher is an agent that can strive to create coherence or decline coherence in writing (Hyvarinen et al., 2010). However, incorrect narratives can present more challenging cases. Overall, the narrative approach is known to give voices to those often invisible, as children in general and special groups of children. Furthermore, the approach helps create new insights, reveal surprises, and build new

innovative models of thinking and understanding early childhood education (Garvis et al., 2015, p. 24).

- Use of stories in casework:

Stories about children, events and cases where children take part, as well as children's stories, are data for narrative analysis (Garvis et al., 2015; Polkinghorne, 1995). In research (i.e. (Garvis et al., 2015, pp. 24–25), children's stories and culture can also be elicited by an approach where the researcher participates in children's creative activities like writing, drawing, photo stories, children initiated role-playing and structured or pretend play. The client system here is identified as individuals who are displaced or forcefully evicted from their homeland, native villages, towns, and country due to ethnic conflict and discrimination. The employment of the narrative approach here is through the traditional structured client-centred approach in Case Work methods in Professional Social Work.

Methodology

To collect children's stories and experiences during their stay in asylum countries and document the practice of narrative approach followed by caseworkers; in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 caseworkers practicing in India, Iraq, Columbia, Chile and Venezuela. The interview guide included items such as:

- How did you follow the narrative approach?
- What were the challenges faced by you while following the narrative approach?
- What were the dominant plots and sub-plots in the stories of the clients?
- What were the issues observed in the children and youths seeking asylum?

The interviews were held in English with registered caseworkers with working with the concerned groups for at least three years were selected for the project.

Importance of stories and narration in social casework

Stories are used to teach and instill morality, patriotism, life concepts, life skills, religion and social and emotional skills. Stories shared by toddlers and their parents are typically collaborative (Garvis et al., 2015), while narratives of older children and adolescents are purposeful. It has served various objectives of entertainment, demonstrating the 'ideal,' 'good' and 'bad, learning coconcepts, and most importantly to this context, in the therapeutic practice for both the narrator and the listener and making meaning is a simulative activity. Therefore,

narratives have become an increasingly popular focus of social research while researching children (Austin et al., 2020).

The importance of stories from children was recognized only when scientists like Jean Piaget showed that children not only had thoughts and experiences worth knowing about, but they were also differently evolved from the thoughts and feelings of adults (Austin et al., 2020, p. 2). This leads to interest in capturing rich information about children and how they think and feel about themselves, resulting from the fairly recent and intense interest in children's narratives.

Social work with refugees and asylum seekers has been the oldest practice (Boccagni and Richard, 2020). Casework being a key method was widely used in interventions with displaced individuals and groups (Richmond, 1917). In a narrative approach, clients are encouraged to view themselves as protagonists in a story and externalize the feelings, issues, and conflicts to help to cope with the issues. The approach follows a Cognitive Behavioural theoretical framework on counselling and casework with concludes with clients being able to re-author the story and develop coping mechanisms and resilience.

For example, the caseworker looking after Y, an eleven-year-old Kurd girl who could not sleep at night. During the sessions held with Y in the Iraq camp, she shared:
"Y was unable to share anything and would keep quiet for months in individual sessions and group sessions, and when she opened, she was comfortable addressing herself in the third person. She narrated the escape from her village, separation from parents, and reuniting with her brother after months in a methodical externalized manner as if Y was a character from her own story. Y resisted any initial attempts to associate herself with the character and only towards the reflective home tasks could she do that."

'During the 'bread time,' I sat next to Yasmine and probed, "What about yesterday, could Iqra close your eyes for a while?". No way! There were some red, yellow and black things, the snake-like creature made some hissing sounds, Iqra attempted to take a walk, but her mother drove me back to bed, she replied.'

According to the caseworker, Y addresses herself as Iqra and narrates her life story through Iqra, and her issues of sleeplessness were resolved successfully through interventions that lasted up to 8 months.

Resilience is another key outcome in this approach. A sixteen-year-old shared with a caseworker that he cannot cope with the constant movement at the beginning of the sessions. In a later stage,

she was reported to be sharing with his peers. "A refugee is always learning, he might be a Kurd, but the very next moment, he might have to flee to Germany where he has to be like a German to get respect." This reflects that the approach follows a gradual process but is highly outcome oriented.

