10 Summary

The Conditions of Asylum-seeking Existence

Resources and Problems in Meaning Making for Children Seeking Asylum in Sweden

In a time when the flood of asylum-seekers is increasing, more knowledge about how their situation looks is necessary in order to help them whether the case is that asylum is granted and an integration in the new country needs to begin, or in the case where a negative decision means repatriation. In asylum families where children are included, special attention needs to be given to the children’s situations and circumstances. When the research study that is the foundation for this dissertation was conducted, the total number of refugee children in the world was 5½ million or 40% of the total number of refugees. Despite this large number, there is relatively little knowledge about the situation of children in asylum camps. That these children need special attention is due to the fact that they are more vulnerable than adults and that traumatic experiences as well as nutritional deficiencies, etc., affect their entire development and maturation process.

Sweden was chosen as the country where an international research project’s pilot study was to be situated. The primary objective of this project was to increase our understanding of how refugee flight and trauma experiences can influence the psychological and physical health of children in light of their family’s cultural background, and the topic of meaning making was named as a specific sub-area of research. In the project description this topic was described as follows: “Meaning making has emerged as a popular concept in current personality research. The focus of meaning making is on the personal and subjective perceptions of the people with regard to meeting various challenges in their lives.”

In this pilot study a combination of different methods, both qualitative and quantitative were used to gather data at one Swedish refugee camp, in order to provide as broad a picture of the topic as possible. A mixed method design was used. In total, 20 asylum-seeking children, between the ages of 7-14, were included. The children spoke Arabic, Russian, or Bosnian. Data have been collected through: interviews with the children and their parents, medical records, drawings made by the children (including one showing how
the child experience God), and photos taken by a sub-group of the children which show an ordinary day in their life. The children (and their parents) also answered some surveys, e.g. about experienced traumas in their life, anxiety symptoms and symptoms related to posttraumatic stress syndrome, PTSD.

As a doctorial student in psychology of religion I became a part of the research team that interviewed those 20 children. All my professions, i.e. physician, theologian and scholar in the behavioural sciences, have helped me to get a holistic view of the human being and to use different kinds of theories simultaneously.

The dissertation focuses on asylum-seeking children’s way of meaning making and the research question is: What are the Resources and Problems in Meaning-making for Arabic-, Russian- and Bosnian-speaking Asylum Seeking Children, aged 7 - 14 years?

In my dissertation I have defined meaning making as: A way to interpret and handle the situation a person encounters. Meaning making includes both the quest for answers of existential questions as well as everyday problems. Here focus lies on behaviours, emotions, and/or cognitive strategies. The person’s life history, problem solving/coping and relations/religion are elements in meaning making.

When the Swedish pilot study started very little was published about children in this very traumatic situation, above and beyond the many technical studies dealing with the psychological and physical health conditions of asylum-seeking children. There were only a very few dealing with their overarching wellbeing. In addition, very often non-western children are represented despite the fact that only western research instruments are used, and often without any attempt at cultural reflection on their adequacy. In the Swedish context there are two recent dissertations describing asylum seeking, although they both deal with adults.

The only article I have found that makes use of Meaning making and children in a context of psychology of religion and cultural psychology is DeMarinis et al. who have studied Polish children and children from a refugee camp. By applying Pruyser’s theory it was possible to place the God-image of the children into Pruyser’s three-world model.

The Swedish pilot study

Another member of the research team has used the material from the pilot study in a mostly quantitative way. Ring found in her dissertation: Exploration of Developmental and Psychosocial Well-Being of Refugee Children

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Seeking Asylum in Sweden\textsuperscript{172}, that there was no difference in relation to age or gender in experienced social support. The Arabic-speaking children had experienced fewer traumas, had a better social functioning and less somatic complaints than both the other groups. Ring made use, in contrast to my analysis, of both parents’ ratings and reports from the staff of the refugee camp. In the qualitative material, i.e. the interviews, Ring found that loss of hope about one’s future was a common symptom, as well as that the asylum-seeking time per se was a trauma. All participants emphasized the great asset they thought the Swedish school was. Religion and faith were also high valued.

My material is very disparate and no single theory can bring order to or interpretation of the material. Because of this, it has been necessary to construct a special theoretical framework drawing on theories from different disciplines. Within the framework the different theories co-operate with one another and the data to identify emerging resources and problems for the children in their meaning making.

