

**Stress, resources and psychological adaptation in young people from refugee  
backgrounds resettled in Australia**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

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Submitted January 2014

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## Abstract

Young people from refugee backgrounds face a number of stressors even after they have been resettled in a country of relative safety and stability such as Australia. There is extensive literature that has documented the challenges facing young people from refugee backgrounds and mental health problems in this population. However, there is far less research that has examined the resources that young people use to manage stress and negotiate challenges. This thesis examined resources that young people saw as salient to their psychological adaptation in resettlement.

Two studies, one qualitative and one quantitative, were conducted to investigate risk, resources and psychological adaptation in the lives of young people who had been resettled in Australia. Study 1 qualitatively identified a range of stressors and resources that participants perceived as salient. Relationships between these factors and resettlement outcomes were then quantitatively investigated in Study 2. A range of outcomes that encompassed not only mental health problems but also domains of positive adaptation were examined.

Study 1 of this thesis consisted of a qualitative investigation of young peoples' experience of stress and challenges since resettling in Australia, as well as the coping strategies and resources that participants perceived as effective in helping them to manage stress. Participants (N = 33, median age = 16 years old) discussed themes relating to stress and resources. A number of salient stressors were identified, relating not only to the challenges of being from a refugee background, but also to typical developmental challenges such as social conflict, difficult schoolwork and planning for the future. A wide range of coping strategies were reported by participants, along with a number of sources of social support, but very few other

resources. Self-sufficient coping and social support were found to be the most salient resources for young people from refugee backgrounds.

Study 2 quantitatively examined the relationships between stress, resources and psychological adaptation. A sample of young people from a range of refugee backgrounds (N = 119, Mean age = 18.3 years old) completed supported questionnaires relating to their feelings and experiences since arriving in Australia. A number of promising findings were made regarding the role played by coping style and social support in predicting psychological adaptation outcomes for young people in resettlement. Four domains of psychological adaptation were examined: mental health problems, subjective wellbeing, school engagement and classroom behaviour. Usage of self-sufficient approach coping was found to predict positive outcomes in all four domains of psychological adaptation. A model of stress, resources and mental health outcomes was also tested. Partial support was found for the model, outlining a complex transactional process through which stress, social support, coping style, and subjective wellbeing predict young people's levels of mental health problems after arriving in Australia.

Overall, these findings constitute an important examination of positive resources in resettlement, and the complex relationships between stress, resources and psychological adaptation. The thesis highlights the importance of using detailed qualitative data to inform quantitative research and develop models of transactional relationships between variables. The implications of the findings for service delivery, theory and future research are discussed.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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BHlthSci. (Hons)

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Julie Robinson, whose passion, dedication and knowledge has been an inspiration. Thanks also go to Tracey Wade, Michael Gradisar and Reg Nixon for their support and assistance during this time.

A number of research assistants contributed to this research, and their help has been invaluable. Thank you to Joey, Mia, Sophie and Mikayla for their hard work and passionate enthusiasm for this difficult field of research.

I am indebted to the non-governmental organisations, community groups, schools and department of education staff who supported this research. This work would not have been possible without their enthusiasm and expertise.

I have endless appreciation for my family, and to Anne, without whom I would not have been able to do any of this.

Most importantly I wish to recognise and thank all the young people who participated in this research, for sharing their stories and making this thesis possible.