Mural painting in South Philadelphia: a means of addressing racism directed against Bhutanese and Burmese refugees, and improving health outcomes

Meera Bhardwaj
Population Health College within the College, Jefferson Medical College of Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA

INTRODUCTION

• Acculturation is the process of adjusting personal behavior patterns in response to prolonged interaction with another culture [1, 2].
• Discrimination in the host country significantly affects the acculturation process. Refugees have an extremely high risk for discrimination [3]. Discrimination exacerbates existing mental health conditions and activates the HPA [4].
• In the South Philadelphia refugees from Bhutan and Myanmar have been resettled into the neighborhood of East Passyunk/ Moymensing. This demographic change has unfortunately resulted in acts of discrimination by the local community against the refugees.
• Mural Arts is painting a mural in the heart of this neighborhood. This mural will announce the presence of the refugees in the neighborhood as well as signal the city government’s acceptance of the refugees.
• It is unclear if the government’s painting will help the refugees gain acceptance into the community, and put an end the hateful acts directed against the refugees.

The Question: In the event that the refugee community continues to face prejudice in its new home, could the mural and its construction, similar to art therapy, help individuals combat the psychologically and physiologically negative consequences of discrimination?

INTERVENTION

• Large Mural in the center of the neighborhood depicting the story of persecution, picking up, and planting roots in a new place. Smaller Murals throughout the neighborhood. Expected completion date of October 2012.
• Multiple community meetings discussing design and presentation of murals. Further design meetings with board of Mural Arts. Several members of the community participate in Mural Arts Board meeting discussions

Storefront at 1927 S. 7th street:
• Forum for residents of the community to interact.
• Collaboration with community partners: Refugee Mental Health Collaborative, which co-sponsors the space; Migrant Education, Jefferson Refugee Health Partners
• Give away events, art workshops, block parties, vocational training, general work skills development
• Multiple events, such as Design Philadelphia and World Refugee Day help to bring attention to this community.

Comparing to Art Therapy:
• The mural was not designed as a form of art therapy. As such, it lacks an essential component and goal of art therapy which is to get individuals to tell their story
• The mural is still a piece of art. Public paint days may still serve as cathartic outlets. There are many opportunities for people in the community to create works of art. Sessions at the storefront and Mural Arts funded community events provide opportunities for the refugee community to interact, build a stronger sense of community, and help to instill a concrete culturally-based self identity. Research has shown that such developments are protective when facing racial discrimination.

PROPOSED ASSESSMENT:

Goals:
1. Have acts of discrimination diminished?
2. Has the level of acculturation been altered by the mural?
3. Has the community mental health status improved?

Assessment Methods:
• Conduct surveys and interviews with community members prior to mural completion, 3 months post completion, 6 months post completion, yearly up to 3 years.
• Assess level of perceived racism in the community with Williams Everyday Discrimination Scale.
• Assess level of acculturation with Psychological Acculturation Scale
• Regular group sessions with the adolescents, adults, and psychiatry specialist—Refugee Mental Health Collaborative members, or Psychiatry residents—to see if rates of PTSD and depression have decreased.

CONCLUSION

• Hard to gauge effects of mural without the mural’s completion.
• Should the mural prove effective, other cities can replicate this mural process in refugee communities. In fact, it may encourage Mural Arts of Philadelphia to develop more refugee-centered murals in other parts of the city, such as West Philly, where the Eritrean, Ivory Coast, and Sudanese refugees reside. Furthermore, the success of this mural may influence Mural Arts to rent out storefronts in other mural development locations. Lastly, grant money may be obtained to secure the storefront at 7th Street and Dudley Street for further community use.

REFERENCES