

## **THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE SHOCK ON THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF REFUGEES IN NAIROBI, KENYA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the influence of culture shock on the psychosocial adjustment among refugees and asylum seekers in Kawangware area, Nairobi County, Kenya. The study was guided by Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of needs and Deprivation theory by Samuel Stouffer. The study employed the descriptive survey design. The target population comprised of 395 refugees and the staff members of organizations dealing with refugees' welfare in Kawangware area, Nairobi Kenya. A total sample of 80 participants (75 refugees and 5 staff members) out of 395 refugees and staff members were selected using simple stratified random sampling. The study used a questionnaire and interview guides to collect primary data from refugees and the staff members respectively. Quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. Both descriptive (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation) and inferential (correlation) analyses were conducted. The study established that there was a strong negative correlation between culture shock and psychosocial adjustment among refugees. The study recommended that humanitarian services among refugees should include psychosocial support and that counsellors needed to focus on culture shock as a major mental health issue among refugees.

**Keywords:** Culture shock; Refugees; Psychosocial adjustment

### **INTRODUCTION**

With many countries undergoing both political and civil wars around the world, the number of refugees is on the increase. They face countless problems such as language and culture barriers, discrimination, violence, sexual harassment, persecution, cumulated stress and depression among others. In a 2016 UNHCR report, it was indicated that a total number of people who have been forced to flee their countries is approximately 65.3 million. In 2015, the UNHCR stated that the

number of refugees and immigrants that attempted to enter Europe rose up to 84% in the year 2014. Many refugees tried to use the Eastern.

Along the Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece, the majority of them were fleeing the civil war in Syria and Iraq. The same report mentioned that this fact has caused a problem to the host countries in terms of infrastructure and economy. It has also affected refugees because they found it difficult to access jobs, shelter, water; they struggled to adapt to the new cultures, they faced family separation, and they had problems accessing education and health care (UNHCR 2016).

Moreover, the United States used to offer refuge to persons fleeing persecution, war and other conflicts in their states of origin. However, in the United States, the president signed an executive order to temporarily ban entry of citizen of six Muslim countries because of security concerns. These countries are Syria, Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Iran, and Yemen. At the same time, the executive order 13780 signed on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2017, suspended the refugee resettlement program for the concerned countries (New Trump Executive Order on Refugees Oct 22, 2017).

Furthermore, in Africa, many countries experience several wars and conflicts. Among these states includes; Libya, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Ivory Coast, Central African Republic, Rwanda and Burundi. This situation has stimulated a high number of refugees around the world. According to United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2015), 17 million people who were displaced were Africans; 97.7 % remain inside their home countries. There are approximately sixteen million refugees in Africa (US Committee for Refugees 2015) all of whom have been involuntary asked to settle where they are generally unwanted and have frequently been left struggling on their own. However, the fact that so many African refugees appear to adjust to their situation and survive the experience of being refugees also shows some unseen capability that is different from the common insight of who is a refugee (Gitahi, 2015).

Socioeconomic factors, such as; housing security and financial are linked with the mental health of relocated refugees. According to Kim (2015), numerous refugees experience monetary problems in the settlement atmosphere that includes gaining financial security and finding appropriate job opportunities, as well as difficulties in adapting to a new culture.

Refugees may experience numerous barriers to secure job opportunities, these may include; acquiring a work permit, language barriers, and credentials from their home countries not being accepted in the relocation countries. They also face taste, lack of vocational skills, psychological and social fences (Aragona et.al. 2017). Consequently, cases of unemployment are higher in refugees equated to host country populations because they often get employment according to their race and gender in August 2018.

Most refugees experience culture shock which is a strange event, not only undefined, but also unpredictable. Culture shock heavily influence the psychological health of refugees. Most refugees are forced to abandon their culture and become assimilated to the new cultures in their host countries. Others are forced to obey new laws and regulations failure to which they are charged. This may make them face difficulties and troubles leisurely and calmly in terms of depression, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness (Jacobs, 2003).

Other studies have shown that refugees, whether perceived as racially similar or dissimilar to the host community's majority, can be targets of bias and discrimination (Hernandez, 2016; Jasinskaja-Lahti & Liebkind, 2015; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2015a, 2015). Xenophobic bias typically emphasized the discomfort with the presence of foreigners in a community and the infringement of these foreigners on the economic, cultural, and social capital of the host community (Esses et al., 2015).