It is important that the characteristics of a child's story must be understood in terms of the context during which the story is made. For instance, in the example, observations of hope and depression, neglect, and ignorance were evident. In research, children and adolescents often have higher levels, with various investigations revealing rates of PTSD from 50-90% and major depression from 6-40% (Carswell et al., 2009). Risk factors for the development of mental health problems include the number of traumas, delayed asylum application process, detention, and the loss of culture and support systems and the pervasive conflict leads to loss of trust, reduced cultural mingling, and most importantly, intergenerational trauma (Carswell et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2007). A caseworker in Venezuela shared:

'Girls in their twenties who have arrived from Columbia share about people's behaviours and their experiences towards them in Venezuela.'

Girl 1: *I believe that Venezuela should welcome refugees. They should not be threatened. We will not take their jobs or anything. Even my parents share the same thought. If Columbians and Venezuelans join hands together, we can stay kind to one another and not give in to Xenophobia.*

Girl 2: *In my personal experience, I have never felt threatened by any of these refugees.*

Girl 3: *I feel letting refugees in would only help Colombia although there will be some hiccups at the start eventually, it will all fall into place.*

The girls shared their thoughts about Venezuelans and Columbians who apparently have had a peaceful past from the verbatim. Their thoughts focused on being kind and welcoming to one another. Moreover, as observed by caseworkers, there was resilience, hope, interest in resolving conflicts and forgiveness. As the caseworker in this case shared:

'….loss of hope, loneliness, depression and anxiety felt when children shared their stories were later transformed to hope, conflict mitigation, and peace-making.'

A number of studies have evaluated the health impacts of loneliness and how it influences individuals' physical, mental, and social well-being (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2010; Hossain et al., 2020, p. 2). People are living with loneliness experience a higher burden of depressive illness, impaired cognitive functions, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases (Lee et al., 2019). As observed in research, as children get older, their narratives look more and more like the narratives of the adults with whom they live (both in their family and in their community) (Austin et al., 2020, pp. 5–6).

The Process of Narration

The narrative approach follows the therapeutic framework of Narrative Therapy (White, 2011, and Payne, 2006) and engages in a storytelling format while presenting issues. A common process or flow of the narrative casework is as depicted, and it is derived from the case worker's reports.

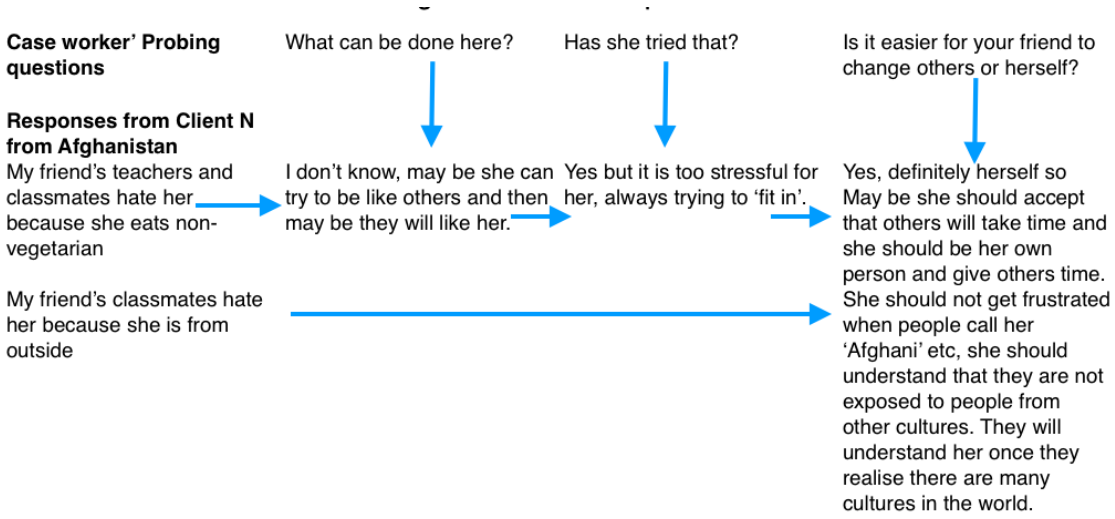
While understanding children's narratives, the effort involves understanding at two levels of analysis, one to the text itself (the story, the conversation, and so on) and another to the process through which the text was created (Austin et al., 2020, p. 9).

