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A Qualitative Study of Asylum Seekers Experience as Mentees with the Welcoming the Stranger Program

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Research Question

What are the experiences of asylum seeking mentees who have been matched with mentors through the “Welcoming the Stranger” program?

Introduction & Background

In the U.S., over 26,000 individuals were granted asylum in 2015, 3.4% of the State of Maine’s population identify as immigrants and Portland Maine’s General Assistance (GA) office reports nearly 40% of GA recipients were asylum seekers during fiscal year 2016 (dhs.gov, 2016 & migrationpolicy.org, 2016, Portlandmaine.gov, 2017).

Asylum seekers are foreign nationals who enter the United States legally fleeing danger in their home country and arriving with psychological and physical burdens. They face hurdles navigating social service systems while trying to gain legal status and get their basic needs met (Hocking, & Sundram, 2015; Piwowarczyk, Keene, & Lincoln, 2008).

Welcoming the Stranger (WTS) is a Portland, Maine grassroots organization of volunteers that matches “friends” (mentors) with asylum seekers (mentees) to help mitigate any barriers and bridge the gap for these newcomers. This qualitative study explores the experience of those individuals as mentees in the WTS program. Existing research primarily combines asylum seekers and refugees in one category, therefore more research on the lived experience of asylum seekers serves to fill that void and help to inform policy, practice, advocacy and program development.

Methods

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

- Hermeneutic phenomenology is a method of inquiry intended to learn about shared lived experience through qualitative data collection. The data is interpreted through the lens of the researcher who draws out themes for reflection (Creswell, 2013).

Bioecological Systems Theory

- Brofenbrenner’s bioecological systems theory, which describes human development in terms of expanding systems, is the framework grounding this study, and is ideal due to the significant impact social systems have on immigrants’ developmental progress. (Brofenbrenner, 1979 & Paat, 2013).

Participants

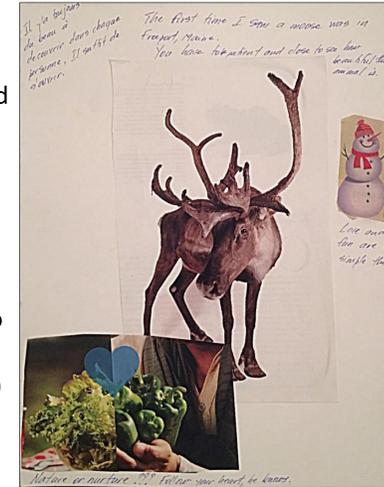
- Criterion sampling was used for this study.
- Mentees were pre-screened by the following criteria; age (over 18), language (ability to speak some English), and minimum length of time matched with a WTS mentee (at least six months) and were drawn from a master list provided to this researcher by the coordinator of WTS.
- Semi-structured interviews that included art collages were conducted over a two-week period.
- A total of six mentees (n=6) were interviewed.
- One art collage was created.

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Results

This qualitative research study explored the experience of asylum seeking immigrants matched with mentors from the Welcoming the Stranger program (WTS). The study resulted in a rich understanding of the shared experiences of asylum seekers matched with WTS. Through analysis of significant statements from the mentees’ personal accounts and their perspectives on the interaction with mentors, two major themes emerged: Logistical/Practical and Relational. (SEE FIGURE 1: SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS & MEANING UNITS)



ART COLLAGE BY WTS.03

Essential Themes

Theme One: Logistical & Practical

Navigating the System

“The best is, first off, I’m now familiar with American system. That’s the thing. And if we try to compare African life, it’s completely different with American. I mean the system. For getting involved in society you need to be trained. So that’s what (my mentor) did and is still doing.” (WTS.06)

Language

“Yeah, yeah. And they help us also to improve our English, because when we are together, me and (my mentor) speak English. She do everything just to help me to improve my English.” (WTS.04)