The environment of hostility can shape the cultural discourse on immigration and can have detrimental influence on those who are the targets of prejudice toward immigrants. Images of immigrants in popular culture are often negative and unpredictable. Immigrants are likely to be portrayed in very stereotypical ways as, for example, criminal uneducated and lazy (Espanshade & Calhoun, 2013; Muller & Espanshade, 2015).

Several studies have revealed that most of the host culture tend to demand that immigrants are assimilated to their culture, leaving their own cultural heritage behind (Florack, Piontkowski, Rohmann, Balzer, & Perzig, 2013; Kosic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2015; Shamai & Ilatov, 2015). Such demands may result in increased cultural confusion and isolation as immigrant individuals and groups attempt to hold on to their sense of cultural identity while trying to connect to their host community and create a home for themselves and their children.

Kurman, Eshel, and Sbeit (2015) on their study found that immigrants' perceptions of the hostile pressures to assimilate in host environments resulted in diminished psychological adjustment for these immigrants. A number of recent studies with large samples of recent immigrants to Finland have revealed that perceived prejudice and discrimination were detrimental to their psychological functioning (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola, & Reuter, 2016; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2015; Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Solheim, 2014). Their studies found that immigrants' cultural or racial similarity to the host country did not protect individuals of various groups from experiencing perceived discrimination because of their immigrant status.

Hovey (2015) reported a strong link between an experience of acculturative stress and depression and suicidality among recent immigrants from Mexico. Similarly, migrant farm workers from Mexico reported higher levels of anxiety and experienced greater acculturative stress (Hovey &

Magana, 2013). Struggles with acculturation and cultural adjustment were associated with mental health distress in a sample of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean youth (Yeh, 2013). These studies highlight that discrimination is a reality for many immigrant individuals, and that it has detrimental effects on their mental health.

The negative impacts of perceived discrimination and prejudice may extend to the second generation of immigrants. For example, Hernandez (2016) found that psychological and social functioning of immigrant children and adolescents declined from first to the second generation across all studied immigrant groups. It is possible that one of the explanations for this finding is related to both the racist and xenophobic environments to which immigrants are exposed in their host country. Instead of underestimating refugees and asylum seekers, the local community has to offer a program to help refugee's breakdown their barriers and boost their integration in the community. The adjustment of refugees to their new environment is a vital component of their mental health. The purpose of this study was to assess the level of culture shock among refugees in Nairobi and how it related to their psychosocial adjustment.

## **METHODS**

According to Refugees Affairs Secretariat (RAS, 2018), the number of refugees and asylum seekers were 66 765 in Nairobi County who are registered. The targeted population for this study was the 395 refugees and staff who lived in Kawangware area in Dagoreti Sub-County. The targeted population comprised; 127 males, 133 females, 105 youths, 10 widowers and 15 windows. The 5 staff working in refugees' offices in Xavier Project, HIAS, Refugees Point, NCCK and CVT organizations in this area were part of the targeted population.

This study adopted a descriptive research design. According to Shuttleworth (2008), a descriptive research design is a scientific method which involves observing and describing the behavior of a subject without influencing it in any way. In addition, Nebeker (2005) suggested that descriptive research design is usually the best method for collecting information that demonstrates relationships and describe the phenomenon as it exists. The sample size was therefore 80 refugees and staff. The researcher calculated the sample size using Slovin's formula (Slovin 1960). As the targeted population was not homogenous, stratified sampling was used to calculate the sample of each category, which was men, widower, widow, and youth. Stratified sampling ensured all the possible characteristics of the population was captured and therefore no biasness in sample representation (Gavora, 2015). The study used questionnaires to obtain data on culture shock and psychosocial adjustment of refugees.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Information

The study sought to find out the demographic information about the sample in order to help future researchers on the topic to make comparisons. The demographic issues examined were gender, age, marital status, nationality, occupation, education and religious affiliation of the participants.

#### *Gender of Respondents*

Gender distribution among the refugees was one of the demographic factors that the researcher sought to know. Respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Table 1 shows the study findings.

**Table 1: Gender of respondent**

<b>Gender of respondent</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Male	38	50.7
Female	37	49.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As shown in Table 1, slightly more than half (50.7%) of the refugees who participated in this study were male while the remaining 49.3% were female. This therefore implies that the findings of this study are not gender-biased thus they are reliable in showing the influence of culture shock of refugees on psychosocial adjustment. According to Cebolla et al. (2015), gender plays a major role in employment of refugees in the current cohort. The traditional view of gender role might influence women's employment which in turn influences the psychosocial adjustment among refugees.

