

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND COPING
STRATEGIES AMONG ROHINGYA REFUGEE YOUTH
IN MALAYSIA

BY

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"No one puts their child in a boat, unless the water is safer than the land."

ABSTRACT

As countries experience conflict within their societies due to civil wars, internal conflicts or persecution by governments, innocent individuals suffer most to the extent they have to leave their home in search of secure livelihood. This study aims to explore and enrich the understanding of the psychological well-being and coping strategies among Rohingya refugee youth resettling in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Three research objectives that guided this study are; (a) to understand the psychological well-being of Rohingya refugees resettling in Malaysia (b) to find out the coping strategies used by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia (c) to examine the Islamic coping strategies used by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. A case-study qualitative research approach was utilized using self-developed semi-structured interviews based on the literature review with 5 participants aged between 15 to 17 years old. The thematic content analysis was utilized to analyse the collected data. The findings revealed that in terms of autonomy, environmental mastery and positive relations with others, refugee youth have developed a sense of belonging and security, freedom of expression, a certain level of mastery in building friendships and explored their potential yet they face the discrimination and restriction which caused by the lack of an official identification documents. With regards to personal growth, self-acceptance and purpose in life, participants stated a clear vision of purpose with high motivation to achieve that, seeking consultation for the personal improvement and also acknowledging their roles and responsibilities. The findings on the coping strategies revealed that refugee youth have a low potential in developing a problem-focused coping strategy which explain the need to empower refugee youth with the practical and solution-oriented skills to deal with the challenges. Refugee youth's one of the major ways to cope is through denial, mental and behavioural disengagement. Participants also mentioned instances whereby turning to religion and seeking social support for emotional reasons were used as the preferred coping strategy, likewise fear and hiding from harm was mentioned fear through the narrations of the challenging boat journeys. The study hoped to contribute to the psychological development of refugee youth and support them with the strong coping strategies. Therefore, the findings of the study are directly proportional to the literature and are sources for policymakers to help develop refugees' social and psychological well-being with the host community.

ملخص البحث

في الوقت الذي تعاني فيه كثير من الدول صراعات داخل مجتمعاتها بسبب الحروب الأهلية أو النزاعات الداخلية أو الاضطهاد من قبل الحكومات ، فإن الأفراد الأبرياء يعانون أكثر من غيرهم إلى حد اضطرابهم إلى مغادرة مجتمعاتهم بحثًا عن سبل العيش الآمنة. هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى استكشاف مفهوم الحياة الطيبة والاستراتيجيات النفسية للتكيف بين الشباب اللاجئين الروهينجا الذين أعيد توطينهم في كوالالمبور بماليزيا. هناك ثلاثة أهداف بحثية عمدة هذه الدراسة لتحقيقها : (أ) استكشاف مفهوم الحياة الطيبة للاجئين الروهينجا الذين يعاد توطينهم في ماليزيا (ب) لتعرف على الاستراتيجيات التكيف النفسي التي يستخدمها اللاجئون من الروهينجا في ماليزيا (ج) لدراسة استراتيجيات التكيف الإسلامي التي يستخدمها لاجئو الروهينجا في ماليزيا. حيث تم استخدام المنهج النوعي لدراسة الحالة باستخدام مقابلات شبه منظمة بناءً على مراجعة الأدبيات مع 5 مشاركين تتراوح أعمارهم بين 15 إلى 17 عامًا. تم استخدام تحليل المحتوى الموضوعي لتحليل البيانات التي تم جمعها. حيث كشفت النتائج أنه فيما يتعلق بالاستقلال الذاتي ، واستيعاب المجتمع والعلاقات الإيجابية مع الآخرين ، استطاع الشباب اللاجئين ان يطور شعورًا بالانتماء والأمن ، وحرية التعبير ، ومستوى معين من التمكن في بناء الصداقات واستكشاف إمكاناتهم ، لكنهم يواجهون التمييز و القيود التي تسببها عدم وجود وثائق هوية رسمية. فيما يتعلق بالنمو الشخصي ، وتقبل الذات والهدف من الحياة ، ذكر المشاركون رؤية واضحة للهدف من الحياة مع وجود دافع كبير لتحقيق ذلك ، والسعي للحصول على الاستشارة لتطوير شخصياتهم وكذلك الاعتراف بأدوارهم ومسؤولياتهم . كما كشفت النتائج التي توصلت إليها استراتيجيات التكيف أن الشباب اللاجئين لديهم إمكانات ضعيفة في تطوير الاستراتيجية التكيف التي تركز على مواجهة المشكلة والتي تفسر الحاجة إلى تمكين الشباب اللاجئين بالمهارات العملية والموجهة نحو حل المشكلات للتعامل مع التحديات الحياتية . كما بينت الدراسة ان من أكثر الطرق المستخدمة من قبل الشباب اللاجئين للتغلب على المشاكل هي حيل الإنكار للواقع والانسحاب العقلي والسلوكي. كما ذكر المشاركون الحالات التي تم فيها اللجوء إلى الدين والسعي للحصول على الدعم الاجتماعي لأسباب عاطفية كاستراتيجية مفضلة للتكيف . وبالمثل تم ذكر الخوف والاختباء من الأذى والخوف من خلال سرد قصص رحلتهم عبر القوارب الصعبة. حيث تأمل الدراسة في المساهمة في التطور النفسي للشباب اللاجئين ودعمهم باستراتيجيات تكيف صلبه . لذلك ، فإن نتائج الدراسة تتناسب مع الأدبيات حيث تعبر احد المصادر لصانعي السياسات للمساعدة في تطوير الحياة الطيبة والاجتماعية للاجئين مع المجتمع المضيف.

