From Trauma to Resilience

Giving Voice to Values

Gwynyth Overland PhD
Some refugees who survive war recover and thrive; others do not. This study sets out to discover what successful survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime found instrumental for both their survival and their mental health. The aim is to contribute to the understanding of resilience, here understood as the ability to recover from misfortunes or change, in order to contribute to the psychosocial rehabilitation of survivors of war crimes and other traumatic events – to discover how war-refugees may be best assisted in processes of recovery and normalization.

The resilience found here was based largely on informants’ cultural and religious resources. Psychosocial guidelines for accessing clients’ backgrounds are available, but health and social workers often fail to access the cultural explanatory models used by survivors in building personal and group resilience. Proposals from the project are incorporated in a cultural resilience interview schema for the use of health and social workers wishing to conduct resilience work with war survivors.

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Main road Battambang – Phnom Penh
Post traumatic survival

Aims

- Understand and explain the recovery and normalisation of resilient Cambodian survivors
- Contribute to improving the meeting between health and social workers and war refugees
By asking them to tell me their life stories

How they survived and recovered after traumatic events:

- How did they explain it?
- What resources did they have?
Methods

A multi-strategy approach to theory generation

- Biographical interviews (Denzin 1989), 3 samples
- Microanalysis / grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998; Nvivo)
- Study of words and phrases (exegesis) (Mollica 2006)
- Abduction (Layder 97; Danermark 02)
Results: Explaining their Resilience

- Social solidarity
- Agency / self-reliance
- Religious worldview

*Culturally accepted coping strategies*
Value dialogue: A very simple method

Awakening sleeping values in marginalised lives and communities
Been on a boat like this?
Had to hang on to a truck like this?
What are your good values?

What mattered, to your father – to your grandmother?

What do you believe to be good for you and good for others?

What will you teach your children?

Talk together
The politics of recognition

We must recognise each individual from each culture and allow her to choose the aspects of culture she will keep –

as long as they do not interfere with others’ right to life, liberty and equality

Charles Taylor, 1992
Generating theory, biographical accounts and translation: A study of trauma and resilience. *International journal of social research methodology*, 2011/1


*Nordic work with traumatised refugees – Do we really care* (2014)


*Processes of violent extremism in the 21st century- International perspectives?* in Overland et al. 2018

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Resilience story

I experienced the worst, yet I survived

Because - I did this, thought like that, held on to these values, made these choices -

I survived to be your mother and give you this gift.