

Psychological wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia

A Position Statement prepared for The Australian Psychological Society

by the APS Public Interest Team

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APS Position Statement on the psychological wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia

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This position statement has been prepared by Emma Sampson and the APS Public Interest team on the basis of an Australian Psychological Society literature review on refugee mental health and wellbeing that was authored by Dr Kate Murray, Professor Graham Davidson and Associate Professor Robert Schweitzer. We are also grateful for the input received from Dr Joan Beckwith, Professor Dean Lusher, Ms Amanda Gordon, Associate Professor Nick Haslam, Dr Bob Rich, Dr. Jeanette Shopland as well as member forums in Sydney and Melbourne who volunteered their time and feedback.

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1. Introduction

- The aim of this statement is to provide an overview of concerns related to refugee mental health and wellbeing within the Australian context, and to position psychologists' responses to these issues. The statement is derived from consultation with psychologists working with refugee communities, a review of current refugee research and practice, and a comprehensive literature review released by the APS titled: *Psychological Wellbeing of Refugees Resettling in Australia (APS 2008)*¹.
- The APS recognises the vulnerability of people seeking asylum and the potential for mental health problems amongst refugees. While diplomatic engagement to stop persecution and ensure a safe route for refugees seeking protection is preferable, there is broad acknowledgement that this is not always possible in practice. Given the global political and climate change contexts, the APS recognises therefore that there will continue to be a need to resettle refugees in Australia. Also acknowledged is the need for laws and policies that uphold the rights of refugees, for provision of adequate support upon resettlement, and for recognition of the potential contribution that refugee communities can make to Australian community life.
- A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing. The APS therefore takes a stand against the destructive consequences of racism and xenophobia, both for populations and for individuals. It expresses deep concern over the adverse public health and mental health consequences of such prejudices. Because of these significant adverse consequences, the APS calls for any national debates (e.g., on policies such as immigration and population, border control and response to terrorism) involving people of diverse ethnic, backgrounds to be based on objective data, and not on prejudices, ideology or political expedience².
- The position statement provides recommendations that encourage and support psychologists to engage with issues impacting on asylum seekers and refugees, including advocacy for change where policies and practices cause harm to mental health and wellbeing. The statement also urges governments to adopt policies which uphold the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, and identifies ways in which the Australian community can best be supported to provide a welcoming and inclusive response to asylum seekers and refugees.

¹ Please refer to this literature review for more information regarding the mental health issues faced by refugees, and the impacts of refugee policies on refugee psychological wellbeing.

² This paragraph is based on and echoes the American Psychiatric Association's 2010 statement on Xenophobia, Immigration, and Mental Health.

2. The APS Position

The Code of Ethics of the Australian Psychological Society (2007) mandates psychologists to respect and protect people's human rights (General Principle A), avoid unfair discrimination (Standard A.1.1), demonstrate knowledge of the consequences of unfair discrimination (Standard A.1.2) and assist clients to address unfair discrimination (Standard A.1.3). In accordance with this mandate, the APS recognises:

- The significant psychosocial impact of the refugee experience, including experiences of pre-migration trauma, migration, and resettlement.
- The vulnerability of people seeking asylum and the related likely incidence of mental health problems amongst refugees. This is based on specific risk factors based on exposure to loss and trauma both prior to and post arrival, and may be expressed in various ways depending on cultural background, personal experience and reception factors.
- The important role that post-migration stressors may have on adjustment, including the experience of loss, restricted access to appropriate supports and limited educational and employment opportunities.
- The heightened risk of mental health problems amongst refugees who are placed in detention, especially children.
- That the system of mandatory immigration detention of asylum seekers in a remote high security detention facility outside of the migration zone inevitably compromises the ethical delivery of psychological services.
- The potential harm caused to asylum seekers who are issued with temporary visas or subjected to conditions that prolong the assessment of their refugee claims and/or restrict access to supports and services.
- That existing assessment instruments, diagnostic approaches and psychological interventions may have limited applicability to asylum seekers and refugees, owing to different cultural assumptions and practices, and that caution is therefore required in mental health diagnosis with refugees.
- That psychologists need to develop their knowledge of broader social, cultural, legal, and political contexts to assist in understanding the experiences and presenting issues of refugees.
- The importance of developing and/or adapting psychological assessments and interventions that are culturally sensitive, recognise traumatic experiences and use appropriate language supports. These need to be developed in partnership with those who work directly with refugees and with refugee communities, and should encourage a critical reflexivity in respect to the political and institutional contexts within which refugees are located.
- That psychological interventions are unlikely to be effective within systems that cause harm and therefore that psychologists may need to advocate for the removal of unjust policies and practices.
- That the presence of family can have a therapeutic effect on people who have survived traumatic experiences, and plays a pivotal role in providing emotional, physical and economic support to refugees upon resettlement.
- The inherent strengths of refugees and the importance of working collaboratively with refugee communities to build strong community support networks that assist in the settlement process, including recovery from trauma.
- The importance of positive and accurate representation of refugee issues, including the promotion of personal survival stories, use of accurate language in reference to refugees and asylum seekers, education about the contexts from which refugees have fled, anti-racism education, and the identification of the contributions made by refugees to the broader community.

