

Lived Experience of Refugee Musicians: Factors That Enable Performance of Music Among Resettled Immigrants Facing What Can Be Unsurmountable Barriers

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PURPOSE: The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of six refugee musicians who left Africa and Asia and were resettled in the United States. While the study scope was broad, this presentation will focus on the emerging themes that reveal specific factors which constrained or enabled them continue music performance despite serious challenges. This study focused on an often-marginalized group to explore the relationship between occupation (music performance) and health and may provide insight to practitioners regarding ways to address occupational injustices that often face this population.

DESIGN: Because the goal was to get accounts of the participants' lived experiences, the study used the phenomenological design. Six participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods from two urban centers, one being a large metropolitan city with several million inhabitants.

METHODS: Five broad study questions were developed, but these were further broken into 13 more focused but open-ended questions used during structured interviews. Unstructured interviews and observations of some community events involving these musicians added more data, as did some publicly available video recordings posted by some of the participants on YouTube. Methods used in analysis were phenomenological reduction, triangulation, description, and comparison.

RESULTS: Data showed continued performance of music despite various barriers. Specific barriers shared between participants included language problems, differences in preferred music style, financial problems limiting access to studio recording, and a lack of access to radio or television broadcasting. Five factors enabled their performance. First, participants had a history with music performance and did not want to lose their identity as musicians. Second, they recognized specific benefits from music performance such as promotion of health and social integration within their communities. Third, participants felt appreciated by individuals and groups in their communities due to their music contribution to specific communal events. Fourthly, they felt they had the ability and readiness to adapt to new environments. Lastly, communities created opportunities by inviting them to perform music in public/community events, though these invitations were much fewer than they desired.

CONCLUSION: These outcomes indicate that even though the performance of music among refugee immigrants faced serious barriers, it was continued due to identifiable factors. The most essential factor appears to be their awareness, from lived experience, that there was a relationship between music performance (broadly defined to include dance) and their mental, physical, and social health or wellbeing. It is likely that occupational therapists would find willing, capable, and talented collaborators among refugee communities if they sought to develop programs that apply music or related arts to foster health for this population. Occupational therapy practitioners are encouraged to consider developing community-based programs to strengthen the factors associated with continued engagement in occupations for individuals who struggle following displacement and/or resettlement. It is probable that many displaced persons abandon occupations that could have promoted their mental and overall health, as new contexts demand adaptation to new economic, cultural, and political realities that are at times highly unlike those of their places of origin. On the other hand, the study revealed that humans could have indelible tenacity, which is what enabled the musicians to continue performance despite the barriers. This tenacity appears to signify a rare degree of occupational resilience.

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