APPROVAL PAGE

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To the refugee youth in hope that this work helps tell your stories and eases your journey.

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All praise is to The One Who taught me by the pen and guided me on this journey. All praise is to The One Who grants wisdom and knowledge to Whom He wills. All praise is to Allah by Whose grace good deeds are completed. And praise and salutations be upon His beloved messenger peace and blessings be upon him.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers an overview of the study, followed by a detailed discussion of the psychological well-being and coping strategies of refugees and their importance in a youth's life. The chapter then identifies some of the challenges facing Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, and their skills in coping with these difficulties. The research problem is then articulated from which the research objectives and questions are derived. The chapter then moves on to underscore the significance of the topic, identify its scope and define the key terms used throughout the thesis. Collectively, this introductory chapter provides a detailed guide of the study.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

As countries experience conflicts within their societies due to civil wars, internal conflicts, or persecution by governments, innocent individuals suffer to the extent that they no longer feel safe in their countries. The consequence is that families have to leave their homes in search of secure livelihoods. In effect, the innocent youth are the ones who suffer the most. Those families and youth who leave their countries in search of security and livelihood become refugees in new countries. They are faced with the challenge of leaving their homes and needing to adapt to new environments. To help ease this burden, it is necessary to understand the coping strategies used by the refugee youth as they adjust to their new environment.

As refugees resettle, those working in a child support system must understand their fears and coping strategies as they adjust to their new environment (Leppma,

2016). Faced with such challenges, individuals use personal or external coping resources as key factors to reduce the adverse effects of stress in overcoming difficulties. The mobilisation of these resources leads to coping strategies. The two most common strategies are emotion-focused or problem-focused coping (Matthieu, 2006). In emotion-focused coping, individuals try to moderate and regulate distressful emotions by for instance, seeking support from others or by avoiding, minimising or reappraising the problems. In problem-focused coping, individuals try to confront and eventually solve the problems directly by being pro-active or reactive when the stressor is appraised as being amenable to change. Any situation in which constructive action is possible seems to enhance problem-focused coping, whereas situations that have to be accepted are more likely to trigger emotion-focused coping.

Evidence suggests that refugees are at considerable risk of mental health problems (Fazel & Stein, 2002) as many have experienced stressors such as exposure to war and violence, loss of their home, malnutrition, detention, and separation from families (Birman et al., 2005). Recent statistics indicate that there are over 25 million refugees worldwide of which only 19.9 million falls under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Quraishi & Saydaminova, 2017). The UN Refugee Agency defines 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 to the homeland for fear of persecution.

Coping revolves around the approaches, skills and abilities that allow people to face and manage life's difficulties to prevent and minimise stress-related illness. The most widely adopted definition is that of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who identified

coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands which are assessed as challenging or exceeding the resources of an individual.

According to the official figures given by the UNHCR as per the end of November 2019, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia reached 178,100. Among refugees, most of the refugees in Malaysia are from Myanmar. According to the statistics, 153,430 refugees are from Myanmar, consisting of 23,280 Chins, 97,750 Rohingyas, 9,410 Myanmar Muslims, 3,630 Rakhines and Arakanese and other ethnicities (UNHCR; figures at a glance, 2019). Yet these numbers only show those who have registered with UNHCR, while many more undocumented refugees live in Malaysia.

