The Role of the AMEP in Building a Holistic Settlement and Multicultural Program: Responding to the Needs of Refugees and Survivors of Torture and Trauma

PARIS ARISTOTLE

Paris Aristotle is the Director of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST) which he was employed to establish ten years ago.

The VFST is a counselling and rehabilitation service for refugees entering Australia who have experienced torture and trauma. Over the past 10 years he has held several positions on government advisory bodies in the settlement and human services fields. He currently holds positions on the Australian Government’s Refugee Resettlement Advisory, the Victorian Government’s Ministerial Multicultural Human Services Advisory Council and is an executive member of the Council for the International Society for Health and Human Rights.

In presenting this paper I hope to draw upon the presentations given by previous speakers in this stream and incorporate their perspectives into a paper about the role of the AMEP in building an holistic response to settlement services. The focus of this presentation will be the experience of humanitarian program entrants and the manner in which the AMEP contributes towards their recovery and rebuilding of a new life.

This issue is very important. Our work with humanitarian entrants is an essential contribution towards the preservation of ideals such as social justice, human rights, social harmony and cultural diversity. Our efforts tell us something about who we are as a people, as a country and as a member of the global community. The work that each and every one of us undertakes has the power to help reshape the destiny of people’s lives which have been otherwise turned upside down and twisted inside out. Through collaboration and understanding our work makes a difference to Jasminca who, having survived six months in a concentration camp and losing a daughter, has managed to courageously bring what is left of her family to Australia to start again, or Mohamad whose detention in an Iraqi prison robbed him of a career in medicine and who awakes each night with terrifying memories of beatings, and electric shock. Then there’s Lim who so badly misses his mother that he can’t drag himself from bed to attend school and who watches as his confused and isolated father struggles with the realities of parenthood alone. They represent the human face of our work.

Advancing the rights and opportunities for minority groups is one of the most complex and difficult areas for any human rights movement. For the advancement of such rights to occur all components of human rights movements need to share a common sense of purpose, build an environment of cooperation and develop initiatives which are grounded in a dynamic and rigorous evaluation of past and present practices. In achieving this, the needs of the people for whom programs are designed must form the nucleus of service planning and delivery.

The resettlement of refugees and humanitarian entrants is an intrinsic component of human rights work. It is a movement predicated on the belief that all human beings have the right to freedom from persecution, and a right to the opportunity to build a meaningful and fulfilling life. As part of a broader international movement, Australia’s resettlement program is one of the most dynamic in the world. As we break Australia’s program down to look at the AMEP, we find one of the most progressive and innovative links in the chain of settlement services worldwide.

Since the end of World War II over 600,000 people from more than 70 different countries have entered Australia as refugees or humanitarian program migrants. In addition, thousands more have been sponsored through family reunification programs. In many cases those sponsored had similar experiences to family members who arrived before them even though their passage to Australia was not as a refugee. For people who comprise this section of the community, their refugee experience was characterised by periods of unparalleled individual, family, community and cultural trauma.
A recent study of people entering Australia under the humanitarian program over the past decade indicated that 25 per cent had suffered extreme experiences of torture and trauma and another 38 per cent in the same study reported less severe experiences of trauma. If these percentages were applied to humanitarian entrants over the past 20 years alone then approximately 170,000 people would fall into these categories.

These experiences have a profound, immediate and long-term impact on the physical and psychological health of survivors and as such on their ability to benefit from settlement services. When statements such as these are made, people often leap to the conclusion that physical and mental health services are the greatest priority. However, this is not necessarily true. At times of crisis and struggle, the services which are of greatest need are those which will help the survivor to rebuild their life. This is rarely one particular kind of service but instead a myriad of services, be they health related, educational, vocational or general support, with the greatest emphasis being determined by the person themselves. Critically, the AMEP program provides the means through which these fundamental needs can be communicated independently, through the direct teaching of English and by creating a rich and interactive learning environment.

Formulating policies and programs for responding to the needs of refugees and survivors of torture and trauma is a complex exercise. Australia’s diverse humanitarian program creates a complex tapestry of rich and vibrant cultures. It requires policy makers and service providers alike to embrace concepts of diversity to ensure successful and appropriate settlement in Australia. However, too frequently policy and service delivery responses are predicated on an assumption that people from a particular country or even a particular region can be treated as a homogenous group. In reality, the ways in which issues of class, gender, religion, and political beliefs interact dismiss notions of homogeneity as ill conceived and inaccurate. More importantly, this view constrains the potential benefits of cultural diversity which, when properly embraced, will add substance and prosperity to the Australian community at large. The AMEP plays a critical part in Australia’s ability to benefit from the cultural richness of these communities.