3. Roles for psychologists

Psychologists are a professional group with expert knowledge, skills, networks and resources that can enhance the mental health and wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. The potential roles and contributions of psychologists in refugee contexts are diverse, and include:

- **Research** – into the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees, particularly the impact of policies on refugee wellbeing and factors that enhance the resettlement process, with a focus on identifying the strengths of refugee groups in rebuilding their lives and communities.
- **Validation** – of existing psychological assessment tools and interventions with refugee communities, particularly with reference to the cultural appropriateness of measures and the impact of diagnostic categories on the ability of refugees to resettle successfully.
- **Provision of services** – to ensure psychological services are accessible to all asylum seekers and refugees, and that these services take account of the broader social, political and legal context of the refugee experience.
- **Advocacy** – against harmful and unjust refugee policies (and public misunderstandings about refugees), for the human rights and wellbeing of this vulnerable group and to ensure the provision of effective services.
- **Professional development** – around issues that impact on the refugee experience, including cultural competence and use of interpreters, and sharing of expertise around what works to support refugees, enhance their wellbeing and accelerate resettlement in Australia.
- **Partnerships** – establishing and contributing to partnerships, networks and coalitions that encourage collaboration and facilitate a multidisciplinary approach to enhancing the mental health and wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers. Collaborating with those working directly with refugees and refugee communities themselves is particularly important.
- **Public awareness campaigns** – utilising skills in attitude and behaviour change at a broader public/societal level to change negative attitudes towards, and stereotyping of, refugees.
- **Community-level response**³ – working with host communities to ensure they are well-placed to assist in the settlement of refugees, to promote positive inter-cultural contact and to raise awareness about the cultural social and economic contributions refugees can make to their communities and lives.
- **Citizen response** – acknowledging that psychologists are also citizens, and are encouraged to become involved in the broader community in ways that support refugees and asylum seekers (e.g., through volunteer work, advocacy campaigns).

³ See the Special Section of the American Journal of Community Psychology, edited by Dinh & Bond (2008), for a range of examples.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Recommendations for psychologists

The APS supports psychology and psychologists:

- Who provide services to those within detention centres to gain appropriate social, political and legal knowledge to assist clients, and expects its members to fulfil their ethical and professional obligations to clients and not to compromise their professional independence.
- To provide culturally competent mental health services to asylum seekers and refugees, which take into account the broader social, political and legal context of the refugee experience.
- To advocate against policies and practices that are detrimental to the wellbeing of refugees and refugee communities.
- To apply caution when assessing refugees and formulating their experiences in clinical terms, and encourages professionals to work collaboratively with refugee communities to optimise mental health and wellbeing, and to ensure the breadth of the human experience (particularly strengths) is harnessed in resettlement.
- To be involved in the development of practice guidelines for mental health professionals working with refugees and asylum seekers.
- To conduct further research into effective mental health responses to asylum seekers and refugees (e.g., appropriate assessment measures for use with refugee communities).
- To assist Australian residents in adjusting and responding to refugee migration (e.g., understanding contributions refugees make, developing awareness of human rights obligations, de-bunking myths and misperceptions, and assisting them with any concerns), and to promote community-level responsibility for positive inter-ethnic relationships, understanding, collaboration and unity.

4.2 Recommendations based on psychological knowledge and research

Based on psychological knowledge, research and best practice, as summarised in the 2008 APS literature review *Psychological Wellbeing of Refugees Resettling in Australia*, the APS:

- Advocates for the rights of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to be respected, including rights to safe haven, security and nurturance of their ethnic and cultural beliefs/values and identity, as essential for psychological health.
- Urges the Australian Government to:
 - Meet its obligations under the UN Refugee Convention and uphold the fundamental right of refugees to seek protection, by adopting a fair refugee status determination process.
 - Only use immigration detention as a short-term option, for as long as is needed to enable appropriate security and health clearances to be completed. Detention should not take place offshore or in remote locations. Community-based alternatives to detention should be prioritised. Children should not be detained.
 - Process refugee claims as quickly as possible, and provide access to appropriate supports and services for all asylum seekers and refugees (e.g., income support, access to health care, employment assistance).
 - Make available resources and support for mental health professionals to access appropriately trained interpreter and translation services, and ensure that these services be accessible to all asylum seekers and refugees.
 - Provide adequate and ongoing settlement support to refugees upon arrival in Australia.
 - Adopt policies that prioritise the migration of family units and enhance reunion of refugee families. This includes recognising the extended nature of family and cultural ties among many refugee communities, and ensuring on-going access to free migration advice.
- Calls on Australia's political leaders, along with media, public commentators and APS members themselves to:
 - Show responsibility and sensitivity to the rights of immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers, and to refrain from actions and comments that serve to inflame xenophobia.
 - Avoid using negative language and stereotyping that further marginalise refugees and perpetuate public misunderstandings.
 - Acknowledge and assist Australians' adjustment to refugees settling in Australia.
 - Promote a welcoming approach to refugees by encouraging and facilitating positive attitudes to refugee communities.

5. Conclusion

As the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia, the APS promotes the contributions of psychology to people's health and wellbeing and to understanding important social issues facing Australian society. It is within this context that the APS undertakes to:

- Advocate for the removal of unjust policies that detrimentally impact on refugee mental health and wellbeing.
- Assist and encourage psychologists' engagement with refugee issues as researchers, academics, practitioners, students and citizens.
- Provide up-to-date information, training and support to psychologists working with asylum seekers and refugees.

References

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