Exploring the psychosocial impact of cultural interventions with displaced people

Helen J. Chatterjee, Clelia Clini, Beverley Butler, Fatima Al-Nammari, Rula Al-Asir and Cornelius Katona

Introduction

This chapter explores the social and psychological impact of cultural and creative activities on displaced people, a process that is of particular importance at a time when understanding how to ease the transition of asylum seekers and refugees to a new place of settlement, and how to improve their lives and their integration in their societies of settlement, is of growing concern.

While the general idea that refugees are entitled to protection is not questioned by European governments, the actual entitlement of individuals to be granted refugee status is – and so migration policies increasingly focus on the protection of borders and the erection of barriers to stop the unplanned and irregular movement of people (Fassin, 2011; Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti, 2016; Thomas, 2014; Sassen, 2006; Turner, 2015). As is by now widely acknowledged, these borders have a strong impact on the physical and psychological condition of refugees and asylum seekers. Drawing on studies in the field of migration, health, arts and well-being, this chapter discusses the potential of cultural and creative activities to ameliorate the negative impacts of displacement and to improve the psychosocial health of people with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. The chapter is divided into four parts: it begins with an overview of the multiple traumas that many refugees and asylum seekers experience and then discusses the link between forced displacement and mental health. The chapter explores the connection
between mental well-being, forced displacement and the arts, by drawing together findings from two site-specific case studies from the UK (the Helen Bamber Foundation) and Jordan (Talbiyeh refugee camp).

**Trauma and violence**

The following lines are from the song ‘No borders’, composed by the music group of the Helen Bamber Foundation, Woven Gold:

```
Let’s talk about no borders
Let’s sing about no borders
We are all human
And this is our world
Let’s say no to borders
```

These verses point to the centrality of borders, material and metaphorical, in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. Indeed, borders are not only the territorial boundaries that refugees have crossed to reach their country of destination, they are also, in Avtar Brah’s words, those ‘arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, alien, the Others’ (Brah, 1996: 198). The juxtaposition of borders and humanity made in this song denounces the violence of being systematically excluded from the realm of humanity both at a discursive and at a practical level: several scholars have in fact observed ‘the prominence of animal metaphors and imagery in representations of irregular migration at border sites globally’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2015: 2; see also Khosravi, 2007) as well as in political discourses over migration, not to mention the dehumanizing conditions in which refugees travel to escape from their countries of origin (Crawley et al., 2016: 43).

Researching the conditions of migration journeys, several scholars have reported a high level of exposure to death and violence, due on the one hand to ‘natural obstacles such as seas, deserts or mountain ranges’ (Collyer, 2010: 277) and on the other hand to the intervention of traffickers and smugglers (Collyer, 2010; Crawley et al., 2016; Gerard and Pickering, 2013; Turner, 2015). Violence is also met at the hands of employees in detention camps at the borders of Europe or of local-government authorities, with evidence referring in particular to Libya and Turkey (Amnesty International 2017; Crawley et al., 2016; Vaughan-Williams, 2015). Embedded in this violence is a dehumanizing approach
that links migrants to animals; Nick Vaughan-Williams’s metaphorical reading of the zoo of Tripoli, which in the wake of the Libyan Revolution of 2011 was turned into a detention camp, is a case in point: ‘the Tripoli zoo-turned-processing centre is symptomatic of a more pervasive and yet under-examined feature of detention in the field of European border security as experienced by some “irregular” migrants: their animalisation in spaces of dehumanisation’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2015: 4). It is often migrants themselves who, in the discussion of their journeys, employ animalizing tropes to highlight the inhuman treatment to which they have been subjected – not only outside of Europe but even in detention camps within European borders, as the 2015 Women for Refugee Women’s ‘I am Human’ report shows (see also Crawley et al., 2016: 43; Khosravi, 2007: 324; Saunders et al., 2016: 35; Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

The connection between borders and violence thus exists both at the metaphorical and the literal level, and this violence has a deep impact on the health and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers for it affects their bodies, their minds and their ability to integrate in the country of settlement.