In order to deliver a truly effective resettlement program for humanitarian entrants, there are several things which governments and service providers must acknowledge. One of the most important issues to be addressed is the restitution of dignity. This should be a central goal of such programs. Without dignity a sense of self is compromised, one’s belief in others is undermined, perception of the future is poor and the ability to feel as though one makes a meaningful contribution to family and community life is eroded. The restitution of dignity sounds simple enough, but as we unpack what it means, we find that this path is often a difficult one to tread. The path is often fractured, poorly signed or simply beyond the length of a person’s initial stride. To care and provide for family, pursue a career, to find a home in which to lay new roots, to make sense of a new society, and to be free of relentless traumatic memories, represent goals to be attained in the resettlement process which in the final analysis remains the responsibility of the individuals themselves. The challenge we all face is to sort out through our collective expertise what each of our contribution need or need not be in order to promote the individual’s attainment of such goals. It goes without saying that the acquisition of language skills is axiomatic to success in all of these areas.

To achieve this we are in need of a conceptual framework that helps us to understand the experience of humanitarian entrants, how these experiences effect them as individuals and what it is we should do in order to facilitate resettlement. What I offer here is a conceptual framework developed by the VFST over the past ten years.

War and state sanctioned violence are planned, systematic ways of oppressing not just individuals and families, but whole communities, who represent a threat to the government or group seeking control. In presenting this schema it is important not to see the component boxes as static because the different components are in fact interactive and flow vertically and horizontally.

**Acts perpetrated by persecutory regimes**

There are four key component methods that persecutory regimes draw upon to create a culture of oppression encapsulating abuses such as:

- Violence, killings, assaults, disappearances, lack of shelter, food, health. For example in a country such as Guatemala it was less likely that people would
survive detention and torture as the government preferred to leave mutilated bodies in public places as a sign of what would happen. In Argentina the disappearance of husbands and sons was commonplace with their unresolved fate causing anguish and preventing grieving from occurring appropriately.

- Death, separation, isolation, dislocation, Prohibition of traditional practices as were the case in the killing fields and re-education camps of Cambodia.
- Widespread deprivation of human rights, exposure to boundless human brutality such as the mass rape of women and the execution of children.
- Invasion of personal boundaries such as in the case of rape and torture, no right to privacy or being forced to make impossible choices, often about who will live or die or be left behind etc.
- Social and psychological experiences which lead to the trauma reaction

The effects of this systematic application of oppressive measures were as designed to create:

- A state of fear or terror, chronic alarm and unpredictability. In East Timor for example, the climate of fear created by the Indonesian military left many residents petrified that each day their lives or the lives of the families were at risk.
• The systematic disruption of basic and core attachments to families, friends, religious and cultural systems.
• The destruction of central values of human existence.
• The creation of shame following brutal acts such as physical torture and rape.

**Core components of the trauma reaction**

The trauma created through systematic oppression is a powerful tool for assisting persecutory regimes to maintain influence. The trauma permeates individual, family, community and societal systems acting as an entrenched oppressive force. In further expanding this conceptual framework it is worth discussing in more detail, the core components of the trauma reaction. These core components include:

- Anxiety, feelings of helplessness and a perceived loss of control. Anxiety can be a severely debilitating reaction, and is the psychological condition of which post traumatic stress disorder is a component. The loss of control arising from the unpredictability created in these situations is what persecutory regimes seek to enshrine in order to minimise opposition.

- Relationships are changed. The capacity for intimacy is altered, grief is pronounced and depression becomes an overwhelming theme. For example adolescents often take on a role of carer at a very early age because one of the parents may have disappeared or been killed. This can place incredible pressure on them at an age where much of their moral development and identity formation is occurring and in more simple terms can rob them of their childhood. Relationships towards the general community and authority figures can also be changed leading to a general sense of mistrust of others and a fear of forming new relationships. Grief can be an overwhelming feeling, stirring emotions and reactions which the survivor is often unaware of but which can affect the way they interact with others.

