

AN INVESTIGATION OF REFUGEE CHILDREN'S FEARS BASED ON CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The study examined refugee children's fears from a variety of perspectives. More specifically, the present study investigated 1) the effect of previous traumatic life events on refugee children's present day fears, 2) the relationship between refugee children's expressed fear objects and their projected fear objects, and 3) the relationship between refugee children's expressed fear objects and parents' knowledge of their child's fear objects. Eighteen refugee child participants with a mean age of 9.64 years were included in the study along with their parent representatives. There were a total of 8 male and 10 female children with a mean residency length of 28 months in the United States. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between prior traumatic events and refugee children's present day expressed fear objects. Results did not suggest a statistically significant relationship between children's self-expressed and projected fears. Similarly, there was no statistical significance between children's expressed fears and their parents' view of their children's fears. Further discussion of results, conclusions, and implications are included in the study.

Key Words: refugee children; children's fears; parents' perspectives; prior trauma

INTRODUCTION

Children naturally experience different types of fears throughout their developmental process. Infants, for example, seem anxious when experiencing sudden motion, loud/abrupt noises, or a sudden approach (Moses, Aldridge, Cellitti, & McCorquodale, 2003; Robinson, Rotter, Fey, & Robinson, 1991). As children get older, they experience other types of fears such as animals, bath, dark, falling, ghosts, loss of a parent, monsters, separation, strangers, or toilet training (e.g., Burnham, 2005; Gebeke, 1994; Robinson, et al., 1991; Sayfan, 2008).

According to Robinson, Robinson, and Whetsell (1988) "understanding children's fears is an important task for adults who are charged with encouraging the growth and development of the child" (p. 84). Once we are able to learn about *what* children fear, we are able to start understanding their fears. Appropriate, adaptive fears, for example, serve as a mechanism for human self-preservation and motivation. Maladaptive fear reactions in children, however, can inhibit normal growth and development and may even become debilitating (Robinson & Gladstone, 1993; Robinson, Rotter, Robinson, Fey, & Vogel, 2004). Further, children's fears have various effects at home and school. As Moses et al. (2003) indicate, "one result is a disabling of learning. Fear curtails concentration and directs the child's focus toward the self, which diminishes motivation for the task at hand" (p. 8).

Children's Fears in Relation to Situational/Environmental Factors

Research indicates that children's fears are affected by current events and political/social situations (e.g., Burnham, 2005; Burnham, 2009; Moses et al., 2003; Peleg-Popko, 2001). Some of these situations are life-threatening such as directly experiencing natural disasters, terrorism, or war. Other situations which are not life threatening may also have lasting social/emotional impact on children however. In addition to experiencing the normal development of fear, during times of violence, children's assumptions of safety are shattered because they no longer believe they are safe (Moses et al., 2003). During armed conflicts, children report "head and stomachaches, trembles, palpitations, and muscle pains" (De Castro et al., 2012, p. 253) and some have nightmares and cannot sleep. Traumatic events such as war, terrorism, or natural disasters often force children and families to leave their homes and relocate either to another part of their home countries or to a completely new country in the world. Some children need to relocate without their immediate family members which affect all areas of their lives (De Castro, 2012).

These transitions (typically unplanned and immediate) result in major changes in children's ecological systems as well as in their social-cultural contexts. As Montgomery (2008) indicated "traumatic experiences prior to escape from the home country seem to be of prime importance for the emotional well-being of children upon arrival in exile" (p. 1600). Further, de Castro et al. (2012) state that "terror, fear, and anxiety are the most persistent and overwhelming factors" when considering the psychosocial impact of armed conflict on children and their families (p. 252). De Castro et al. (2012) also indicate that fear affects children and their families in addition to influencing their choices and decisions. Many families exposed to such political/social unrest immigrate to the United States each year under refugee status, however, research investigating the fears of children with refugee status living in the U.S. is very limited.

Immigrant Population in the US

It is estimated that approximately 13 % (about 40 million) of United States residents are foreign-born or are children of first generation immigrant families (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Current estimates indicate that approximately 5.3 million of these individuals are students who receive instruction as English Language Learners (Education Week, 2012). In addition to language acquisition, one of the main challenges faced by immigrant children is the social aspect of adapting to a new school and cultural environment (Hamilton, 2004); when compared to typical immigrants, refugee children have a more difficult time.