#### *Age of Respondents*

The study's findings on the age bracket of the respondents were as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Age of the respondent**

Age of the respondent	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18-30 years	18	24.0
31-40 years	40	53.3
41-50 years	16	21.3
51 and above	1	1.3
Total	75	100.0

As per the findings in Table 2, the highest number (53.3%) of the respondents were aged between 31-40 years, followed by 24.0% and 21.3% who were 18-30 years and 41-50 years old respectively, and only one respondent who was above 51 years old. Categorizing the respondents in terms of the youth (18-35 years) and the adult (above 35 years), then the majority (77.3%) of the respondents were the youth (18-35 years) while a few (23.0%) were adult (more than 35 years). These findings imply that majority of the refugees in Kawangware area in Nairobi County are the youth who should be mostly independent and active participants in improving the economy of their countries.

### ***Marital Status of Respondents***

Study findings on the marital status of the respondents are shown in Table

**Table 3: Marital status**

Marital status	Frequency	Percent
Single	27	36.0
Married	29	38.7
Divorced	10	13.3
Widowed	9	12.0
Total	75	100.0

The findings in Table 3 show that 36.0% of the respondents were single, 38.7% were married, 13.3% were divorced, while another 12.0% were widowed. The findings imply that the study obtained views, opinions, perceptions, and factual information from a wide range of respondents in terms of marital status. This means that the findings of this study are not confined to responses obtained from a specific group or category of refugees with regards to marital status.

### ***Occupation of the Respondents***

The study sought to know the living conditions of refugees living Kawangware based on their occupation. Therefore, respondents of this study (refugees) were asked to indicate their occupations. Findings are presented in Table .4

**Table 4: Occupation of refugees**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Self-employed	40	53.3
Unemployed	17	22.7
Employed	10	13.3
Student	8	10.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As per the findings in Table 4, slightly more than half of the respondents at 53.3% said that they self-employed; an indication that they were engaging themselves in self-sustaining economic activities such as small and medium businesses, farming, manufacture of textiles, repair activities, to earn some income to sustain them. Also, 13.3% indicated that they are in employed either in private or public sector. Some (22.7%) indicated that they are unemployed while 10.7% pointed out that they were students. These findings show majority of the refugees are independent, that is, they are either self-employed or they are unemployed. This implies that majority of the respondents have worked hard to ensure that they are earning income that enable them have better living conditions. These findings are in agreement with Pavillo et al. (2010) who also found that the majority of refugees who have access to work are engaged in the informal economy (self-employment); very few are employed in the formal sector, which leads to the unemployment of many of them.

***Level of Education***

Findings on the highest level of education among refugees in Kawangware are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5: Education level**

<b>Education level</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
None at all	9	12.0
Primary	17	22.7
Secondary	34	45.3
College	12	16.0
University	3	4.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Findings in Table 5 show that only 4.0% the refugees in Kawangware had obtained highest level of education i.e. university education (Undergraduate, Masters, and PhD), followed by 16.0% who had obtained college education (Diploma and Certificate), then 45.3% who had secondary education, and 16.0% who had obtained only primary education. Some of the refugees representing 12.0% indicated that they had not obtained any education. These findings imply that majority of the refugees in Kawangware area in Nairobi County had obtained basic education with some going further to obtain higher education in Colleges and Universities. This could explain why majority of them had indicated that were either self-employed or employed in formal and informal sectors.

**Religious Affiliation**

In most cases, refugees originate from different religious backgrounds. The study sought to know the religious affiliations of the refugees living in Kawangware in Nairobi County. Findings were as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: Religious Affiliation**

<b>Religious affiliation</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Protestant	34	45.3
Catholic	29	38.7
Muslim	8	10.7
Others	4	5.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100.0</b>

As shown in Table 6 above, the highest number of the respondents at 45.3% was religiously affiliated to Protestant Church, closely followed by 38.7% who were affiliated to Catholic Church, then 10.7% Muslims, while 5.3% belonged to other religious affiliations like Hindu, Traditionalists among others. The findings imply that majority of the refugees (more than 70%) are Christians; Protestants, Catholics among other Christian religious affiliations. The findings further demonstrate that refugees in Kawangware area are affiliated to different religious affiliations thus their post-immigration living conditions cannot be attributed to specific religious affiliations. They cut across various religious affiliations. However, previous studies such as a study by Aparna Hebbani (2014) indicated the presence of discrimination, and marginalization of refugees on the basis of their religious affiliation. Similarly, participants of a study by Kawaja (2007) who were refugees mentioned discrimination due to their religious affiliation.

### ***Nationality***

Refugees originate from various countries which had been affected by social, economic, political, natural, or human calamities or disasters. This study sought to know the nationality of the refugees living in Kawangware area in Nairobi County. The findings are presented in Table 8.