**Forced displacement and mental health**

Considering the traumas that, as previously mentioned, refugees have suffered and/or witnessed, both before being able to flee their countries and during their migration journeys, it is perhaps not surprising that research conducted in the field of displacement and mental health shows that ‘asylum seekers and displaced persons worldwide report high rates of pre-migration trauma’ (Robjant et al., 2009: 275; see also Silove et al., 1997) and that they display high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety (Alpak et al., 2015; Katona, 2016; Robjant et al., 2009; Schubert and Punamäki, 2011 – also see Krause and Sharples, and Seguin, in this volume). Research shows that refugees and displaced people are more likely than the general populace to experience a range of mental-health problems, such as major depression and PTSD, even two decades after resettlement (Fazel et al., 2005; Hassan et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 2005). They are also at greater risk of non-affective psychosis (for example, delusional disorder and loss of touch with reality) than other migrants (Hollander et al., 2016). These problems are thought to arise from the trauma associated with exposure to violence (Reed et al., 2012) and difficulties encountered in the migration journey (Collyer, 2010), as well as migration-related difficulties in their countries.
of asylum and of resettlement – such as difficulties with immigration, employment and income (Carswell et al., 2011). Additionally, refugees and displaced people can be vulnerable to loneliness (Strijk et al., 2011) and loss of identity through the process of acculturation (Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003; Liebkind, 1996; Phillimore, 2011).

It is important also to note that a considerable number of asylum seekers worldwide (an estimated 20 per cent in 2011) have been victims of torture – a practice that, Carla Schubert and Raija-Leena Punamäki argue, aims at ‘deliberately breaking down their personal integrity’ and thus heightening the probability of their developing mental-health problems (Schubert and Punamäki, 2011: 175). According to studies conducted in this field, asylum seekers and refugees also display higher rates of psychopathological disorders and they are at greater risk of developing schizophrenia and other non-affective psychoses compared with the non-asylum-seeking population (Katona, 2016; Hollander et al., 2016; Porter and Haslam, 2005).

In addition to pre-migration trauma, asylum seekers and refugees are also exposed to post-migration living difficulties, including socioeconomic disadvantage, work difficulties, experience of detention and the situation of uncertainty related to the asylum-application process, which enhance their vulnerability to non-affective psychoses (Alpak et al., 2015: 45; Aragona et al., 2012: 4; Katona and Howard, 2017: 1; Robjant et al., 2009: 276). Indeed, if, as several studies suggest (Allen and Allen, 2016; Fisher, 2012; Griffin, 2010; Marmot et al., 2010; Paul and Moser, 2009), there exists a strong link between social and economic conditions – including income, employability and housing – and health, then asylum seekers and refugees are at considerable risk of developing mental and physical health issues. Refugees’ vulnerability to non-affective psychosis is also heightened by racism and hostility, which in turn generate social and emotional isolation (Katona, 2016: 1). As refugees and asylum seekers find themselves isolated from a society that maintains their status as outsiders, they often lack the social networks that could provide support (Allen and Allen, 2016: 31) – hence, the feelings of loneliness that, as reported by a study conducted by the charity The Forum in 2014, are perceived as the major challenge for displaced people living in the UK (Christodoulou, 2014).

**Well-being, creative practices and displacement**

In order to understand the link between creative practices, health and well-being, it is useful to focus first on the notion of well-being – a term
used extensively, if often in a self-evident manner. A useful definition is offered by the New Economic Foundation (NEF), which defines well-being as ‘the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going through the interaction between their circumstances, activities and psychological resources or “mental capital”’ (NEF, 2008: 3). According to the NEF, there are different components to well-being, including ‘personal wellbeing (emotional wellbeing, satisfying life, vitality, resilience, self-esteem and positive functioning) and social wellbeing, including supporting relationships and trust and belonging’ (NEF, 2009: n.p.). Well-being is also associated with health; the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (WHO, 1946: 2). Well-being thus cannot simply be defined either as a matter of happiness or as a lack of illness or disease. As emphasized by Erica Ander et al., ‘well-being is associated with a sense of resilience and flourishing, rather than just surviving’ (Ander et al., 2011: 243), a point that is crucial to bear in mind when thinking of the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers.