In the theoretical framework used in the dissertation selections from the following theories are included: psychosocial development according to Erik H Erikson; Paul W Pruyser’s psychological theory on the three worlds of psychic balance (autistic, realistic, and illusionistic); James W Fowler’s theory on faith development; Ana-Maria Rizzuto’s theory on the development of a god-representation; and Jan van der Lans’ thinking concerning meaning-giving behaviour and how such is related to religion. Coping through both religious and daily forms, are represented through the theories of Kenneth I Pargament and Annemarie J M Smith. Finally, an analysis instrument on the symptomatology of posttraumatic stress syndrome, PTSD, is also included.

\textsuperscript{172} Ring, E.: Exploration of Developmental and Psychosocial Well-Being of Refugee Children Seeking Asylum in Sweden. Dissertation May 2002 at the University of Hawaii.
Diagram of the theoretical framework and process of data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Erikson Pruysr Fowler PTSD</th>
<th>Personal profile - life history - problem handling - relations - faith/religion</th>
<th>RESOURCES and PROBLEMS in MEANING-MAKING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van der Lans Rizzuto Copingtheories</td>
<td>Relations - to one self - to others - to God</td>
<td>Coping strategies - physiological - emotional - cognitive - behavioural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Personal profiles - to describe the whole person**

A personal profile has been constructed for each of the participating children. This describes the child’s life-history, how problems are handled, what relations the child has, and his/her faith and/or religion.

The outer, physical world that the asylum-seeking children exist within is naturally a limited one. It consists of the refugee-camp area that is constituted of home, school, hobby centres, healthcare centres, and the reception area of the Immigration Office. They seldom or never travel outside this world, and when they do it is usually for a medical need at a hospital. On the other hand, this refugee-camp area is close to nature. The persons the children meet with are important for their relating and relationships. Family members, relatives, friends, teachers, the psychologist and other healthcare personnel are included here. In the personal profiles of the children, other things and experiences of great importance for the development of their positive relating process, such as having a pet, learning Swedish, or practising one’s religion are also included.

Through the children’s personal profiles I have, using Pruysr’s theory on the three worlds, identified some of the problems and resources that are included in their meaning making. Among the problems special notation needs to be given to the children’s common state of ill health. This state is related...
primarily to the uncertain situation during the asylum-waiting period as well as to their experienced traumas. These asylum-seeking children have experienced many types of trauma. The Bosnian-speaking children report the most episodes of trauma with a range of eight to thirty experiences. The majority of the study’s children also exhibit age-appropriate PTSD-symptoms such as bed wetting, stomach cramps, nightmares, and self-isolation tendencies.

Resources are e.g. to have the most stable family life as possible, to have friends, and to have the opportunity to attend school. The school environment as a whole is invigorating for the children. Even though the limited data here do not allow for the application of Fowler’s stages of faith development for each child, there is evidence that the often self-evident religious beliefs of the children are a strength to them.

The personal profiles of the asylum-seeking children have also been analysed by means of Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages. In this case as well, the limited data preclude an assessment for each individual child. However, it can be noted that most of the children are in the developmental stage: school- or teenage years, as would be anticipated considering the ages of the children. Yet, they lack basic security and most, probably the majority if not all of these children, are at a high risk for solving the psychosocial crisis of this stage in psychologically detrimental ways.

Interestingly, many of the parents have observed that if the child is able to play, they can tell that the child is feeling well. This observation is in accordance with Pruyser’s theory. Tragically, it is when the child gets into a severe crisis and concomitantly is forced to leave school or becomes withdrawn and isolated at school, that he or she thereby loses the illusionistic world’s opportunities that the school environment creates. One of the older children reflects upon just this loss. She points out that when she is not feeling well, she withdraws from her peers even though she knows that she will feel a little better if she permits herself to socialise with her friends.

Many parents do not want their children to talk about and dwell on their traumatic memories but instead hope that they instead can actively try to forget. They also try to distract their children and keep them busy. These children, as all children, need a well-developed illusionistic world to be able to balance their realistic and autistic worlds. Without knowing it, the parents intuitively apply Pruyser’s theory when they encourage their children to play and perform other creative acts, the very activities that can help the children to create a new perspective and thereby a means of containment for their traumatic memories. According to Pruyser one should, as I see it, be able to say: “playing canalises, not distracts.” So what the parents express that they do not want their children doing (i.e. processing memories and experiences) they are in reality giving their children the health-producing tools through which to so do. Pruyser’s theory permits a way of understanding the means by which this kind of processing occurs. And in fact it needs to be noted that this processing is not the same as the parents’ expressed concerns for un-
healthy dwelling on such traumatic memories. Such would be an example of the illusionistic world’s dysfunction.