By Malaysian law, there is no distinction between refugees and undocumented migrants, therefore undocumented migrants are considered as classified as stateless individuals (UNHCR, 2019). This means that refugee children are not allowed to attend public schools. According to Malaysian law, basic education is free only for Malaysian citizens (UNHCR, 2019). Private schools are too expensive for most refugees, since refugees in Malaysia do not have the right to work, as the Malaysian government does not give them work permits (Alexander, n.d.).

The Rohingyas are a Muslim minority who have resided in Myanmar for several generations and account for 7% of Myanmar's population. However, the 1982 citizenship law of Myanmar has deprived Rohingyas of citizenship, which has effectively rendered nearly one million Rohingyas stateless. They are denied basic human rights and given no access to education and health care. Furthermore, Rohingyas are not allowed to move freely and are deprived of their right to marriage unless they obtain permission. Since August 2017, over 700,000 Rohingyas have fled Myanmar

and crossed the Andaman sea into neighbouring countries. This has created one of the world's largest refugee camps in Bangladesh. They have faced violence in Myanmar in what is being called ethnic cleansing. Reports have been made to claim that the military has been killing and raping the Rohingyas and has set their villages on fire. The term 'ethnic cleansing' has been reserved for some of the worst atrocities in history. The UN defines it as: "a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas" (UNHCR, 2018). Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, who served as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2014 to 2018, pointed out that this is one of the most problematic human right situations in the world. What makes Myanmar a textbook example of ethnic cleansing is that the military has been launching attacks on the Rohingyas and the Myanmar government has systematically driven the Rohingya out of the country (UN Human Rights Council, 2017; Jones, 2019).

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Malaysia has been seen as a secure land for many refugees fleeing from persecution. Thousands have faced and endured perilous journeys to seek shelter and protection where those who had to flee from their land due to persecution and were obliged to approach UNHCR and go through the protracted interview process to get the official status of being a refugee. Yet, even if they become official refugees, they are not legally recognised as Malaysia has not signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.

Without government protection, many live in squalid conditions and have no access to state-run schools, free healthcare and they are unable to work legally. Most

refugee children can only study in community schools for refugees funded by Muslim groups that were mostly established by non-governmental organisations.

Several studies, such as (Lau & Thomas, 2008) have explored young refugees' fears and coping strategies, yet most of the approaches in the research area are from Western perspective. Therefore, there is a lack of study in terms of understanding their psychological well-being from an Islamic perspective because the Rohingya refugees are mostly Muslim and there is a need for an Islamic understanding of psychological well-being in order to help them develop a useful coping strategies. There is also a lack of research that has focused on refugee youth psychological well-being and coping strategies from the perspective of youth and teachers. These young refugees are victims of war, violence, oppression and persecution. As their numbers increase, there is no foreseeable return to their country, leaving them little choice but to live in a foreign country. In order to cope with the extreme difficulties in search of seeking a safe land, refugees need to develop a strong psychological well-being and effective spiritual coping skills.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Research on the psychological well-being and coping strategies among refugee youth would improve the counselling support for refugees' psychological and mental well-being as well as contribute to alleviating some of the burden they shoulder. This research is a step towards reaching solutions to challenges refugees face while in a foreign country and essential for teachers and counsellors to understand the factors that affect as well as support refugees' well-being in order to help them adopt to their new environment. Therefore, this study examines how Rohingya refugee youth in Malaysia strategize their coping skills in order to build and maintain psychological well-being.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To address the research questions, the researcher has endeavoured to achieve the following aims:

1. To understand the psychological well-being of Rohingya refugees resettling in Malaysia.
2. To examine the coping strategies used by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.
3. To find out the Islamic coping strategies used by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research explores the following questions:

RQ1. What is the psychological well-being of Rohingya refugees resettling in Malaysia?

RQ2. What are the coping strategies used by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia?

RQ3. What are the Islamic coping strategies used by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia?

1.6 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study conceptualises Rohingya refugee youth's psychological well-being according to the selected principles of Carol Ryff's Six-Factor Model of Psychological Well-Being, which has the factors as personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery and positive relations with others. It identifies the coping strategies of refugee youth based on the components of Carver's Coping Mechanisms theory, which has the components such as seeking social support for instrumental and emotional reasons, acceptance, turning to religion, denial and behavioural and mental disengagements.

