

Introduction to *Special Section* on: psychosocial support, conflict transformation and creative approaches in response to the needs of Syrian refugees in Turkey

INTRODUCTION

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been involved in psychosocial support activities for migrants, asylum seekers, refugees and crisis-affected communities since the late 1990s. The organisation's approach to its psychosocial programmes is systemic, interdisciplinary and community based. One main feature of these programmes has been the organisation of executive masters, diploma or certificate courses on psychosocial approaches to population mobility in low-resource or crisis-affected countries and communities. These courses – run from the Balkan peninsula to the Middle East, to South America – have all been adapted to the specific cultural, social and political conditions in the countries, as well as the situations and political landscapes in which they were organised. However, they all share two sets of similarities.

One set of similarities concerns the pedagogical and practical organisation of the courses. They are designed in collaboration with national universities, respecting national certification requirements and are organised every second weekend, as they target working professionals employed by national or local government departments and non-governmental organisations. The courses are free of charge, but participants are subjected to a competitive application process, where the level of impact a student can have on humanitarian activities in the field is considered a strong comparative advantage. Pedagogically, they are organised in lectures and apprenticeships, learning through participatory and interactive workshops, simulations and guided and supervised fieldwork. The understanding is that the students will progress from learning in class, to practicing within a protected space and finally working in the real world under supervision, reaching an enhancement of their technical capacities and critical thinking.

The other set of commonalities concerns inspiring principles inherent in all courses. The first principle is the promotion of a systemic approach in the students' daily work to become aware of, and manage, the complex interactions between the systems of meaning, including the geopolitical, historical, inter- and intra-personal, humanitarian, communitarian and cultural/sub-cultural systems. The other principle is the consideration that the success of an international intervention in a field so culturally bound as psychosocial support would lie in the technical knowledge and support it can pass to local formal and informal respondents. The courses are, therefore, functioning as a space for dialogue between international experts identified by the IOM's *Mental Health*,

Psychosocial Response and Intercultural Communication Section and national academic experts brought on board by the national university and field practitioners. The objective is not to impose hierarchical practices, but to create a new narrative of collaborative intervention between faculty and students that is participatory and adapted to the specific situation. Local, community-based ownership and a sustainable approach stem from this basic model of work.

In 2013, the organisation devised a programme to respond to the psychosocial needs of Syrians residing in Syria and decided to focus the intervention on the capacity building of local psychosocial practitioners and responders (the people who respond to the crisis). Among different initiatives IOM designed, a one-year Executive Masters programme in '*Psychosocial Support and Dialogue*' for Syrians was developed at the Lebanese University after several consultations with Lebanese colleagues and groups of Syrian practitioners. The programme was set up for two generations of students. In 2017, a similar, but shorter, course was organised in Turkey at the Social Sciences University of Ankara (ASBU) for Syrian and Turkish professionals working with Syrian refugees in the country.

INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The idea of organising courses looking at the intersections between psychosocial support and conflict transformation in the context of the Syria crisis was informed by different considerations. One was the attempt to step away from a psychosocial approach that is dominated by clinical psychology and public health paradigms, and often forgets the wider inputs that social and psychological sciences (such as community psychology, linguistics, anthropology, ethnography and applied arts) can give to humanitarian action. The aim is to shift the focus away from prevention and the cure of mental disorders to psychologically informed and culturally sensitive social action. The Syrian system faces a complex cultural, social, political and communitarian breakdown. The influx of Syrian refugees to countries such as Lebanon and Turkey poses identity and relational redefinitions that cannot be reduced to universally understood pathological or negative emotional effects, therefore requiring the assistance of professionals who are able to read the wider context to provide support. The aim is to shift the focus from the prevention and cure of mental disorders to psychologically and culturally informed social action.

The other consideration in designing courses was an attempt to link psychosocial support and conflict transformation, thereby looking at the root causes as well as the effects of conflict, and not only at its effects. Colleagues invited to the conflict transformation were working in a variety of settings including internally displaced persons shelters, neighbourhoods, informal groups, churches and mosques, health centres and camps. They were all reporting an increasing frustration towards the paradigms of interventions that made them accept the status quo of the conflict: an almost paralysing sense of uneasiness and/or helplessness, one that can resonate with many psychosocial practitioners in many different crises around the world, but has become all too obvious within the specific context of the Syria crisis.