There are many things in the childrens’ environment that are of a positive nature and can be considered as resources. Most children have pointed out the great significance of friends, and parents have said that they can safely let their children walk to school and play outside without worrying or accompanying them. These are unusual and most welcomed expressions of freedom.

But there are also many things that are problematic in the childrens’ environment. To see a policeman or a police car often causes severe anxiety as harsh memories obtrusively return from the time before coming to Sweden. Furthermore many have witnessed the Swedish police seizing neighbours and friends prior to their deportation. These are images of strong symbolic value. Among the strongest symbols is the mailbox. Every asylum-seeking family has, in the reception area of the Immigration Office, its own mailbox. It is here where, in addition to regular mail, all correspondence concerning their asylum application is received. Every single day the mailbox is being approached with mixed feelings of hope and fear; hope of getting permission to stay (i.e. a permanent resident card, “a green card”) and fear of finding a rejection instead. The children have to create their own ways of handling this gut-wrenching, everyday challenge.

Coping and relations – resources and problems

Three different types of coping patterns (emotional, cognitive, and behavioural) and relational patterns (to oneself = ego-image, to others and to God) are identified and explored in the surveys:

It appears that the asylum-seeking children, in terms of emotional coping patterns, actively use somatisation and passively use social support. The cognitive coping patterns can consist of trying to forget, to avoid reminders, and/or to daydream. As behavioural coping patterns, the children can do things that they actually are too old to do, being on the lookout for scary things, and/or with special “magical” behaviours trying to insure that nothing terrible will happen. There is no difference between genders when it comes to coping mechanisms.

The resources of the ego-image are fantasy and daydreaming together with a conviction that one is able to influence life by performing certain actions. The problems encompass feelings of different-ness and the experiencing of many symptoms of illness. The relationship with friends varies and the children often feel excluded by friends. Despite this, they do not think that the friends are mean. The relationship with teachers partly resembles the relationships the children have to their mothers. The children feel liked by the teacher but they do not get enough personal time. The relationship to the mother is dual. On the one hand, the mother is unpredictable, and on the
other, loving and nurturing. Yet she does not give the children enough time
and she does not comfort them when they hurt.

Coping and relations are greatly connected. For coping to be successful a
good ego-image is often needed, i.e. the relationship to oneself, as well as
social support, i.e. the relationship to others. The children’s ill health is a
problem involving both ego-image and coping.

The resource in meaning making that faith and/or religion possesses,
which has appeared in the personal profiles, is not included among the sur-
vey areas. This resource also includes the third variant of relations, the rela-
tion to God.

Overview listing of asylum-seeking children’s resources and problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Profile</strong></td>
<td><strong>Personal Profile</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-To have one’s entire family (and more relatives) in Sweden</td>
<td>-Missing family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Trying to live as ordinary an everyday life as possible</td>
<td>-One’s own psychosomatic illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The home is important</td>
<td>-Illness of other members of the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-To get to know the language and culture</td>
<td>-The psychic insecurity and uncertainty of waiting for application decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The school, there the teachers are extremely important</td>
<td>-Memories of traumatic events and possible psychic injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-The friends the children make mostly at school are very important</td>
<td>-Linguistic problems which make it difficult to communicate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Health care, here mostly psychiatric care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Religion/Faith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping</th>
<th>Ego image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-To get social support</td>
<td>-To have access to one’s own imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-To try and forget</td>
<td>-To be able to prevent horrible things from happening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-To avoid reminders</td>
<td>-To consider oneself as a well-behaved girl or boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-To daydream</td>
<td>-To have many symptoms of illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-To look for things to happen</td>
<td>-To believe one is a jinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-To act childishly</td>
<td>-To do things to prevent things from happening</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping</th>
<th>Ego image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Somatisation</td>
<td>-To feel one is different from other children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-To have many symptoms of illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-To believe one is a jinx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relation to God

According to Rizzuto the relation to the mother is fundamental for the child’s representation of God. This changes later during the course of life and elements from other important persons related to the child are incorporated. For the asylum-seeking child the family is extremely central as these children have experienced many losses and the family is often the only link to the life left behind. In my material there is a near total lack of information about the children’s early relationship to their mothers. It appears that most of the children have experienced a normal developmental pattern during the infant and toddler years. The difficulties that led to the flight of the families came later in time. In unsafe and unstable situations it is natural that the bonding to and the dependence on closely related persons grows stronger. In several cases the children lost their fathers, whereby the role of the mother would have been reinforced. I use this reinforced role and the information I received about the children’s relationship to their mothers at the time of the pilot study. I use the survey answers about how the children now, at their present age, look upon the relationship to their actual mothers. I let this relationship to their mother psychologically define the children’s representation of God. This representation of God is hypothetical since it is not based upon retrospective data from the first eighteen months of the child’s life. I can therefore not give a final answer concerning the representation of God for the children in this study.