A growing body of research offers evidence of the beneficial effects of arts and creative activities – including dancing, singing, theatre, museum and heritage activities – on health and well-being (APPPGAHW, 2017; Bygren et al., 2009; Camic and Chatterjee, 2013; Chatterjee and Noble, 2013; Clift et al., 2010; Clift and Camic, 2016; Cuypers et al., 2012; Konlaan et al., 2000; Staricoff et al., 2001; Staricoff, 2004, 2006). Studies conducted in the field of museums and health, for example, suggest that ‘museum and art gallery encounters can help with a range of health issues, enhance wellbeing, and build social capital and resilience’ (Chatterjee, 2016: 286; see also Ander et al., 2013). For instance, Koenraad Cuypers et al. (2012) conducted a large population study in Norway involving over 50,000 adult participants in order to assess the role of cultural activities on perceptions of health, anxiety, depression and satisfaction with life. Results showed that participation in both receptive and creative cultural activities was significantly associated with good health, good satisfaction with life, and low anxiety and depression – even when the data was adjusted for confounding or associated factors (such as employment status).

Another example of the benefits of participating in creative practices is offered by Betsan Corkhill and colleagues’ study on the effects of knitting on people with depression and sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): according to their findings, the repetitive movements made by knitters seem to induce a state of meditation and relaxation that can help people manage ‘pain spasm, panic and anxiety’ (Corkhill et al.,
The researchers add, ‘automatic movements may also facilitate access to the subconscious and could aid treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy’ (Corkhill et al., 2014: 41). Moreover, even ‘symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can subside significantly with knitting, even several years after the original trauma’ (ibid.). The possibility of choosing whether to knit in groups or not – and, in the former case, to be able to choose whether to join a conversation or to knit in silence – or to make or not make eye contact, together with the fact of being in charge of the rhythm of knitting strengthen the perception of being in control, which adds to the benefits of knitting (ibid.: 40–3).

Given these premises, it is plausible to hypothesize that arts and creative activities can successfully alleviate some of the harmful effects of both pre-migration trauma and post-migration living difficulties. The social dimension of engagement in creative activities can be especially helpful in addressing the question of post-migration difficulties related to racism and hostility, social and emotional isolation and work difficulties. Indeed, this is a hypothesis also advanced by the European Commission, which in a 2005 report argued that engaging in creative activities could reduce poverty and social isolation. The report also highlighted the fact that having access to cultural activities is especially difficult for refugees (Community Action Programme on Social Exclusion, 2005: 3). Several initiatives in Europe seek to address the question of integrating refugees (and migrants more generally) through the arts: recently published research commissioned by the European Union (EU) maps 96 cultural initiatives across the EU that target refugees and migrants with the purpose of easing their integration within the countries of settlement (McGregor and Ragab, 2016: 11). In the UK, a 2008 report commissioned by Arts Council England, the Baring Foundation and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation identified nearly 200 organizations engaged with arts and refugees (Kidd et al., 2008: 5). While stressing the important role that arts can play in integrating refugees and migrants in their societies of settlement, the EU study also maintains that ‘artistic expression can be an important tool in therapeutic settings since it promotes self-esteem, facilitates the expression of emotions as well as the processing of traumatic experiences’ (McGregor and Ragab, 2016: 8).

Previous research highlights the important role that engagement in cultural activities can play in the integration of refugees and immigrants, and how being involved in cultural activities is a way in which to challenge social exclusion, promote social cohesion and tackle discrimination and the negative representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the dominant discourse – including in the media and policy (Kidd et
Notwithstanding these findings, and even if there is general agreement over the beneficial effects of cultural and creative activities on the lives of refugees, previous studies agree that their impact on health and well-being has yet to be evaluated in a systematic way (Kidd et al., 2008: 53; McGregor and Ragab, 2016: 6). Laura Smith et al. (2011) also highlight the research gap, noting that there are relatively few studies that have explicitly explored the impact of cultural participation and arts activities on the health and well-being of displaced people. A few studies have been conducted in the field – for example, N. Sunderland et al.’s (2015) research on the impact of participatory music on the health and well-being of refugees in Australia – but this is still an emergent field of study. Smith et al. (2011) detail three case studies of the impact of arts engagement involving displaced and marginalized people: theatre performances with Sudanese refugees living in Syracuse, New York; Cuban exiles producing art in Miami; and flamenco music with Gitanos, or Roma, in southern Spain. The study reveals that artistic activities help individuals to restore their identity and a sense of community, and to build solidarity. The authors argue that the arts provide ‘alternative spaces for the contemplation of the complexities of adaptation’, which help communities to navigate the challenges of dislocation, marginalization and integration (Smith et al., 2011: 196), and go on to suggest that the expressive and non-violent outputs of cultural participation demonstrate that the arts and culture should be integrated into all levels of policy pertaining to immigration, conflict resolution and diplomacy.

