

How to take into account the background of the refugee

Irregular and forced migrants come from different contexts and experiences and, like everybody, have multiple intersecting identities. It is extremely important to welcome their stories, experiences, culture, fears and aspirations. They are frequently exposed to intolerable levels of risk in transit: they are unprotected, accumulate debt, and have no legal recourse. Professionals working in Southern Europe with newcomers report that, for the last three years, migrants entering/crossing Europe via the Mediterranean have been more and more devastated (especially the ones passing by Libya), which results in frequent mental and physical diseases. Due to this problem a systemic approach is no more enough if not integrated by a supply chain approach where more professionals/organizations collaborate each other in each sphere of actions (health, law, house, work, culture) and accompany migrants in a comprehensive and smooth process.

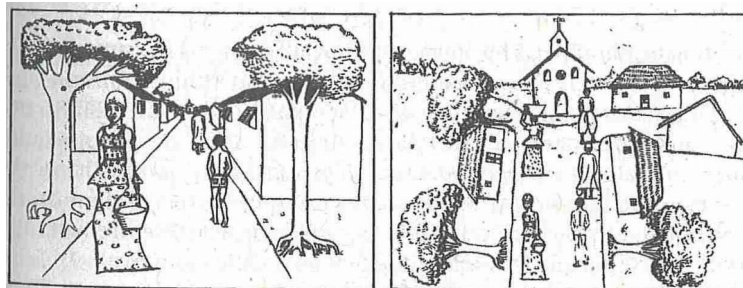
As far as the identity of refugee is concerned, some prefer not to adopt the label of refugee as a primary identifier, hoping to get rid of this identity over time, while others prefer to maintain this identity. Anyway it is recommended to take in mind that “refugee” is just a legal status, not a human one.

The first meeting with the foreigner is extremely important as it is the occasion where the professional has to show both technical skills and human qualities to welcome him/her and give the necessary support to find a comfortable solution to the migrant’s problem. The confidence building process starts here and it is functional to an authentic dialogue.

Cultural differences are generally the first big barrier for professionals in welcoming a newcomer and build a confidence relationship. Communication styles need to be tailored to the newcomer’s cultural background, which means to reduce the existing cultural distance and try to see the world with the migrant’s eye. Mediators and mentors with similar background as newcomers/refugees have a crucial positive impact and may help the empathy and confidence building process. Anthropological approach based on observation and absence of judgment may be helpful, not having an ethnocentric approach, therefore trying as much as possible not to have any conditioning, or cultural stereotypes and considering people with objective criteria such as age, gender, level of education and nothing else. Thus lots of mistakes may be avoided.

Classical western tools may not work as they do not correspond to the cultural vision of the world of the other, for example written word is not so effective with many African or Asian cultures and working with concept maps, diagrams or graphical tools may cause misunderstanding. Even the use of a city map given to a low-educated migrant African may be a problem: they orientate themselves much better with cardinal points. As an example some illiterate Western African village people use an orthogonal perspective in representing reality, like in the below image on the right, where the

position of objects is given by a sort of natural order: vertical position of human beings while horizontal position for non-living beings and objects. So people questioned on which drawings represents their village may answer they do not understand the following drawing on the left where all the elements are vertical; on the contrary they feel comfortable with the one on the right. Being aware that the objective reality may be seen in different ways from different cultures must be always into consideration by a professional working with refugees and newcomers.



Source: F. Levy-Ranvoisy, *Manuel de dessin pour communiquer avec une population non alphabétisée: la perspective orthogonale*, Karthala-ACCT, 1987

Storytelling is the most suitable tool to let migrants express themselves and let professionals enter his/her vision of the world. As Paul Watzlawick remarks communication takes place on two distinct levels, that of content and that of relationship. Storytelling allows the parties to tell their stories, trying to build a relationship, as far as they can. Starting from their stories, their experiences, migrants can express their values, needs, expectations.

Resources

- Levy-Ranvoisy F., *Manuel de dessin pour communiquer avec une population non alphabétisée: la perspective orthogonale*, Karthala-ACCT, 1987
- Watzlawick P., Beavin J.H., Jackson D.D. (1967), *Pragmatics of Human Communication*.



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