Concerning the relationship to the mother two overriding patterns can be discerned. The first pattern implies a polarity, some items are totally agreed to while others are totally rejected. The asylum-seeking children are confident of their mother’s love, that they get their needs fulfilled by the mother and that the mother cares about their feelings. But at the same time the mother does not give them enough time and does not make them feel better when sad or hurt. The other pattern is that all questions about the relationship to the mother are answered with “sometimes”. I interpret these two patterns of answers to indicate two different representations of God. The first shows a God who the children are certain loves them, who fulfils their needs and who cares about their feelings. On the contrary God does not have enough time and does not comfort the children when hurt or sad. The other pattern of answers leads to a God who is whimsical and unpredictable. Sometimes he cares about their feelings; sometimes the children get what they need, and sometimes not.

Further research is needed on the connection between relations and religion and how to measure this connection. This goes for children in general but above all asylum-seeking children who also have suffered severe and multiple types of trauma.

There is additional data in this category, the children’s drawings of God. The query that can be raised is if the two representations of God can be dis-
tinguished in the drawings and in the children’s statements related to these drawings. All the children are raised within monotheistic religions and many of them have expressed testimonies of faith, as can be found in the personal profiles. These testimonies are in a number of cases conventional. The children’s drawings of God show what the children spontaneously drew when they got the task to draw their picture of God or how they felt while thinking of God. All children did not make a drawing of God.

Some of the children have, as could be expected, an anthropomorphic way of thinking about God. Illustrative of this is one drawing in which God is pictured as a king with a crown and a sceptre in the sky. The children ask him for help about daily things, such as being able to safely cross the street, as well as very important ones, such as getting permanent residency in Sweden. The drawings of God represent mostly positive themes. The loving God can be seen with mutual love being shared between God and the child. God is the emperor of heaven and he helps. The children are curious about God. For some children thoughts of God imply thoughts of death and that they are certain that after death the soul will fly to heaven. Other drawings reveal an insecurity about what God will do. For instance the children’s comments related to their drawings show they are not always sure that God is going to give the family a permanent residency permit even though they ask him to. This reflects an unpredictable God. One negative drawing shows that there is no God, just evil.

Meaning making and God-image

It is possible to identify at least three areas of meaning making or existential questions in the children’s god-representation drawings commentary. The first is general thinking about God. Questions concerning God are generally the same for the children. Here are examples that the children see questions related to God as something universal and of importance to everyone. This is noted in the comment to the first drawing: “Everyone wants to know what God looks like.” But included in this area are also individual speculations, as in the commentary: “I am standing and thinking about God.” (Figure 8-9.) The second area concerns God’s presence in daily life. Here God is understood as an obvious partner and presence in daily life. God is portrayed, in male form, as a helper of children in their activities such as going to school, jumping rope: “God helps me to jump”, playing and preventing traffic accidents: “God helps me in the traffic, so that I will not be hit by car”. (Figure 10-13.) The third area concerns deeper reflections on what God and faith are.

The drawings in this area are very interesting as they focus upon the children’s existential questions. To indicate that one does not know what God looks like can be a simple reflection of what a faith tradition has taught, or that it is forbidden to represent images of God in a tradition, or it can be an individual expression: “I don’t know what God looks like but I can draw and paint the sun.” For some of the children the relationship to God is love: “God
loves us and we love him back.” There are also thoughts concerning death, eternity, how one images God, on where God is, and if God exists. In this area there are also expressions of doubt and denial: “There is no goodness, only evil.” (Figure 14-20.)

It can be argued that the children’s god-representation drawings evidence the two god-representations as paralleling the relationship to the mother that Rizzuto provides in her theory, but also that the drawings provide insight into the children’s own thoughts related to their existential questions. These kinds of questions are not found in the study’s questionnaire. Therefore there is no data available from the questionnaire that might contribute to an empirical connection between existential questions, relationship to the mother, and god-representation.