Assessing the impact of creative practices on the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers

Assessing the impact of cultural and creative activities on the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers presents challenges – as is the case with assessing the efficacy of any non-clinical intervention in the health arena. The field of arts and health has a vast evidence base, but this evidence has often been limited to evaluation studies that have not been subjected to peer review or small-scale qualitative studies with small sample sizes and no control groups; this has limited its acceptance across mainstream health and social care. In order to address this challenge, UCL and the University of Petra (Jordan) have adopted an interdisciplinary approach to analyse the impact of cultural activities carried out at the Helen Bam-ber Foundation in London and at the Talbiyeh refugee camp in Jordan,
which – drawing on the social sciences, psychology, critical heritage and the health sciences – combines qualitative and quantitative methods.

The collaboration between UCL and the University of Petra was established in order to address the research gap in relation to the impact and efficacy of creative and cultural programming for recently and longer-term displaced people. Funded through the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund (Ref: ES/P003818/1), the work employed a participatory-action research approach. Described ‘as a way of opening up space for dialogue and conversation about states of affairs in our worlds’ (Kemmis et al., 2014: 28), this method encourages engaged participation in the activities under study and is ideally suited to help break down potential cultural, disciplinary, professional, language or socio-economic barriers among audiences (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013: 9–33; Pope and Mays, 2006: 1–11). Participants are thus treated as co-researchers and co-producers with a view to reducing inequalities, building connections and creating a shared learning experience. Findings from this research are presented in two case studies.

Helen Bamber Foundation, London: Case study 1

The Helen Bamber Foundation, London provides expert care and support for refugees and asylum seekers who are survivors of torture and/or other forms of extreme human cruelty such as human trafficking. Established in 2005, the foundation has pioneered a model of integrated care that addresses the complex needs and vulnerabilities of survivors. This includes an individually tailored programme of specialist psychological care and physical rehabilitation activities alongside an advisory GP clinic, expert medico-legal documentation, safeguarding, welfare and housing support, and a creative-arts programme. Launched in 2007, the programme offers survivors access to 10 free artistic and skills-development groups within comfortable and safe surroundings at the foundation. Group activities available at the Helen Bamber Foundation include knitting, music, arts and crafts, photography and film-making. Groups are delivered by 25 dedicated, professional volunteers and attended by 100 survivors of torture, human trafficking and other forms of extreme human cruelty from over 30 countries. These groups offer vital opportunities for survivors to explore their independence, reconnect with their pre-trauma identity, and learn new and expand existing skills in order to improve their future employment prospects. Crucially, they also offer the
opportunity to socialize and develop supportive peer relationships (also see We Are Movers, this volume).

In pilot research with the Helen Bamber Foundation, the participatory-action research approach was developed with clients, staff and volunteers, who were recruited as co-researchers to help design the research protocol and inform the data-collection approach through a series of informal focus groups. During pilot research, co-researchers were consulted on the wording of draft research questions for use in formal one-to-one interviews and to gather more informal feedback on the best ways in which to demonstrate the impact of creative and cultural activities on psychosocial health and mental well-being. The rationale was to develop the research paradigm through collaboration and reflection; this process of collective inquiry allows ideas and answers to research questions to evolve over time, providing more nuanced and insightful outcomes. The approach also affords an opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers from the Helen Bamber Foundation and Talbiyeh refugee camp.

