



Examining resiliency in adolescent refugees through the Tree of Life activity

1. What is the research about?

Refugee youth encounter a number of challenges upon resettlement, including poor mental health, education gaps, and language barriers. Resiliency researchers suggest that supporting this group of youth to **recognize their assets** can help them move from adapting positively to thriving.

In this study, the authors use the Tree of Life drawing activity to learn about the strengths and resources of adolescent refugees in northeast Texas. This research has important implications for the use of creative arts activities with newcomer youth.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in northeast Texas in the United States.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about unaccompanied adolescent refugees. A total of 16 youth aged 13-20 participated in the study. They came from six different countries and had spent 10 months to six years in the United States. All resided in individual or agency-run foster homes.

4. How was the research done?

Participants were recruited with the help of a counselor at a local charitable organization. The researchers recruited participants based on criteria that they: a) be a refugee between the ages of 13-21 years; b) reside in northeast Texas; and c) have classification as an 'unaccompanied refugee minor' with the charitable organization.

Researchers led the Tree of Life activity in three groups of five to six participants. Youth were instructed to draw a tree, using words and pictures to represent aspects of their lives in different parts of the tree. Researchers analyzed the drawings in order to identify key assets (e.g., hard work, family, self-confidence). This data was imported into a qualitative analysis software in order to count the number of times each asset appeared in the data, and to determine the most salient themes.

“Creative activities, such as the Tree of Life, may facilitate the discovery of strengths and resources in adolescent refugees, by which they may progress beyond survival of adversity to resiliency and thriving” (p. 146).

The quality of the data may have been affected by the presence of language barriers and researchers' limited access to participants. The authors note that the transferability of the findings is affected by the wide range of participant ages within the adolescent years.

5. What are the key findings?

The researchers identified three main categories of strengths and resources:

a) Self-Efficacy

Participants expressed positive beliefs about their future, and many spoke about their unique talents (e.g. in sports or performing arts).

b) Values

Education, altruism, and cooperation were frequently mentioned values.

c) Relationships

Youth were most likely to identify their relationships with others, especially their families, as an important resource.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

The Tree of Life activity allows refugee youth to focus on what is going well in their lives, and this research shows that **those who are invited to reflect on their assets will discover them**. Youth workers should consider using the Tree of Life or other creative arts activities to help newcomer youth “consider their own strengths and resources in relation to many aspects of their lives and stories” (p. 145). These activities may be particularly impactful with youth facing language barriers, and youth who have experienced trauma.



Stark, M. D., Quinn, B. P., Hennessey, K. A., Rutledge, A. A., Hunter, A. K., & Gordillo, P. K. (2019). Examining resiliency in adolescent refugees through the Tree of Life activity. *Journal of Youth Development*, 14(2), 130-152.

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