- Shattering of previously held assumptions, loss of trust, meaning and identity are destroyed and a view of the future is altered. This is one of the most challenging aspects of the trauma reaction for service providers to come to grips with because of how the survivors’ reality of what human nature can produce is so different to our own. They have seen the most evil side of human nature and in many instances they bear witness to this evil in unreasonable people they once knew as friends and neighbours, as was the case in Bosnia, or whom they had convinced themselves were devoid of any human compassion. Once in Australia they carry this reality about human nature with them and in combination with other traumatic reactions this can effect their perception of the meaning and purpose to life. For example a Latin American couple whom were clients of the Foundation described their house being raided and ransacked. They told of how they were abused and beaten and then dragged outside and held apart. While held apart the intruders set fire to their house. Inside the house was their two year old son. As the mother looked up at me as this story was being recounted, her eyes filled with tears, as she described how she could hear her son’s screams the entire time. Having survived such a horrific experience as this one, it is not difficult to see how a person would question any previously held beliefs about human existence.
Finally, guilt and shame. These reactions are very important to understand in the context of this conceptual framework because they are the ones that prevent people from seeking assistance, cause them to feel unworthy of assistance or that the assistance would not be forthcoming anyway. It is not as straightforward as simply explaining to a survivor that they should not feel guilty. In some senses guilt and shame allow the survivor to have some control over who is to blame and while this may be considered maladaptive it is a complicated process to reverse such feelings.

The recovery goals

In order to respond, resettlement programs must focus on goals which emphasise recovery and re-establishment of the person’s life.

As you can see from this last column the recovery goals are broad and encompass the components that are important to all of us in our own desire and need to feel a functioning valued member of the community. I will turn to this section in more detail in a few moments.

Prior to returning to the recovery component of the conceptual framework I want to briefly discuss the settlement process and its effects on the trauma reaction. It is often felt that once in the safety of a country such as Australia the trauma reaction should settle and perceived threats are no longer relevant. This is not achieved by resettlement alone as several factors in the new country can maintain the trauma reaction.

Settlement factors and the trauma reaction

Serious threats can persist such as family members who have been left behind remaining exposed to danger. Anxiety about their welfare continues to maintain a sense of helplessness and powerlessness and reinforces feelings of loss, shame and guilt. The new and unfamiliar environment and associated fear about not coping in the future also maintain a sense of impending failure and perpetuates a sense of loss of control.

The devaluing of the person in the new culture is reinforced by issues such as failure to have prior qualifications and work experience recognised. Perceptions of injustice and exposure to ignorance sustain feelings of a unsympathetic world, reinforce loss of trust and continue to challenge a sense of future.

Racial prejudice reinforces feelings of isolation, shame and guilt and therefore perpetuates the survivor’s struggle and preserves the intended goal of the torturers. Where racial prejudice results in verbal and physical acts of violence a survivor’s sense of security and safety is undermined. These feelings are internalised by survivors of torture and their families, all of whose lives have been dramatically altered by the enactment of similar prejudices on an extreme and mass scale in their countries of origin.

These settlement factors which perpetuate trauma reactions are by no means insurmountable and much of what we already do provides a foil to their effects. The more we understand these issues the more we can account for them in service planning and delivery and the more likely it will be that people will cope better within the normal process of resettlement.

This conceptual framework outlines some of the social and political components of how persecutory regimes operate with a combination of social and clinical consequences. It is a challenge for service systems in this field to fully understand that the pathology, for want of a better word, which is unavoidably created
through surviving an experience such as this should not be responded to in a pathological way. In recent years service providers have developed programs that are not pathological or dependency creating and as a result are very successful in promoting successful resettlement. It is on this point that I wish to expand in regards to the AMEP as it is a tremendous example of a component of service response that is non pathological in nature. To elaborate further on this I want to focus on the last section of the conceptual framework being the recovery goals.

In doing this you will note that language acquisition has a place in each of the core recovery goal categories. AMEP teachers will spend more time with humanitarian entrants in the first six to 12 months of their arrival than any other professional. In this context the relationship between AMEP teachers and the humanitarian entrants is very important. The messages conveyed through this relationship have the potential to be formative in terms of the students’ perceptions of future opportunities and in the critical process of re-establishing connections to other human beings. As you well know, teaching in this context is not only about understanding words and symbols but about incorporating understanding of the dominant culture, how that dominant culture operates and how it interacts with the cultural framework of humanitarian program entrants. To create this level of learning the AMEP must, and actively does, facilitate a safe environment in which students are empowered to explore the meaning of their new language in cultural terms.

**Restore control and safety**

- Facilitating language acquisition
- Providing a supportive and predictable learning environment
- Providing a point of access into other critical service types in the resettlement process
- Integrating learning objectives with practical day to day survival issues
- Developing curricula which provides routine, flexibility, sets achievable goals and accommodates learning and emotional difficulties

In order to assist in this process, facilitating language acquisition promotes control because it enables people to be self reliant on how they wish to communicate and interact with others.
By providing a supportive predictable and nurturing learning environment, a sense of personal safety is created. This becomes central to the reduction of fear and anxiety because they know what to expect and understand that their personal concerns are respected.