All the caseworkers shared that it was difficult for their clients to express themselves in the initial sessions, and it took a long while to 'open up. They shared that the sessions lasted from 3 months to 1 year. The conversation map shared by a caseworker depicted that they are interested in sharing, but the shame, guilt, inability, and fear of confrontation of one's issues were the primary obstacle, and they were overcome through externalization.

A caseworker shared the following conversation map:

This indicates that, N projected her issues on her friend and described herself as another entity, on probing questions by the caseworker following transformation happened in the thought and attitude. The caseworker found that she was unable to pinpoint the real issue in the initial narration and the coping strategies emerged only gradually over time.

Therefore, to understand the narrative style of children better, it is recommended for



narrative researchers to refine the understanding of the long-term effects of early individual differences in narrative ability, to identify the experiences and influences that seem to facilitate narrative skill, patience, and allowing objectivity and externalization.

One way that the caseworkers dealt with was to understand the form and content of children's stories (i.e. as shared in the above example: feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression) that are tied to the context (i.e. lack of personal space, privacy issue) in which they tell stories and the purposes for which they are telling them. It also highlights the skills and attitudes of the caseworkers.

Content of the stories

Storytelling is pervasive (Austin et al., 2020, p. 3). In recent years, casework practitioners and researchers have learned about how children tell stories, and those stories change as a function of development (Bron, 1994; Lawlor, 2009). Children, it would seem, respond with intense absorption and awe to events that seem humdrum and regular to older people (Hogan & Greene, 2005b, pp. 4–5). In research (Austin et al., 2020, p. 5; Garvis et al., 2015), it has been observed that young children use to play, gesture and stories to transform ordinary experiences into something out of the ordinary by expanding them in dimension, detail and interpretation.

Symbols and metaphor: *'Monster*,' 'Boats,' '*Scarves*' are points of reference recurring in the narrative of the children and youths the caseworkers intervened with. Y always mentioned monsters hiding under her bed, while H would constantly refer to boats and plays with boats. For Y, the monster was the memories of escaping from her village, and the bag underneath her bed

was symbolic of her native place in Iraq, which Islamic State bombed. The blue scarf reminded her of the mother who got separated from her. For H, the boats were signified a key aspect of his separation from his after as he witnessed his father's boat drifting away. The scarf for S signified hope of conflicts being resolved, and she hopes to return to her home in Columbia.
The clients were unable to speak of the separation from family, loss of home and grief of parental death, and these symbols were 'lifeboats' for them to express their issues to the caseworkers.

The text, plot, and sub-plot of the story: The Content is not direct rather indirect and allegorical: The stories have common words as 'them,' 'they,' 'her, 'him,' 'his mother,' and 'her mother' rather than 'I,' 'me,' 'mine,' and 'my.' The story with symbols and metaphors and using oneself as an indirect person is more helpful, and they see themselves as audience and realize the need for an instant resolution which helps to cope. Hence, we see how children in situations can have imaginative control over the world by being able to decide, at least symbolically. It is a vital component of human experience, just like for these children. N, a Rohingya refugee residing in Delhi, referring to a monster not liking children; through this plot, she displays a sense of lack of freedom, fear of a bigger, powerful unknown, and getting used to the new identity that lacks a sense of togetherness and collective identity in a community (Burnett, 2013). Hence, the paradox of such a narrative is that the child operates with an alienated meaning in a real situation (Vygotski, 1978, p. 25). This shows loneliness with signs of depressive symptoms where the children are not allowed to move freely.

Externalization: While understanding children's narratives, it is important to understand people's opinions and their immediate context. Therefore, generalizing a difficulty can be a comfort, and children often accept what is in a story rather than a personal challenge about their behaviour (Austin et al., 2020).

*Ventilation:*Some stories often include mythical creatures evolved from the place and the history of the people who live there. As in N's case, a sense of her identity was missing where she related her current domicile to the home and village that her parents mentioned often. As observed, it made her feel uneasy (i.e. there was the loss of sleep) and observations of integration and identity crises. The beast is ventilation, symbolization, and externalization of the issues she received through intergenerational trauma.

Another client, N from Afghanistan, lives in Delhi with her mother. She has shared her love for food and her dream to open her very own restaurant. In her conversations with friends and teachers in the school where the children have been asked to bring a portion of their home-cooked

food prepared in their tradition, she shares how she could not sleep the night before and be deviated that no one tasted her food.