Refugee children represent a unique group of immigrant children- due to their potential hardships prior to coming to their new home country such as surviving disasters, terrorism, or war (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006) and to the potential effect of these prior traumatic life events on their development. The 1951 Refugee Convention describes a refugee as "a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution" (The UN Refugee Agency, 2011, p.3).

Once in a new, safe environment, children's support systems such as parents and caregivers must understand refugee children's social and psychological processes (e.g., fears and coping) as

they adjust to the new culture. As Montgomery (2008) indicates, there are surprisingly few studies focusing on refugee populations “despite their importance for understanding the consequences of immigration and thus developing relevant and effective integration programs” (p. 1597). These studies have mostly focused on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, in contrast to children’s fears.

Assessment of Children’s Fears

Assessments of children’s fears are conducted through interviews, observations, self-reports, and third-party responses. Interviews may be divided into structured interviews and projective techniques (e.g., De Castro et al., 2012; Gullone, 2000; Kubiacko, 2012; Robinson & Gladstone, 1993; Robinson, et al., 1988; Robinson, & Rotter, 1991; Robinson, Rotter, Robinson, Fey, & Vogel, 2004; Sayfan & Lagattuta, 2008; Zisenwine et al., 2013). During structured interviews, each child participating in the study is asked the same questions in the same order. One result from studies using structured interviews is differences in children’s fears are based on the child’s fear object which changes as a function of development and gender, although “fear content differences relating to gender are less well-researched than those relating to age” (Gullone, 2000, p. 440). A second form of interview is the use of projectives. Studies using projective techniques most often present children with a set of pictures and ask children to indicate what the child in the picture is afraid of (Lahikainen, Kirmanen, Kraav, & Taimalu, 2003; Lahikainen, Kraav, Kirmanen, & Taimalu, 2006; Robinson & Gladstone, 1993; Robinson, Robinson, & Whetsell, 1988; Taimalu, Lahikainen, Korhonen, & Kraav, 2007). Another type of projective strategy was used by Sayfan and Lagattuta (2008) by interviewing children utilizing short stories and accompanying pictures for each scene of the story. Participants were asked to predict each character’s emotions and specify the intensity of their fears.

The next type of assessment used to research children’s fears is through observations. Observational research in children’s fears generally took place in the early twentieth century (e.g., Jersild & Homes, 1935; Valentine, 1930). Although the use of observations provided a foundation for present research in children’s fears, this technique is considered to be outdated and unreliable (Gullone, 2000). Assessment of children’s fears may also be conducted through children’s self-reports (Bokhorst et al., 2008; Burnham, 2005; Burnham & Gullone, 1997; Fisher et al., 2006; Ingman, Ollendick, & Akande, 1999; Mellon, Koliadis, & Paraskevopoulos, 2004; Taimalu et al., 2007; Varela, Sanchez-Sosa, Biggs, & Luis, 2008). Most often self-reports are collected via questionnaires or surveys and are also used to conduct research on children from different cultures.

Further, third-party responses are generated from respondents who are generally either children’s parents or teachers (e.g., Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006; Gullone, 2000; Muris & Merckelbach, 2000; Zisenwine et al., 2013). Third-party reports generally assess respondent’s perception of children’s fears as well as their moods and worries (Bayer, Sanson, & Hemphill, 2006), severity of children’s fears and phobias (Muris & Merckelbach, 2000), culture and structure of children’s fears (Tikalsky & Wallace, 1988), and children’s ritualistic behaviors (Zohar & Felz, 2001). Thus, third-party reports have investigated children’s fears within broader contexts of anxiety, culture, and social/emotional contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is three-fold. The first purpose is to investigate the effect of previous traumatic life events on refugee children's present day fears. The second purpose is to investigate the relationship between refugee children's expressed fear objects and their projected fear objects. The final purpose is to investigate the relationship between refugee children's expressed fear objects and parents' knowledge of their child's fear objects.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

All participants in the study reside in the State of Florida under refugee status granted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. All refugee children participating in the study attend public school in Florida as well as participate in a non-profit refugee resettlement youth program that is committed to meeting the needs of refugee children. The selection of the children for this study was purposeful (i.e., refugee children between the ages of 5-13 years of age) through collaboration with the non-profit program mentioned above.

The study involved 18 refugee child participants and a parent for each child. Child participants' ages range from 6 years-of-age to 13 years-of-age, with a mean age of 9.64 years. There were a total of eight male and ten female child participants. Prior to the start of the study, participants resided in the United States for a period ranging from 5 months to 72 months, with a mean residency of 28 months.