Co-researching forced displacement and the creative arts

Co-researcher workshops allowed for the emergence of a few key thematic clusters, which were subsequently explored in more detail during the interview phase. Clients, volunteers and members of staff articulated their reflections on the impact of creative activities guided by three topics (skills, social engagement and personal emotions); from this, a number of themes emerged regarding the value of engaging in creative-arts activities (see also Figure 22.1):

• Learning or improving practical skills
• Acquiring technical, language, social and life skills
• Developing new, balanced, social relationships based on respect and mutual recognition
• Having opportunities to meet people, forge friendships, counter loneliness and develop a sense of belonging in a ‘safe space’
• Valuing peer-learning and mutual support
• Developing improved mood and self-confidence
• Experiencing freedom of expression and the possibility to develop new identities other than being viewed as refugees or asylum seekers.
Emergent themes were then explored in greater detail during the interview stage. One element that emerged strongly in the interviews conducted with clients is that these groups offer the opportunity to do something useful and productive rather than staying at home and waiting for the government to grant them leave to remain in the UK. All of these clients asserted that attending these groups allows them to have a routine – a ‘luxury’, one client observed – while learning new (or improving old) skills, and commented on the benefits of such a combination on their mental-health condition. ‘Having something to do’ and ‘something to look forward to’ were two recurrent expressions that came up during interviews, usually followed by a strong emphasis on the utility of the skills learnt. As one client remarked:

There are a lot of skills that you learn and that, you know, you’ll keep, that will stay with you for a lifetime … For instance if I go for a job somewhere, where you have to write what skills you have, so I could include all of this. I mean I don’t have a certificate or, like, proper qualifications, but I’ve learned all those skills so I feel like,
it is, in a way, impressive? Because you feel like, you know, rather than just waiting and not doing anything, you have been learning.

This perspective was shared by another client, who commented:

I’ve learnt new skills … and you can never waste your time learning new skills. New skills always help you in your life, always. So everything I’ve learnt will help me. You think like ‘film club, learning how to edit, etc.’ People pay people on YouTube to edit their films, and I’m, like, I could just do my own, if I wanted to have a YouTube channel I can do my own.

Apart from learning different skills, clients also commented on the impact of attending groups on their mental-health condition. One explained how, by attending creative groups, ‘you don’t feel like a useless person’ and how creative activities help participants to experience:

A sense of achievement: like every time I come to these classes I make something, I take something home with me, I learn something from my teachers, from other friends, and then I get this … like I have to do more, or, I have to improve myself, that kind of feeling. So, these classes, I think, are very important: instead of sitting at home, you come here, you feel better.

Another client drew an explicit connection between creative activities and mental health:

If you are not doing anything with your time, then it’s not good for you, you know; depression sets in, anxiety sets in … you become paranoid about everything, you know, but going to an activity helps you release those hormones that bring happiness to you – when you are actually doing something that you are enjoying.

The opportunity to meet people and create friendships emerged as another theme. A client explained how attending the singing group, for example, helped her to learn how to connect with people:

I didn’t know how to communicate … so because of this singing, I know how to communicate now, I know how to sing and I know how to play with people … I [didn’t] play with people before, I [didn’t] talk to people before, but through this singing I know how
to communicate with people, I know how to sing, I know how to play with people. Now I know how to draw people to myself. Before when I came, because of all [the] things that [were] going on in my life I don't talk to people, I don't go near people. But because of these groups now, when everybody comes together, they would just live together, eat together, then just stay together. So I love it, I love it, being together with people. True, before, when I came to this country I don’t move, I don’t go near people … I [didn’t] have [a] friend, I [didn’t] have anybody in the country, but through this music group now I met many friends.

When asked how she feels when she attends arts activities, one client said, ‘I feel so happy and I feel loved, because we are like sisters and brothers … to see people: you are not alone, you have other people and your situation is not for you only, also others are experiencing such [a] situation’. More generally, it seemed that through arts-activities groups clients were able to create a community characterized by solidarity. The awareness of experiencing similar situations made clients feel free to share their own experiences with one another – but they also felt free not to do so, if they did not feel like opening up:

There is a sense of community: you know you go there, you know there are people like you in the same situation, you're not going to be judged, so it’s that sense of community: we know what’s going on, we don’t have to talk about it … But with that opportunity of people meeting up in the groups where there is a therapeutic activity going on, again it’s a distraction from immigration and we know we are all going through it, but we don’t have to talk about it. There are other things going on in life, and we talked about, for example in the art group, the works we produced and what we could do, what we could achieve and get inspired by each other’s work. And learning new things like polishing our existing skills, it’s just amazing.

