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Therapy with Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Ashley Fletcher

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Ashley Fletcher has worked for the last 20 years in Manchester taking a Human Rights approach to therapy with migrant communities. This is a summary of his seminar written by Frank Kelley.

He gave an eloquent and inspiring insight into his therapeutic work with clients with a history of forced migration. They are an increasing part of the demographic of the North West, the largest asylum dispersal area in the UK. Whilst at first sight appearing a discrete and distinct group, they present with the full diversity of the population at large and with complex traumas and needs.

To find out more you can read a new book *Psychological Therapies for Survivors of Torture: A human rights approach with people seeking asylum*, edited by Jude Boyles, PCCS Books 2017.

The organisation *Freedom from Torture* is for people whose asylum applications have failed and are threatened with return to States where they are not safe. Go to their website:

https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/what_we_do/north_west_in_manchester

Ashley began with a plea for therapists in private practice to take up this work as Institutional therapists can be less helpful. Although clients are often deprived they can have health budgets which would pay for therapy.

Ashley gave us two exercises. The first was to take ten minutes to think about what we would take with us if we were forced to flee the life we knew. Our answers were objects which were practical or symbolic. The clothes we stood up in, so we could move fast, earplugs, smart phones, portable wealth like jewellery, or the guitar which is an important reminder of home. Very often asylum seekers will want to hold on to the sensory memories of home; the fall of sunlight and characteristic smells.

The second exercise was to think about what this client group has lost. We thought of grieving, loss and dislocation. We lose the capacity to control our lives. There are losses of wealth; not only what is left behind but also the cost of human trafficking; for example it can cost \$40,000 to flee Iran. We lose the source of status, comfort and support from our lifelong social networks and all that is involved in being able to speak in the language of our birth. We lose a life we easily understand and the current triggers for our memories of that life.

Other losses are less of a burden. We are escaping conflict, oppression, danger threat and imprisonment and torture and the loss of hope.

Ashley believes we need to be experienced to do this therapeutic work. We are working with clients whose history gives them a loss of trust in individuals and institutions. We think we are sitting in a therapy room but there is the constant shadow of the police interrogation room or the torture chamber. We are working with

a lack of understanding of each others cultures and our lack of understanding of non western concepts of health and healing. We are working with all the pressures of unmet needs; of food, shelter and basic security. We are working under the shadow of deportation.

We are working with the sheer horror and terror of clients experiences which they may wish to shield us from. These horrors will also fragment the narrative clients can give of their experiences. We are working with unfamiliar structures and unusual transferences and countertransferences and particularly the often unfulfilled fantasy of rescue. Transference explanations may be helpful to us but can sound distinctly odd to clients from a different culture.

Ashley said we would often be working with issues outside our own experience and may fear we do not know how to connect. However he did point out that there are no new feelings and that understanding feelings is our everyday work. Put simply Therapy 101 is empathy and basic techniques. We should not be distracted by the horrific glamour of this work and overlook the resilience our clients have relied on to get here. If our clients sometimes seem distant we should remember that invisibility is a survival technique.

We should always hold a human rights approach in mind and ask ourselves what our responsibilities are and what are the protection implications of our work. We should not think our responsibilities solely lie in the fifty minutes of a therapy session.

Thank you to Ashley Fletcher for an absorbing and informative seminar which helped us think in depth about his and our own therapeutic work.