Resources

- Transportation
- “And another thing for different reason for appointment, there’s some places you can’t get a bus...So that’s the important thing (my mentor) was doing for me and he’s still doing ... and now he’s training me how to drive.” (WTS.06)
- Basic Necessities

“The Welcoming the Stranger...to find a house and then to find the furniture, also help to registration to the kids at school and find things your family needs.” (WTS.01)

Theme Two: Relational

Like Family

“I like so much my mentors. I call them mom and dad, yes, because one day I told them, “I don’t have family here. I saw you like my parent...” (WTS.05)

Gratitude of Mentee

“I’m really grateful, I’m blessed.” (WTS.06)

Emotionally Supportive & Safe

“I feel like it’s...it’s make me feel that now, I’m not alone. Yeah, I’m not alone, and everything which is hard for me, I know there is a person just is beside me just to help me. She’s willing to help me in every, every situation.” (WTS.04)

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SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS	MEANING UNITS
Mm-hmm. And I thought it was interesting. And of course is interesting. It is interesting and the first thing I think when I remember, I said to myself that we will be more than a mentee and mentor. And we are today, 10 months later, yeah, we are more than mentor and mentee. ... Like family, like family. WTS.03, Pg.2	My mentor is like family to me. <i>(Theme Two)</i>
The most positive is psychologically is it's helped you to know you have someone in a country you don't know anybody, and you know that there is someone you can count on. You feel good. You feel, even if you just account some programs, there is a person who will be there for you. WTS.04, Pg.2	Knowing I have someone in this country I can count on makes me feel safe. <i>(Theme Two)</i>
The best part is the way she help me to improve my English day after day. Yeah. Every day we tried, every day, at least one, once a day we try to text or to email each other. WTS.03, Pg.3	My mentor has helped me with my English. <i>(Theme One)</i>
She is doing a really good job. Really, yeah. WTS.03, Pg.3	I am grateful to have my mentor. <i>(Theme Two)</i>
Yeah, he's still training me, right. Like everything I do before doing it I ask him. Because he knows the system. He's was born here all his life, right. So he know more than I do, so anything, anytime, I ask him. And he helps ..." WTS.06, Pg.5	Mentors help me learn the system. <i>(Theme One)</i>
Everything that I need sometimes, sometime when I call, most of them they give to me. Sometime they say, "We don't have right now but we will find it," and they find it. WTS.05, Pg.	My mentors are dependable and a good resource. <i>(Theme One)</i>

FIGURE 1: SIGNIFICANT STATEMENTS & MEANING UNITS

Discussion

Prior research supports the assertion that asylum seekers face systemic challenges and a lack of basic needs, and the best intervention programs are those that allow individuals time to adjust to their new environment, while promoting capacity building, such as a sense of control, empowerment and meaning in one’s life (Akinsulure-Smith & Jones, 2011; Asgary, Charpentier & Burnett, 2012 & 2013; McBrien & Day, 2012; Rivera, Lynch, Li, & Obamehinti, 2016).

My study supports the literature. It found that asylum seeking mentees matched with mentors through the Welcoming the Stranger’s (WTS) mentorship model have encountered systemic obstacles as well as a lack of basic needs. Involvement as mentees with WTS has mitigated some of these hurdles, resulting in acculturation and assimilation. Two outstanding themes emerged from the data; **logistical/practical** and **relational**.

The **Logistical and practical** theme results from mentee and mentor collaboration, and includes informal training on American social systems, the English language and cultural nuances, guidance on the asylum seeking process, and access to resources such as transportation or basic necessities. The **relational** them includes the connections created through the match as well as the peace-of-mind knowing mentees are not alone in this new country.

Overall, mentees in this study suggest the relationship with their mentors has resulted in a sense of empowerment, emotional stability and encouragement for them, as well as the knowledge needed to navigate social systems like DHHS, find employment and access daycare. Mentees describe a feeling of gratitude to their mentors and an increased sense of safety in their new country due to the relationship, and indicate that time with their mentor is as important to them as material items provided by mentors.