This reflection highlights the importance of expressing emotions through art creation:

It is more of expressing, more of letting go, it’s like getting a spirit out of you, and you don't necessarily have to tell someone I've done this because of that and that, and this’, you know. Because sometimes you just don't find the voice to talk about it and, I, as a person am really shy and, you know, I feel easily embarrassed, you know … So … that’s why I'm into arts – yes, I'm doing arts really.
In addition to the opportunity to express themselves without having to articulate their feelings, clients also seemed to agree on the fact that these groups had helped them to ‘grow emotionally’ and gain ‘confidence’.

Building on findings from the above case study, we adopted the same participatory-action framework to explore experiences of residents from Talbiyeh refugee camp in order to assess the psychosocial impact of creative and arts activities.

Talbiyeh refugee camp, Jordan: Case study 2

Talbiyeh refugee camp in Jordan is one of 13 emergency camps (10 of which are under the mandate of the UN Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA)\(^2\) established to house Palestinian refugees in the aftermath of the 1948 and 1967 Arab–Israeli wars. Jordan houses the largest number of Palestine refugees in the Middle East:\(^3\) the current number of refugees from Palestine in Jordan (more than two million) comprises approximately 20 per cent of the country’s current population.\(^4\) Talbiyeh was established in 1968 as an emergency camp, and offers refuge to around 5,000 Palestinian refugees and displaced people, mostly coming from Beer Sheba, Hebron, Jericho, Ramallah and Gaza, in addition to other Palestinian towns. The camp is set up on an area of about 130,000 square metres, 35 kilometres south of the capital, Amman. The official camp boundaries currently include 805 shelters offering refuge to 823 families; however, the camp and its surrounding spillover include 7,262 individuals according to the 2007 estimates of the Jordan Department of Statistics. By 2008, the unemployment rate was approximately 15 per cent and 10 per cent of the shelters housed two to four families, bearing in mind that the average family size is 5.6 and the average shelter size is 71.33 square metres. Furthermore, 12 per cent of families live in abject poverty and 32 per cent are in relative poverty. As is the case in urban Palestinian camps across Jordan, the urban context is severely disadvantaged as there is limited open space, no recreational areas and limited vehicular access to many camp areas (UNRWA 2008 – also see Maqusi, this volume).

Palestinian refugee camps were created in the course of two waves of human displacement. The first wave came in the aftermath of the violent conflict and displacements of 1948 synonymous with the creation of the Israeli state. This event is referred to by Palestinians as Al-Nakba (‘the Catastrophe’) and is a traumatic episode that has had little international recognition and no resolution (Butler and Al-Nammari, 2016).
As a consequence of the displacement of Palestinians into Jordan, the Hussein, Amman New (Wihdat), Irbid and Zarqa camps were created. The second wave of displacement, in 1967, resulted in the creation of Baq'a, Husn (Azmi al-Mufti), Talbiyeh (Zyzia), Marka, Souf and Jerash camps. Three additional camps are acknowledged by the Department of Palestinian Affairs, but not by UNRWA: Madaba, Prince Hassan and Sukhneh. These camps grew into settlements without any urban planning, resulting in what are effectively temporary cities characterized by low-quality construction and layers of socio-economic issues mixed with high levels of social solidarity (Al-Nammari, 2013, 2014). UNRWA serves the camps by providing basic education, health and relief, and the Jordanian Government offers supportive services in development and infrastructure in addition to camp governance and control, which is carried out in close coordination with UNRWA (Al-Nammari, 2015; see Maqusi, this volume).