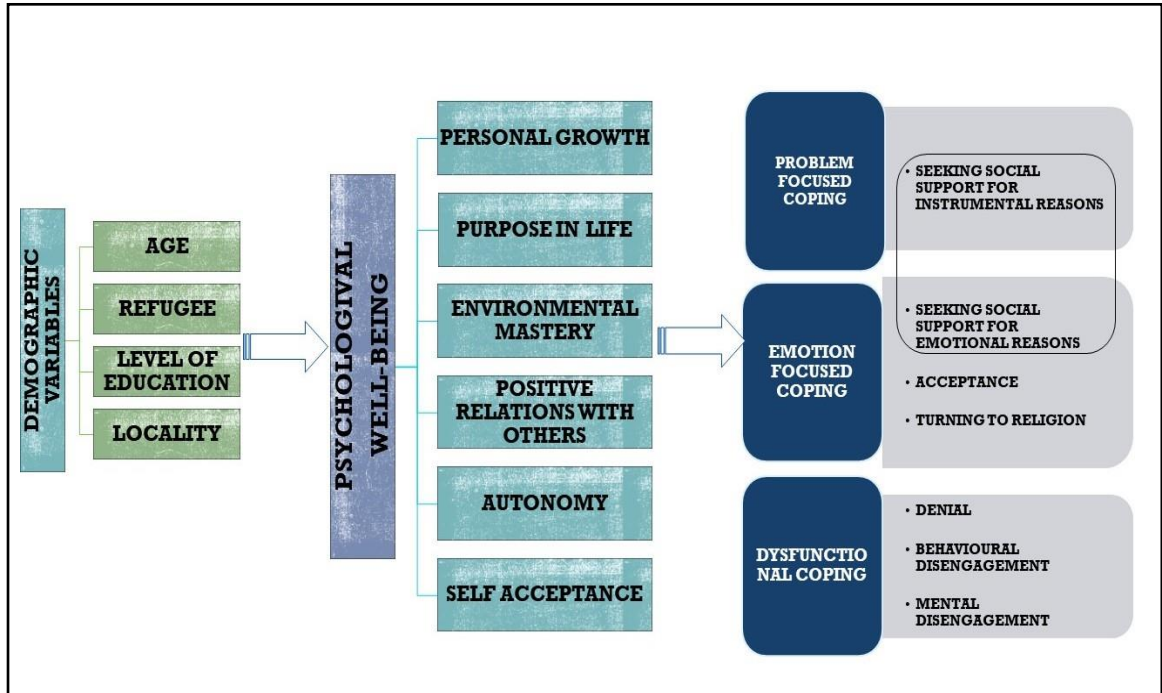


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework of the current study

Figure 1.1 shows the selected components from the theoretical framework in order to create the most suitable conceptual framework for the current study. It starts with demographic variables in order to understand the background story of the participants. Therefore, the age, the time period of their refugee status with the level of education and locality will be examined and analyzed. From the first theory, all six components are used in order to have a better understanding of the refugee youth's psychological well-being. Among the coping strategies, first component of the problem-focused coping, seeking social support for instrumental reason will be examined together with the second first component of the emotion-focused coping, which is seeking social support for emotional reason. Because the researcher has found the content of the two components similar, and better to be understood and examine together.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1.7.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study is significant as it enriches the literature on refugee children and young adults' psychological and spiritual well-being as well as coping strategies. It provides psychologists and educators with the knowledge of the skills needed to support the psychological well-being of Rohingya refugee children. Furthermore, the findings of the study will help refugee youth and parents, as well as teachers, explore and improve refugee youth's coping abilities. Findings of the study will support government policymakers to devise effective policies that inculcate spiritual and religious guidance. This study will also contribute to the fields of psychology, refugee education, children growth, psychological well-being by exploring the factors associated with the psychological well-being and coping strategies of Rohingya refugee youth in Malaysia. Additionally, this study will attempt to advance Islamic perspectives of the coping strategies practised by Rohingya refugee youth in Malaysia.

1.7.2 Practical Contributions

This study will encourage teachers in refugee schools to be more aware of the psychological challenges of refugee children and young adults. By examining their psychological well-being, teachers would make provisions to accommodate the difficulties experienced by refugee youth. Identifying the coping strategies from an Islamic perspective will allow teachers to evaluate refugee students and guide educators towards developing material relevant to those coping strategies. The practical contributions include advancing the psychological, mental and spiritual well-being of refugee youth. Furthermore, the findings could constitute a basis to develop future curricula or syllabi on the needs of refugee education and psychological development.