**Table 7: Nationality of Respondents**

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Burundian	26	34.7
Rwandese	26	34.7
Congolese	14	18.7
Somalia	2	2.7
Other	7	9.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The findings in Table 7 show that most of the respondents were Burundian and Rwandese at 34.7% and 34.7% respectively. Others were Congolese at 18.7%, Somalia at 2.7% and a few (9.2%) from other African countries like Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda among other countries. These findings imply that there quite a good number of Refugees in Kawangware area whose motherland countries are Burundi, Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo. This is attributed to the fact that the three countries had gone through socio-economic and political instability since 1990s thus the reason why some of their citizens opted to seek refuge in Kenya.

**Correlation between Culture Shock and Psychosocial Adjustment among Refugees**

The research sought to understand the extent to which culture shock was demonstrated among refugees and how it related to psychosocial adjustment of refugees. Eight statements in relation to culture shock were stated and refugees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed to the statements. Findings were as presented in Table 8.

**Table 8: Culture shock among Refugees**

<b>Culture shock attributes</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>
I never experience culture shock since I arrived in Nairobi	75	2.2533	.79003
I feel better when interrelating with people with different cultures	75	2.9867	.66766
The misinterpretation of my own culture made me develop defence or other behaviour	75	2.5467	2.37836
All culture communicated has a negative impact on my experience	75	2.1600	.54624
I experienced psychological effects when I expose myself to another culture	75	2.5733	.82484
I am happy with my culture because it makes me feel safe	75	3.0933	.98877
I feel free because there is no judgment about religion or other	75	3.3200	1.00216
I like to share my culture	75	3.4533	.84299

Findings in Table 8 show that respondents generally agreed ( $2.5 \leq \text{mean score} < 3.5$ ) that: they felt better when interrelating with people with different cultures; the misinterpretation of their own culture made them develop defence or other behaviour; they experienced psychological effects when they exposed themselves to another culture; they were happy with their culture because it made them feel safe; they felt free because there was no judgment about religion or other; they liked to share their culture; they liked to share their culture. These findings have shown that culture shock is a post-immigration living condition among refugees thus could have effect on psychosocial adjustment among refugees.

To establish the relationship between culture shock living condition and psychosocial adjustment among refugees, the researcher conducted Pearson correlation analysis between culture shock attributes and psychosocial adjustment variables (interpersonal relationship, life satisfaction, and self-esteem). The findings were as presented in Tables 9.

**Table 9: Relationship between culture shock and psychosocial adjustment among refugees**

		Correlations			
		Culture shock	Interpersonal Relationship	Life satisfaction	Self-esteem
Culture shock	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	1			
Interpersonal Relationship	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	-.834**	1		
Life satisfaction	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	-.818**	.711**	1	
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	-.822**	-.719**	-.713**	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

From the findings in Table 9, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) between culture shock and the three variables of psychosocial adjustment (interpersonal relationship, life satisfaction, and self-esteem) were -0.834, -0.818, and -0.822 respectively. The findings show that there was a strong negative correlation between culture shock and all the three variables of psychosocial adjustment (interpersonal relationship, life satisfaction, and self-esteem). Further, the findings show that the relationships were statistically significant since the statistical significant coefficient (p) for all the three correlations is less than the accepted standard significant coefficient of 0.005 (p<0.05); implying that the relationships were statistically significant. This implies that the higher the culture shock among refugees, the lower the psychosocial adjustment. This is evident that refugees who experience higher culture shock were more likely to experience psychological disturbance in relation to their interpersonal relationship, life satisfaction and self-esteem.

**DISCUSSION**

Several studies have revealed that most of the host culture tend to demand that immigrants are assimilated to their culture, leaving their own cultural heritage behind (Florack, Piontkowski, Rohmann, Balzer, & Perzig, 2013; Kotic, Mannetti, & Sam, 2015; Shamai & Ilatov, 2015). Such demands may result in increased cultural confusion and isolation as immigrant individuals and

groups attempt to hold on to their sense of cultural identity while trying to connect to their host community and create a home for themselves and their children.

Kurman, Eshel, and Sbeit (2015) on their study found that immigrants' perceptions of the hostile pressures to assimilate in host environments resulted in diminished psychological adjustment for these immigrants. A number of recent studies with large samples of recent immigrants to Finland have revealed that perceived prejudice and discrimination were detrimental to their psychological functioning (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Jaakkola, & Reuter, 2016; Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2015; Liebkind, Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Solheim, 2014). Their studies found that immigrants' cultural or racial similarity to the host country did not protect individuals of various groups from experiencing perceived discrimination because of their immigrant status.