Violence in Talbiyeh camp has been identified as a key issue by local camp communities; although not large in scale, issues of vandalism, youth assault, verbal abuse, domestic violence and school delinquency have been cited as significant by local organizations and locals (Al-Nammari, 2013, 2015). During the current research project, participants confirmed that such issues persist, in addition to what they perceived as a spread of drug abuse among the unemployed youth. Reasons, or sources, of violence suggest that the community understands the problem to be rooted in the following issues:

1) Environmental pressures: the cramped conditions and lack of space in the camp creates tensions and puts the inhabitants under great stress. This is compounded by the poor quality of shelters, as the zinc roofing makes the rooms very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter, in addition to leaks and inability to control noise. This is further accentuated by having an average of five to six individuals living in a space of 70 square metres.

2) Economic pressures, including: a lack of job opportunities, limited income for those who do work, a heavy dependency ratio, an inability to meet daily life needs and scarce resources. Studies have shown that youths have a feeling of ‘complete despair’ as they feel that they have no possibility of a better quality of life as long as they remain in the camp and, furthermore, that some feel that the only solution is to emigrate due to discrimination against Palestinians in Jordan (Al-Nammari, 2015).
3) Social issues, including: pressures of being away from family, low expectations, feelings of insecurity due to the political situation, anxiety, pressure from family or relatives, pressure from the community.

4) Political issues: there is currently no solution on the horizon, creating a lasting ‘temporary state’ (Al-Nammari, 2015) in which refugees live in a state of ‘permanent impermanence’ (Butler and Al-Nammari, 2016).

In the light of the above, and in an attempt to offer psychosocial support, the Women’s Programme Centre (WPC) in Talbiyeh started the Heritage Project in 2008. The WPC is a local organization functioning via local volunteers and a locally elected leadership; it offers varied training programmes for income generation and support for women’s empowerment, but also targets youths and adolescents. The Heritage Project uses video and oral interviews undertaken by youths with the elders on their memories of Palestine, the 1948 and 1967 wars, life prior to the wars, early camp life and memories of the homeland in general. The programme received funding in 2010 and again in 2013 from the German International Development Fund (GIZ), and has successfully developed the heritage initiative including:

1) an objects-based heritage programme, developing themes for exhibits and collections including embroidery and fabrics, domestic and agricultural tools, and old photographs

2) art and photography, which are both used as tools for developing film-making skills through workshops

3) a performing-arts programme including traditional dabkeh dancing and a related spin-off in the form of a Palestinian rap group, which is run in collaboration with the Talbiyeh Youth Club

4) a memory project, documenting the memory of elders in the camp, which emerged as a key objective that culminated in the production of short 5–10 minute films

5) a film school developed by young people from the camp to capture, record and investigate their identities as refugees, women, men, camp residents and Palestinian-Jordanians.

Other local organizations also offer sewing, embroidery and macramé classes, but such classes are only offered to women. Males, on the other hand, have limited art exposure and their youth institutions focus mainly on sports (UNRWA 2009); thus, the WPC heritage project has received
significant credit for successfully creating a space that offers diverse arts and culture activities for both genders.

Our work in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan employed ‘heritage ethnographies’ in order to address the dynamic and creative relationships between heritage, well-being and place making; the authors argue that these manifest as potent popular and efficacious heritage rites that comprise crucial resources underpinning Palestinian residents’ experiences of camp life. Moreover, this study highlights the way in which such heritage rites enable refugees to define themselves beyond ‘bare life’ and to make moral/ethical claims to well-being in terms of diverse articulations of the ‘good life’ (Butler and Al-Nammari, 2016). 5,6

Adopting the participatory-action research approach that was developed with the Helen Bamber Foundation, and building on the above, we worked with residents from Talbiyeh camp and colleagues from the WPC to explore themes of creativity and arts activities through a series of art making, embroidery and film-making workshops. The following themes emerged from these workshops:

![Figure 22.2](image_url)
• Perseverance and life skills
• Identity and self-exploration
• Joy, combating distress
• Social networks, high moral and peer support
• Self-esteem and pride in achievement
• Economic potential.

A number of themes emerging from research in Talbiyeh overlap with those discovered in London at the Helen Bamber Foundation regarding the value of creative-arts activities. These include the importance of acquiring life skills (which could also be classed as transferable skills), the role of arts activities as a conduit for self-exploration and addressing issues of identity, improving self-confidence and self-esteem, and the value of social networks and peer support.

