

Religion and Refugee Trauma as Experienced by Artists Hosted within the ICORN Network

Research Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the role of religion in experiencing refugee trauma among ICORN (International Network of Cities of Refuge) Guest Artists in Poland and Scandinavia.

Research Question

The research question posed was: *How religion influences the experience of refugee trauma among ICORN Guest Artists?* Specific questions included i.e. questions about migration and acculturation experiences, as well as trauma experiences, reception and understanding of these experiences, factors supporting coping, whether and how religion and/or art are helpful in the process of coping with refugee trauma, and what role they play in the new place of residence, what is gained and what is lost as a result of migration.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the interviewed ICORN Artists. The most appropriate way to obtain such in-depth data was to gain access to detailed personal accounts from the participants. Therefore, the study was implemented in a qualitative manner and had an explorative and inductive character, in line with the methodology proposed by Angrosino (2007) and Creswell (2009).

Participants and Recruitment

The research group consisted of 18 ICORN Guest Artists coming from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Syria and Zimbabwe, and currently living in Europe (4 women and 14 men; age range 30-61 years). The recruitment of respondents was a three-step process and involved: identifying possible respondents and obtaining contacts through the ICORN Administrative Centre, creating a list of respondents who met prerequisites, making email contact with the selected ICORN Artists informing them of the purpose and process of the study, and then arranging personal meetings with those willing to meet, in a safe space suggested by them. The research group also included 7 employees of the Administrative Centre and coordinators of the ICORN network in Poland and Scandinavia (6 women and 1 man; age range 28-55 years). The group of ICORN Artists had never been the subject of research before, and therefore the research project was pioneering.

Data Collection

The research data was collected during semi-structured interviews with ICORN Guest Artists in Poland, Norway and Sweden, and expert interviews with programme coordinators and ICORN Administrative Centre staff.

Data Analysis

For data analysis IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009) was used. The conceptual framework used to present the results of this study is ADAPT (Adaptation and Development after Persecution and Trauma) – a new theoretical model for working with refugee trauma (Silove, 2013).

Results

Among the research participants, religion appeared to be a theme that was rarely addressed and only in the context of two themes: Religion & Art and Religion & Persecution. The group of

ICORN Artists differs significantly from other migrant/refugee populations in terms of declared religiosity. Namely, the Guest Artists declared themselves to be non-believers, who had to flee their country of origin precisely because of their atheism, while many of the other refugees surveyed, describe themselves as believers, for whom religion is an important part of life and helps them cope with refugee trauma (Adedoyin et al., 2016; Benedict, 2009; Bryant-Davis, Wong, 2013; Gladden, 2012; Goździak, 2002; Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2010; Sleijpen et al., 2016; Woodcock, 1995).

The results of this study also show that despite experiencing multiple traumas, as defined by currently accepted definitions, ICORN Artists rarely self-identify their experiences as traumatic. This is in line with the findings of new research on trauma in a transcultural context, which advocates a flexible and adaptive approach to different culturally informed interpretations of mental health (Tay et al., 2019).

Finally, the key superordinate themes that emerged in this study, directly relate to the ADAPT model, thus confirming its suitability for in-depth understanding and arranging refugee experiences. At the same time, the results also showed that the model needs further modifications and additions to fully capture the experiences of the research participants.

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