Hovey (2015) reported a strong link between an experience of acculturative stress and depression and suicidality among recent immigrants from Mexico. Similarly, migrant farm workers from Mexico reported higher levels of anxiety and experienced greater acculturative stress (Hovey & Magana, 2013). Struggles with acculturation and cultural adjustment were associated with mental health distress in a sample of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean youth (Yeh, 2013). These studies highlight that discrimination is a reality for many immigrant individuals, and that it has detrimental effects on their mental health.

The negative impacts of perceived discrimination and prejudice may extend to the second generation of immigrants. For example, Hernandez (2016) found that psychological and social functioning of immigrant children and adolescents declined from first to the second generation across all studied immigrant groups. It is possible that one of the explanations for this finding is related to both the racist and xenophobic environments to which immigrants are exposed in their host country. Instead of underestimating refugees and asylum seekers, the local community has to offer a program to help refugee's breakdown their barriers and boost their integration in the community.

Kovacev and Shute (2012) carried out a study on culture shock. The participants were 83, aged between 12 and 19 years, through a semi-structured method, the findings were that those with positive attitudes towards both cultures obtained higher scores of self-worth and peer acceptance. On the other hand, those with negative attitudes towards a new culture had the lowest ratings on psychosocial adjustment. People have different strengths or weaknesses according to the way they perceive things. In this study, all of them were young; they did not experience a lot about culture shock.

Hawazin (2016) did another study on culture shock. The study was carried out through a qualitative method on 12 adults who have been in Canada for three to five years. Her findings

were that all people interviewed stated they were happy to come to Canada because they felt safe. On the other hand, they added that real life was different from that of their country of origin, which constituted a serious cultural challenge for most of them. Other findings on culture shock manifested in the shift of the social role: men found themselves performing roles normally devoted to females. In addition to that, most refugees barely adapted to Canadian culture due to the language barrier.

Horenczyk (2016) speculated that inconsistent and poor treatment of immigrants results in their vulnerability to anxiety and related disorders. Barry and Grilo (2013) found that East Asian immigrants perceived both individual and group discrimination in their host community, and this perception negatively influenced their operative. Perceived discrimination was related to psychological distress in a sample of 108 Arab Americans, a majority of whom were born outside the United States (Moradi & Hasan, 2014).

A similar study explored the risk factor associated with culture tremor among Refuge seekers from Darfur. In his study, Ben (2015) chose 340 participants who were asylum seekers. He used culture shock questionnaires to assess socio-demographic factors and living difficulties. The findings were that high levels of culture tremor were observed in females as well as males, who experienced culture shock with PTSD; and those from rural origins who experienced trauma in the course of their journey. High culture shock scores were linked with being a female and with a long period since their departure from Sudan.

The levels of stress for those living in rural areas in Sudan showed are significantly high scores for those who had been imprisoned in a transit country. Others with high scores were those who experienced discrimination and living difficulties. Care programs should target sub-groups at risk, including females and those who suffer from PTSD and focusing on promoting the living conditions in order to facilitate adjustment of refuge seekers to a new society.

There was also a study done by Githui on refugees living in Ruiru, Kiambu, Kenya on women living in those areas. The researcher used interview guides. In this current study, the researcher will be using interviews and questionnaires. Many of the refugees in Githui's study experienced culture shock due to the fact that they originated from rural areas, where they owned land, yet when they arrived in Kenya, they were not able to get land. Ager and Strang (2004) defined land ownership as a mark of belonging that is ultimate market integration.

For refugee women from rural areas, exile entails the loss of ownership and access to land, leading to a loss of heritage for their children. A great number of Sudanese refugee women face a number of challenges. They must adjust to a new culture and language. There is a need to bring together urban refugees and the surrounding Kenyan communities to increase dialogue and

culture exchange, leading to mutual understanding and respect. In this study, the researcher explored how culture shock relates to the refugees' psychosocial adjustment in their new environment.

### **COUNSELING IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

With evidence of the negative influence of culture shock on the psychosocial adjustment of refugees there is need for counsellors to focus on culture shock as a major mental health issue when handling refugees. Provision of basic needs to the refugees by humanitarian organizations is commendable but not holistic. Helping the refugees settle in the new environment only to be confronted with attempts to force them abandon their culture is traumatic and needs to be addressed. Humanitarian organizations need to invest more in psychosocial support of the refugees so as to maintain their self-identity which will promote thriving in their new environment.

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