Procedures

IRB approval was received for the study and consent/child assent procedures were completed through collaboration with the program aiding refugee resettlement. All data were obtained in each refugee family's home during one visit lasting approximately one and one-half hours. A total of four undergraduate students assisted in data collection. Prior to assisting in the study, all undergraduate students received training and engaged in practice administrations of all instruments included in the study under university faculty supervision. One undergraduate student and a supervising faculty member generally collected data together in all study participants' homes. In addition, the official case worker assigned to the family by the non-profit refugee resettling organization was also present during data collection. The official case worker also served as translator when necessary.

Data Collection

Data on children's fears and prior traumatic experiences were obtained from children's drawings and structured interviews with both child and parent participants. Children participated in study activities independent of their parents.

Child Participants' Expressed Fear Objects: Data identifying each child's *expressed* fear object were obtained via structured interview and drawings (Driessnack, 2006; Lahikainen, et

al.2003). Following the administration protocol established by Driessnack (2006) a single sheet of standard white paper was placed in front of each child in landscape mode. During this standardized administration, each child was asked to “think about what you are afraid of and *draw it.*” If a child hesitated, the examiner replied, “All people, even adults are sometimes afraid of something, although they may be afraid of different things than children. ...What things are you afraid of?” (Lahikainen, et al.2003; p. 86). If at any point, the child appeared uncomfortable with answering any questions or if the child appeared uncomfortable with the interview process, the child was allowed to stop participating. Each child received an identification code (ID) and the ID was written on the children’s drawings.

Child Participants’ Projected Fear Objects: Children’s *projected* fear objects were identified from his/her response to projective drawings (Robinson et al., 1988). Following the protocol established by Robinson et al. (1988) children were presented with a set of black and white pictures, one of a same gender child (e.g., boy for boys) and the other of an opposite gender child (e.g., girl for boys). The examiner said to each participant, “This child is the same age as you are. He/she is afraid. What is he/she afraid of?” (Robinson, et al. (1988, p. 86). Responses were recorded along with each participant’s ID on a response sheet.

Parent Participants’ Data: Study examiners interviewed all parents using a structured interview. Questions contained within the questionnaire focused on the identification of 1) the parent’s knowledge of his/her child’s fear object, 2) the identification of a traumatic event(s) witnessed/experienced by the child, 3) the child’s behavioral and verbal response to the traumatic event, and 4) demographic questions relating to age, ethnicity, length of time in the United States.

Data Analysis

Children’s expressed fear objects were identified from their statements based on their own drawing of what each child was afraid. Children’s projected fear objects were identified from their responses to a picture of a same gender child and their responses to a picture of an opposite gender child. Each fear object was coded into one of three categories: 1 = animal, 2 = mystical, and 3= event/situation. An example of each of the three categories includes: 1= dog/alligator, 2= dragon/ghost, 3= thunderstorm/darkness. The prior traumatic event identified by each child’s parent was coded into one of two categories 1= non-life threatening, or 2= life threatening. An example of each category of prior traumatic events include: 1= separation from family, and 2 = witnessing a killing.

Two researchers independently coded the child participant’s prior traumatic experiences, as reported by the parent, as well as each child’s expressed and projected fear objects into one of the three categories identified above. There was 100% agreement across all participant responses, with one exception. The single divergent categorization was resolved after a brief discussion. Chi squared (χ^2) test of association was used to compare all relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results investigating the effect of prior traumatic events on refugee children’s present day expressed fear object found a statistically significant relationship, χ^2 (2)= 8.889, $p < .01$. This

indicates there is a significant relationship between children's exposure to life threatening or non-life threatening events and the type of object they fear.

The results investigating the relationship between children's expressed fear objects as identified in children's own drawings and children's projected fear objects of the same gender child was not significant, $\chi^2 (4) = 8.669, p > .05$. Similarly, the relationship between children's expressed fear objects and their projected fear objects of an opposite gender child was not statistically significant, $\chi^2 (4) = 9.429, p = .051$. Finally, the relationship between parent's knowledge of their children's fear object and children's reported fear object was not statistically significant, $\chi^2 (4) = 8.471, p > .05$.

The finding of a statistically significant relationship between whether or not children were exposed to a prior life threatening event and the type of object the child fears indicates that refugee children who were not exposed to prior life threatening events most often fear environment/events. In contrast, refugee children exposed to life threatening events most often fear animals. Children who were not exposed to life threatening events most often feared darkness, thunder, and being alone. The animals feared most often by children exposed to life-threatening events appeared to be dogs, alligators, and snakes.