It is important to note that several of the children appear to have a positive god-representation even though the individual relationship to the mother is ambivalent. A possible explanation of this can be the type of socialisation that the child has had into the faith. Myths and traditions are also important here. I have already proposed that faith, in general, is a resource for the children. In some cases, such as following difficult and/or traumatic experiences, faith can also function as a problem. The problem of theodicy and its central question of how an almighty God can allow so much evil to take place, have become actualized for some of the children.

Conclusions

One of the most important findings of the study is that the school environment, with its teachers, schoolmates and physical grounds, has emerged as the most essential resource for the children. The school offers a place where creativity and play are allowed. For health-promoting meaning making, it is important to bring the autistic world in touch with the realistic realm/world. In order for this to happen, children need the illusionistic world to be functioning. This is accomplished through their playing. Other resources include the opportunity to live a life as ordinary as possible and, to a lesser extent, the children’s faith system.

A major problem for the children is the agonizing waiting for the decision of whether or not they will be allowed to stay in Sweden. Most of the children were suffering from PTSD itself or at the very least exhibited many of its symptoms, and their mental health has deteriorated during this waiting time.

The children are often their family’s primary reason for escaping and for continuing to exist. Also from this point of view it is important to learn more about the complex situations in which the children live and to identify both what helps and hinders them in their own meaning making.

The study’s results underscore the importance of doing research related to meaning making for asylum-seeking children. The multi-disciplinary re-
search area of asylum-seeking children’s health is complex and there does not exist a single theory in psychology of religion that can provide a holistic approach to illuminate these children’s meaning making. Holistic research in this area requires, in addition to new instruments that assess positive aspects as well as problems, an approach to research that encompasses competency in different areas. Theoretical development related to meaning making is necessary, both for children in general and asylum-seeking children in particular. The theoretical framework created in this dissertation can be understood as a first step towards this theoretical development. Also, as there is no generally accepted definition of meaning making in psychology of religion, the definition used here can hopefully serve as a starting point for continued work in this area.

Meaning making
The research study has focused on the need to identify and examine these asylum-seeking children’s god-representation or religion in order to operationalise their meaning making means. Here this has been done through an examination of the children’s different relationships. My interpretation of Rizzuto’s theory has been a first attempt to show how the relation to the mother can illustrate a child’s god-representation and approach to religion. This attempt needs further development through theoretical reflection in combination with empirical studies.

Hypotheses generated through the study
1. Asylum-seeking children’s meaning making is less stable than that of children in a safe, stable and permanent living context.
2. Asylum-seeking children’s meaning making improves through access to their illusionistic world, primarily through the experiencing of planned and spontaneous play.
3. The asylum-seeking child’s relation to the mother provides access to his/her god-representation.
4. Functional religion can be accessed, for asylum-seeking children, through a mapping and analysis of their relationships.

Theoretical and applied recommendations based on this research study
The following recommendations are proposed for strengthening the meaning making process and general health of asylum-seeking children.

- In the development of suitable instruments to investigate religious coping in asylum-seeking children, the developmental stages in general psychology and psychology of religion provided by Erikson and Fowler respectively, can be used.
• The development of a theory or theories of meaning making for asylum-seeking children needs to be informed by the medical advances in research findings related to the effect of stress on the brain’s function.

• One way in which the function of the illusionistic world can be enhanced, for both asylum-seeking children and adults, is through the reading of the folk stories and sagas available from the ethnic culture through which psychological strength is gained as well as allowing for the possibility to process existential problems.

• Asylum-seeking children and their families should be located in smaller localities that offer a ready access to nature. This permits a certain type of stability for both children and their parents.

**Future research**

The hypotheses generated through this study naturally need to be tested in research studies after an instrument is developed that can measure the nature and function of asylum-seeking children’s resources as well as problems. This is where the theoretical recommendations above enter in. According to medical research the brain is negatively affected by long-term and chronic stress conditions. This has been researched with adults, but not sufficiently with children. Of special importance is whether such damages to the brain are permanent or not. The results of this research in the future with children of different ages and stages of development will be invaluable. Stress and the past or present experiencing of trauma, along with concomitant changes to the brain, would be expected to result in perhaps another type of childhood development in general and of faith development and meaning making in particular.

There is little documentation focusing on asylum-seeking children’s resources or on their ways of meaning making. I have at several points in the dissertation emphasized the need for this kind of research both in non-western contexts and with instruments suitable for different cultural contexts. In relation to asylum-seeking children such research would be of great importance for the development of culturally-informed theory and applied measures.