'She had asked her mother to prepare kebabs and pack them in the blue casserole and insisted her father drop her at school on this day. As the recess bell rang, she was looking forward to sharing her kebabs with teachers and students who were both vegetarians and non-vegetarians.'

'With few children not able to try her kebabs on that day, she was confident with a decision that her restaurant will serve kebabs all weekdays except on Tuesdays as that was the day when children of her class did not eat non-vegetarian food.' shared the caseworker.

It is clear how children tell stories with them as external central characters relate to it. Their stories involve using something (an object or a gesture) to represent an issue, and ventilation proves a key element here. It is a release of pent-up emotions and issues.

To conclude, the narrative approach involves transforming reality. It is a pervasive and powerful process in early childhood, linked among other things to the acquisition of grammar (Bruner, 1985), an understanding of events (Greene & Hogan, 2005), the development of imagination (Harris et al., 1993), the differentiation between symbol, symbol user, and audience (Cattanach, 2007a; Werner, 1961) appearance reality distinction (Flavell, 1986; Piaget, 1955) and an understanding of the mental states (Harris et al., 1993).

Challenges and opportunities:

- Enhancing the case worker's skill and capacity building for effective interpretation of the symbols and metaphors

The dilemmas facing contemporary narrative practitioners are the issue of interpretations, i.e. the story's underlying meaning (Hogan & Greene, 2005b, pp. 16–17). One step to tackle and consider is to identify similar underlying meanings (for instance, from the above examples: monster and children not eating kebabs on Tuesdays), and the second step is to elicit or collect stories from children, and then ask other potential audiences (peers, teachers, social work team to interpret them. It calls for dealing with issues as a team involving group workers, family members, educators, researchers, etc., by employing the Case Work Principle of Resource Utilization. In the case of Y, the circle time activities held with a teacher in the camp helped open up about her mother's scarf, which she could not speak about in the casework process. (Boccagni and Richard, 2020 assert the need for Professional development and self-self-awareness for social caseworkers to enhance their skills, especially communication and empathy.

- Time and human resource scarcity

The narrative approach is a gradual process and can be resolved through a continued and sustained time. Several caseworkers shared that while the narrative interventions were in the process, they could not complete the sessions as the children were frequently transferred or their families moved. In such a scenario, referrals were much needed, and it could be effective with more caseworkers working with the displaced individuals and communities.

- Redefining and structure and objective of the therapeutic relationship

Client self-determination is another important principle of social casework, and the structure is absent in the narrative approach. It is important to develop one with the clients. Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world (Garvis et al., 2015, p. 10; Polkinghorne, 1995). Through the use of narrative through the interview method, we observed how practitioners could recognize the power of subjectivity in allowing open dialogue and co-construction of meaning. Next, becoming comfortable with narrative research also means accepting ideas that the world has no fixed rules or structure for assigning behaviour but requires an open dialogue to build consensus around shared meaning to ensure the inclusion of multiple voices (Wisniewski & Hatch, 1995). While it is important to set goals with the client for each session and the entire counselling process, using the interviewing process in a more creative way (i.e. using play and storytelling), the caseworkers were able to make it more comfortable for children who had stressful experiences to share (Davis, 2007).

The narrative approach assumes that cultural, social, and political factors are entangled with people's problems. In particular, in the context of refugees, they are impacted by the context aigret extent. Social work research and the use of other methods such as community organization and group work in tandem with casework can be effective for the clients, especially for the children. Correspondingly, a factor assisting persons in freeing themselves from the exteriorization of blame and guilt can examine issues of social power. Therefore, greater awareness and understanding are needed for the widespread importance of the narrative approach as a sense-making form for young children (Bamberg, 2007; Bruner, 1986).

Conclusion

Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world (Garvis et al., 2015, p. 10; Polkinghorne, 1995). Hence, this article has described how caseworkers could recognize the power of subjectivity in allowing open dialogue and co-construction of meaning. Next, the paper also discusses examples of how children tell stories and

relate to them differently. All of the participants had typical issues to share: a lack of belonging and identity. This absence of belonging and a sense of identity further lead to depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems. Thus, the caseworkers could capture and interpret the children's narratives in a democratic manner by utilizing the narrative process (Davis, 2007).

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