The beauty of the AMEP having such a high take-up rate by humanitarian entrants is that it can act as a point of access to other critical services. At different levels and degrees, AMEP services are forging practical relationships with specialist service providers to assist students. For example over the past few years, my own organisation has developed a strong training and development program with the Victorian AMES. This involved the development of specific training in understanding the effects of trauma and how teachers may be better able to respond in the classroom. This process has strengthened our relationship and the quality of interaction and responsiveness between the two organisations is very positive. Additionally, VFST’s Early Intervention Program enjoys a strong partnership with the Victorian AMES in the delivery of health information for newly-arrived humanitarian entrants.

Flexibility in the approach to curricula development allows the classroom activities to focus on useful and practical outcomes which are tangible and relevant to everyday life. This principle also applies to providing a routine as well as setting achievable goals. These principles are important in accommodating learning and emotional difficulties. These are all examples of practical ways that the AMEP can promote the restoration of control and safety.

**Restore attachments and connections**

- Facilitating language acquisition for communication
- Providing supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships
- Providing potential for social activities which enable an experience of pleasure and fun
- Providing opportunities to undertake activities in groups

AMEP services can provide supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships which promote social interaction. This becomes critical in relation to preventing isolation. Isolation is a major contributing factor to the maintenance of depression. Without the confidence to interact with others the depression can become
entrenched. While it sounds obvious, the program is also ideal for providing experiences of pleasure and fun. None of us can survive without such experiences, and like other aspects of the recovery goals, this process encourages connections to others once again.

**Restoring identity, meaning and purpose**

- Facilitating language acquisition as a way of restoring a sense of self or 'I'
- Developing a sense of future in educational, vocational and social terms
- Providing a safe environment to promote self-esteem and the opportunity for use of coping skills

Developing a sense of future for newly arrived-humanitarian entrants can be greatly influenced by the AMEP. However, truly restoring identity purpose and meaning, requires the AMEP to promote further opportunities for education, vocational training and employment, either directly or in association with other service providers in the field.

Encouraging people to utilise their coping skills by providing an environment that is supportive and understanding helps to promote self-esteem and confidence by reinforcing that they have the personal resources to manage the process or to at least negotiate the assistance that might be required.

**Restoring value**
The provision of a nationally-funded government initiative such as the AMEP communicates the message that we value their contribution and welcome them into community life. The AMEP also acts to counter issues such as racism which conveys a message of respect and makes it plausible to believe that they are worthy of respect.

- Restoring Control and Safety
- Facilitating language acquisition
- Providing a program which is respectful and understanding of the effects of surviving human rights violations
- Communicating evidence-based advice to government policy makers about how to improve the program

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- **Restoring Control and Safety**
  - Facilitating language acquisition

- **Reducing Fear and Anxiety**
  - Providing a supportive and predictable learning environment
  - Providing a point of access into other critical service types in the resettlement process
  - Integrating learning objectives with practical day to day survival issues
  - Developing curricula which provides routine, flexibility, sets achievable goals, and accommodates learning and emotional difficulties

- **Restoring Attachments and Connections**
  - Facilitating language acquisition for communication

- **Overcoming Loss and Grief**
  - Providing supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships
  - Providing potential for social activities which enable an experience of pleasure and fun
Providing opportunities to undertake activities in groups

Facilitating language acquisition as a way of restoring a sense of self or "I"

Developing a sense of future in educational, vocational and social terms

Providing a safe environment to promote self esteem and the opportunity for use of coping skills

Restoring Value

Facilitating language acquisition

Proving a program which is respectful and understanding of the effects of surviving human rights violations

Communicating evidence-based advice to government policy makers about how to improve the program

Conclusion

This has been a brief presentation of what I hoped would be important issues to consider in relation to the role of the AMEP in resettlement programs. We all have a role to play and while at times we feel frustrated by the difficulties or the slowness of progress in this area, we should more often feel inspired by the excellent work being carried out and by the enormous potential to do it better. By thinking proactively about how to develop services further and about how to form and encourage partnerships with other essential settlement services, we will be able to build a more beneficial and robust resettlement program. In doing so we send a message to the community and to the people we aim to assist, that we care and that we won’t tolerate such injustices. This message is a powerful one in terms of denouncing human rights violations worldwide and in conveying to those people who have survived such atrocities that they are respected and valued. Naturally in an ideal world such abuses would not exist and the fact that they do says a great deal about us as human beings and the flaws we inherently have. However, it is through the kind of activities in which we engage, such as the AMEP, and how we choose to respond to human rights causes which will in the end help to define our humanity.