1.8 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study covers a sample of Rohingya refugee youth in Malaysia. Participants were selected based on prior consideration concerning location and ethnic distribution. Yet, this research centres only on selected participants among Rohingya refugee youth who settled in Malaysia and at chosen particular school and based on case study approach. Therefore, this study focuses particularly with the aged between 15 and 17 year. Given this frame, the results and recommendations of the study cannot be generalised and applied to the entire refugee population in the world as this study is qualitative in nature and the data collection was done through the interviews with the particular people in the area of the interest.

1.9 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

In order to ensure an accurate understanding of this study, the definition of terms need to be defined. The leading constructs exist in this study are psychological well-being and coping strategy. Nevertheless, the several meanings discussed by various scholars, the definition which is closely related to this study is cited in the research done by Lazarus and Folkman et al. (1984).

- i. **Psychological Well-Being** is the state at which an individual realises his or her own potential, the ability to cope with everyday stresses of life, capacity to work and contribute efficiently to his or her community the best way possible. The health of an individual does not only comprise one's physical state or the absence of a disease but also the state of one's social well-being and mental health. In this research, the psychological well-being of refugee youth is examined with the chosen participants among the area of interest. Carol Ryff's

Six-Factor Model of Psychological Well-being is chosen by the researcher to analyse the data gathered through interviews.

- ii. **Coping Strategies** are constant cognitive and behavioural responses which individuals use to manage or tolerate a stressful situation and therefore shows the capacity of oneself to respond to and recover from something stressful. As coping strategies are influenced by socio-cultural factors, the religious background of the chosen population has been taken into consideration and consequently this research paper explores Islamic perspectives to coping strategies as well.
- iii. **Rohingya** is an ethnic Muslim group living in the Rakhine State in Myanmar for centuries and often called as the world's most persecuted minority. They are not officially recognised as citizens by the Myanmar government since 1982 (Mohajan, 2018). Since then, they have been facing tremendous difficulties. In this study, a particular group of Rohingya refugee youth who fled Myanmar due to persecution and seek protection in Malaysia is chosen as a sample of the research.
- iv. **Refugee**, according to the UN Refugee Agency is 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 a country of origin for fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2011).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the two major components of the study which are psychological well-being and coping strategies. It also reviews the literature consisting of articles as well as books on these two components. Carol Ryff's Six-Factor model and Carver's ways of coping are added to the literature review as mentioned in the conceptual framework of the study. Recognition and protection of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and refugees' rights and protection from an Islamic perspective will also be discussed further.

2.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Throughout the history of psychology, psychologists have differed in their explanations of psychological well-being. Being a subjective issue, psychological well-being could have different implications. While some of the psychologists positively correlate it to factors such as satisfaction with life, self-esteem or internal control, it is negatively correlated to depression. Basing on the evaluations and description of the people of all age groups different perspectives of themselves, all of which are important in order to understand psychological well-being. The lexical equivalence of psychological well-being is "a contented state of being happy, healthy and prosperous" and refers to "optimal psychological experience and functioning" (Deci & Ryan, 2008). It is also defined as "a positive and sustainable state that allows individuals, groups or nations to thrive and flourish". Well-being is also described as happiness, satisfaction, empathy,

motivation, interest, physical vitality, satisfying social relationships and resilience (Huppert, Baylis & Keverne, 2004).

Psychological well-being was once described by Ryff (1989) as not only as the absence of illness but having positive self-esteem, mastery, autonomy, positive relationships with other people, a sense of purposefulness and meaning in life, and feelings of continued growth and development. Parallel to Ryff's definition, Cloninger (2008) stated that authentic well-being involves positive emotions, mature character traits such as self-directedness, cooperativeness, and self-transcendence, life satisfaction, and character strengths and virtues such as hope, compassion, and courage.

Since it is a broad concept, there is no single conceptual understanding of psychological well-being. The first understanding of psychological well-being was offered by Bradburn (1969) who characterised psychological well-being as being guided by two crucial concepts with different positive and negative effects. Happiness was described as developing a balance of pleasant over unpleasant experiences (Edwards, 2015). Studies related to psychological well-being were predominantly concerned with positive and negative experiences, subjective well-being and life satisfaction which were formed around the Greek word 'eudemonia', which means "happiness" (Ryff, 1989).

Psychological well-being was perceived as the absence of disease and the presence positive functions (WHO, 2006), the World Health Organisation described well-being in the International Health Conference as not only the absence of such negativities but also a balance in physical, mental as well as comfort (Grad, 2002). Research supports the broad effects of psychological well-being as it increases with age, education, extraversion and consciousness, whereas it decreases with neuroticism (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Furthermore, there is no significant difference