

KEYNOTE LECTURE

SUPPORTING THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF FORCIBLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

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Abstract

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that as of 2021 there were currently 84 million who have been forcibly displaced from their homes across the globe. The conflict in Ukraine has led to a further marked increase in these numbers. Mental health difficulties have been shown to be elevated in forcibly displaced people (including asylum seeking and refugee populations). Risk factors can be associated with events that occurred prior to, during, and after the migratory journey. Whilst there is recognition of the important impact that a history of traumatic events (e.g., torture, abuse and neglect) can have, social adversity in the form of 'daily stressors' (e.g., a lack of access to basic resources, isolation, lack of safety and security, family violence) is being increasingly recognised as an important determinant of the mental health of forcibly displaced people. Concerns have been raised about the potential medicalization of social adversity faced by displaced populations. There has also been a comparative lack of research investigating approaches that may be helpful for enhancing the quality of life and subjective wellbeing of forcibly displaced people. Psychosocial interventions and low-intensity psychological interventions can provide scalable opportunities for treating common mental disorders and promoting wellbeing. This presentation will focus on research studies that I have been involved in which have been undertaken in the EU and in sub-Saharan Africa to evaluate the efficacy of psychosocial interventions for forcibly displaced people. These projects have involved the linguistic and cultural adaptation of interventions and assessment measures. The implications that this research has for the integration of forcibly displaced people in the EU and beyond will be discussed. This will include a focus on conceptual frameworks that provide opportunities for situating determinants of mental health in the socio-political context in which forcibly displaced people live their lives, and not just risk- and protective-factors specific to the individual.

Biography

Prof. Ross White (PhD, D.ClinPsy) is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at Queen's University Belfast. He is an expert in Global Mental Health. He was lead editor of 'The Palgrave Handbook of Socio-cultural Perspectives on Global Mental Health'. Ross has research collaborations with the World Health Organization and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees investigating the efficacy of psychosocial interventions for reducing distress experienced by refugees particularly in the context and/or aftermath of humanitarian crises. He also has an interest in the processes involved in the linguistic/cultural adaptation of psychological therapies. Ross is the Principal Investigator on the ESRC/AHRC funded Community-based Sociotherapy Adapted for Refugees (COSTAR) project that is evaluating a psychosocial intervention for Congolese refugees living in Uganda and Rwanda. Ross was a co-investigator on the EU Horizon2020 funded Refugee Emergency: DEFining and Implementing Novel Evidence-based psychosocial interventions (RE-DEFINE) project that is evaluating a group-based guided self-help intervention for refugees and asylum seekers across the EU and in Turkey.