Conclusion

If we consider well-being as ‘the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going through the interaction between their circumstances, activities and psychological resources or “mental capital”’ (NEF, 2008: 3), then it appears that creative activities have a positive impact on the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers, and that cultural creative activities can be employed to address pre-migration trauma (as in the case of Talbiyeh camp) and post-migration living difficulties (explored with the Helen Bamber Foundation). In particular, the evidence confirms Jessica Allen and Matilda Allen’s suggestion that ‘engagement in participative creative arts activities in communities can help to build social capital, address loneliness and social isolation, and build personal confidence and a sense of empowerment’ (Allen and Allen, 2016: 32). In addition, our research in the UK and Jordan demonstrates that creative activities afford an opportunity to develop new, and to enhance existing, skills, including those that are transferable and have economic potential. Furthermore, the social and collaborative nature of creative activities provides avenues for individuals to explore personal and psychological challenges, such as anxiety and depression, using non-verbal creative means – and this approach to dealing with psychological trauma may be preferred to standard psychological therapies (including drug and talking therapies) or, indeed, used to augment such approaches.

In a similar vein, studies that pursue co-researched mixed methodologies can make an important contribution by investigating and
highlighting novel aspects of the lived realities faced by refugees and asylum seekers while also identifying new creative resources for supporting well-being in its wider sense. As the synergies highlighted by researching across two refugee settings have demonstrated, whether you are an individual who is a second- or third-generation long-term refugee, such as residents from Talbiyeh, or a first-generation ‘new’ refugee, as with the Helen Bamber Foundation clients, the value of creative-arts activities to improve psychosocial well-being, provide a sense of belonging, develop skills and make meaning of your life is potentially profound.  

Notes

1. One of the most notable examples of this discursive strategy was offered by the former British prime minister, David Cameron, in the summer of 2015, when he warned of a ‘swarm of people’ crossing the Mediterranean Sea. [https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned).

2. Palestine refugees are catered for via UNRWA exclusively, while Syrian and Iraqi refugees (and any other nationality) are addressed by UNHCR – see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh in this volume for a discussion of the implications of this bifurcated system in a camp inhabited by Palestinian in addition to Syrian, Iraqi and other refugees.

3. Jordan is the country that hosts the largest number of Palestinian refugees (2,175,491 refugees), and, as a result of the arrival of refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict since 2011, in 2016 it was the world’s top refugee-hosting country: that year, there were more than 2.7 million refugees in Jordan, compared with 2.5 million refugees in Turkey. By 2017, as the number of Syrian refugees decreased, Jordan became the country hosting the second-largest number of refugees in the world, with 89 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants (Malkawi, 2017; UNHCR, 2017; UNRWA, 2016).

4. These figures – provided by UNRWA and the Jordan Department of Statistics – do not include displaced persons, as UNRWA does not acknowledge their refugee status.


6. For a discussion of conceptual and ethical relationships between heritage and well-being, see Butler (2012); on the crucial role of Palestinian cultural heritage in contexts of extremis, see Butler (2009, 2009b); and on the efficacies of heritage, see Butler (2016).

7. Results and creative outputs from this study are available via the project website: [https://culturehealthresearch.wordpress.com/forced-displacement-and-cultural-interventions](https://culturehealthresearch.wordpress.com/forced-displacement-and-cultural-interventions).

References


Butler, Beverley and Fatima Al-Nammari. 2016. ‘“We Palestinian Refugees” – Heritage Rites and as the Clothing of Bare Life: Reconfiguring Paradox, Obligation, and Imperative in Palestinian Refugee Camps in Jordan’, *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 3 (2): 147–59.


Casas-Cortes, Maribel, Sebastian Cobarrubias, Nicholas De Genova, Glenda Garelli, Giorgio Grappi, Charles Heller, Sabine Hess, Bernd Kasparek, Sandro Mezzadra, Brett Neilson, Irene Peano,


NEF (New Economic Foundation) 2008. ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing: A report presented to the Fore-sight Project on communicating the evidence base for improving people’s well-being’, New Eco-