The finding of a statistically significant relationship between prior traumatic experiences and children's present day fears closely relates to Montgomery's (2008) findings that "traumatic experiences and life conditions in the home country or during the flight have a profound effect on the mental health of children at arrival in the host country" (p. 1602). She further stated that the impact of such prior traumatic experiences is considerably reduced after 9 years. The participants in this study resided in the United States for about two years, on average, thus are still in need of social networks, potential mental health services, and possible academic support in order to ensure their safe emotional adjustment and academic success. A unique aspect of the present study is that all children participants have a shared life experience in the United States through the non-profit refugee resettlement program. Thus, the present results may indicate that the effect of prior life threatening events on children's present day fears is independent of children's experiences once relocated to the United States.

The non-statistically significant results testing the relationship between children's expressed fear objects and children's projected fear objects of the same and opposite gender child suggests that children do not project their own expressed fear objects onto others. Thus, it does not appear to have a relationship between what children say they are afraid of and their idea of what other children may fear. The non-significant relationship between children's expressed fear objects as identified in drawings and their parents' knowledge of the children's fear objects was not unexpected. This result is consistent with previous research indicating that parents often underestimate the prevalence and intensity of their children's fears (e.g., Barrett, Berney, Bhate, Famuyiwa, Fundudis, Kolvin, & Tyrer, 1991; Klein, 2009; Lahikainen, et. al, 2006; Muris & Merckelbach, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

The present study examined refugee children's fears from a variety of perspectives. Upon examining refugee children self-expressed and projected fears, analyses were conducted to investigate children's fears in relation to their prior traumatic events and to their parents' knowledge of their child's fears. Results indicated a statistically significant relationship between prior traumatic events and refugee children's present day expressed fear objects. Results did not find a statistically significant relationship between children's self-expressed and projected fears. Similarly, there was no statistical significance between children's expressed fears and their parents' view of their children's fears. This study contributed to the existing research base by suggesting that 1) different types of prior traumatic experiences result in different types of fears in children, 2) children do not seem to project their own expressed fears to other children, and 3) there does not seem to be a relationship between children's expressed fear objects and their parents' views of children's fears.

As indicated above, fear is a significant factor in child development. More specifically, fear is one domain through which children create meaning and understanding of their environment (Elbedour, Shulman, & Kedem, 1997; Lahikainen, et al., 2006) and children's fears may also serve as a measure of their well-being (Lahikainen, et al., 2006; Taimalu et al. , 2007). By becoming familiar with children's fears and learning how to guide them to work through their fears, one can "provide a supportive and safe foundation" for children (Gebeke, 1994, ¶ 20). This process is especially important for immigrant/refugee children who may not only go through a normative development of fear but also experience major life transitions (De Castro, 2012) and social/cultural adjustment to their new countries.

As Angel, Hjern, and Ingleby (2001) indicated despite recent attempts to identify refugee children's major needs and documenting their psychological problems "the literature contains substantial disagreements concerning these children's vulnerability and the nature of their problems" (p. 4). Therefore, it continues to be essential to keep studying refugee children's needs along with their fears in order to enable them to voice then work through their fears. Such process is essential not only for children, but also for parents and teachers as well, so everyone can assist refugee children to foster resilience skills, reduce their stress, and start the crucial healing process.

LIMITATIONS/STRENGTHS

This study is limited by the number of refugee participants living in the United States and receiving services in a non-profit refugee resettlement program. Yet, this is also one of the strengths of the study. Although the participants attend different public schools, they all share a common experience together -the support offered through the same refugee resettlement program. Additional strengths of the present study include being the first study examining the relationship between refugee children's prior traumatic life experiences and their current fear objects.

IMPLICATIONS TO EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

Studying refugee children and their social/emotional health is an area in need of investigation in a variety of fields (e.g., education, mental health, and related fields). One of the main difficulties

educators and mental health professionals face is that “many refugee families will not accept referral to a mental health service, and may be reluctant to remove the troubled child from school classes and miss educational opportunities” (Hodes, 2000, p. 65). Further, several refugee parents do not want to share their previous traumatic experiences and encourage their children not to talk about the family’s prior experiences (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006). These challenges can become even more difficult when parents underestimate the intensity and/or prevalence of their children’s fears. Future studies are recommended in the areas of reaching out to refugee children and their families, assessing their needs, and providing them with necessary services in and outside of school.

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