Psychosocial support and conflict transformation together have the capacity to not only help empower populations and heal intra-personal and inter-personal wounds between Syrian refugees, but also between the refugee and host communities in the ever-changing game of roles and attributed, perceived or challenged identities, which was and is taking place around this specific crisis.

THREE PILLARS OF DESIGN IN THE PROGRAMMES IN TURKEY

The course in Turkey was organised into three pillars. The first looked at psychosocial support, international standards, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee pyramid of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) intervention, counselling skills, assessment skills and systemic approaches to care. Trainers of this section included Guglielmo Schininà, head of the IOM MHPSS section; Nikolaos Gkionakis, head of the Greek Mental Health Day Centre for Migrants 'Babel'; and Hande Karakılıç, a specialist in psychiatry from Gazi University.

The second pillar looked more in depth into the practices of conflict mediation and transformation, pacific coexistence, dialogue and integration at the small community level. Trainers for this component included Oussama Safa, a lecturer at Saint Joseph University in Lebanon; Tatsushi Arai, Associate Professor of Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation at the School for International Training Graduate Institute in Vermont, USA; Hilal Demir, Director of the Nonviolent Education Research Center in Ankara; and Gabriele Proglio, Cultural History, at the University of Turin.

The third pillar was dedicated to the use of culture and cultural activities in both other pillars and as a way to link them. The attention to cultural, creative, theatrical and oral history processes and tools was also due to very practical reasons. Within the security situation created by the conflict, counselling and talk therapies were not often welcome by authorities and the clients reluctantly engaged or did not engage due to privacy and security considerations. The use of creative tools and, therefore, of metaphors allowed them to express the unspeakable in safe ways and approach conflict transformation without

the imposed sedimentation of a language informed by dominant, polarising narratives. Trainers for this section were the drama therapist and Executive Director at the Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy 'Catharsis', Zeina Daccache; Director at Formaart, Workplace for Participatory Drama in Rotterdam, Luc Opdebeeck; and Guglielmo Schininà.

ARTICLES INCLUDED IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

The course in Turkey was organised over a period of 6 months and included guided fieldwork at the end, wherein the students could elaborate and practice what they had learned in collaboration with their trainers. They could decide on which pillar to focus their work, although most fieldwork integrated elements from all pillars. While discussing the fieldwork reports, it became apparent that some of the findings and analysis from the fieldwork could be of great relevance for other practitioners in Turkey, and elsewhere. Hence, the faculty and the *Intervention* editorial team decided to publish selected articles written by the students, on the basis of their fieldwork. They are good examples of the powerful effect of art and dialogue-based interventions.

The *Special Section* papers address different groups, including children, adolescents, women and men, as well as different creative techniques, all adapted to the cultural context. They include the description and analysis of a workshop to enhance emotional awareness in Syrian refugee children living in the south of Turkey by Necile Ş. Gürle.

Usama Alshugry, a psychiatrist by background, who critically describes the successes and limits of using non-violent communication tools and some techniques derived from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* to integrate psychosocial elements into livelihood support activities offered to a group of Syrian refugee women.

Cafer Yüksek used social theatre techniques to respond to the stress provoked by a common and yet overlooked stress factor in emergencies, young refugee students' adaptation to new curricula and teaching methods in the host country.

Isincu Koc used oral history techniques to assess the needs of a group of Syrian adult men and provides in her article a powerful analysis of the themes that emerged, far beyond the mere assessment of their vulnerabilities and negative feelings.

Finally, Bayan Hakki describes her powerful creative work with a group of older Syrian women that complemented group therapy sessions and helped them look into adversity-activated developments that crisis situations brought into their lives.

The Editorial Board of *Intervention* has seen the importance of supporting fieldworkers to showcase their work and demonstrate the potential of creative, theatrical and oral history processes and tools in the field of psychosocial support. These reports are all small case studies, written by

students, and with them the *Intervention's* aim is to qualitatively highlight the aspects of feasibility and open our readership to the experiences of creativity as a way of expressing the unspeakable in safety. These field reports also remind all of us that play and culture, as well as conflict transformation, are the important elements of resilience.

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