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# Guiding dilemmas and principles informing psychotherapeutic work with African refugees in South Africa.

**Grootenhuis, Geertje-Kieke**

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# Guiding dilemmas and principles informing psychotherapeutic work with African refugees in South Africa

**Geertje-Kieke Grootenhuis**

A Research Report submitted to the School of Humanities and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts (Clinical Psychology).

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# Abstract

Therapists seeing refugee populations often struggle with the traditional boundaries of psychotherapy and conventional wisdom's about therapeutic goals and practice. The social, political and cultural context of the therapeutic work throws up dilemmas and constraints that need to be better understood in working with these marginalized clients, particularly those in uncontaining environments such as South Africa. Although many refugees experience serious mental health problems and adjustment difficulties, the context in which treatment is offered impacts on the type of psychotherapeutic intervention and therapist stance that is optimal or possible. This study discusses presenting strengths, dilemmas and possible guiding therapeutic principles that arose from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 8 interviewees (4 psychotherapists and 4 refugee clients) concerning their experiences of conducting and being in medium term psychotherapy, looking at similarities and differences in observations. In accordance with the literature, this study found that the main descriptions of psychological distress discussed by the refugee clients included those caused by past trauma and those that were a response to current experiences. The prevalence of these symptoms stresses the importance of psychological intervention. The strengths of psychotherapy noted by refugee clients included: the preparation for psychotherapy through psycho-social workshops, attaining of both emotional and general support, the psych-social approach used by many of the therapists and the importance of foundational elements of psychotherapy, such as the relationship. This research project found that experiencing a containing therapeutic space was possible due to what refugees coined 'the professionalism of the therapists'. Therapists raised such issues such as having to step out of the conventional therapist role, having to deal with the impact of the horror stories described by refugees, struggles to identify appropriate therapeutic approaches, difficulties in assisting refugees to establish sustainable support networks and not meeting refugees' expectations that they will be 'fully healed' through therapy. Possible guiding therapeutic principles, such as working within the supportive framework of a two phased integrative framework, are also discussed. The study found that ideally speaking, therapists and refugee clients are more supported if therapy is offered as part of a multi-dimensional and multidisciplinary approach.

# Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work, and that I have given full acknowledgement to the sources that I have used. It is being submitted for the Degree of Masters of Arts (Clinical psychology) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University.

_____

**Geertje-Kieke Grootenhuis**

August 2007

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS


| | Page |
|---|---|
| **Title Page** | **i** |
| **Abstract** | **ii** |
| **Declaration** | **iii** |
| **Acknowledgements** | **iv** |
| **Table of Contents** | **v- viii** |

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

| | |
|---|---|
| **1.1 Research Rational and Aim** | **1** |
| **1.2 Outline of this Report** | **2** |

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

| | |
|---|---|
| **2.1 Introduction** | **5** |
| **2.2 Refugee and psychological distress** | **6** |
| **2.3 Refugee in the South African context** | **12** |
| **2.4 Counselling approaches used to assist refugees** | **19** |
| *2.4.1. The Therapeutic 'Frame'* | **19** |
| *2.4.2. Multicultural Sensitivity* | **21** |
| *2.4.3. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* | **23** |
| *2.4.4. Psychodynamic Therapy* | **24** |
| *2.4.5. Testimony Therapy* | **24** |
| *2.4.6. Narrative Therapy* | **25** |
| *2.4.7. Integrative Therapeutic Approaches* | **25** |
| *2.4.8. Psycho-Social Approach* | **26** |
| **2.5 Usefulness of therapeutic approaches for refugees in unsafe contexts** | **28** |
| **2.6 Difficulties confronting therapists working with refugees** | **31** |
| **2.7 Conclusion** | **34** |

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD


**3.1 Introduction** **36**

**3.2 Research Aims** **37**

**3.3 Research Questions** **37**

**3.4 Methodological Approach/Framework** **37**

*3.4.1 Interpretive Inquiry/ Hermeneutics* **38**

**3.5 Participants** **40**

*3.5.1 Refugee clients brief biography* **42**

*3.5.2 Summary of Therapists brief biography* **43**

**3.6 Data Collection** **44**

*3.6.1 Interviews* **45**

**3.7 Data Analysis** **46**

*3.7.1 Validation* **49**

**3.8 Reflexive considerations** **49**

**3.9 Ethical Considerations** **50**


## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: Part 1

### *The lived South African refugee context*


**4.1 Introduction** **52**

**4.2 The generic refugee experience** **52**

*4.2.1 Political refugees versus economic migrants* **52**

*4.2.2 Multiple losses* **54**

*4.2.3 Trauma* **56**

*4.2.4 Social uprooting: The experience of alienation* **56**

**4.3 The South African urban refugee experience** **58**

*4.3.1 Basic needs and support* **58**

*4.3.2 Living with discrimination* **60**

*4.3.3 Retraumatization* **62**

*4.3.4 Refugee resilience* **62**

**4.4 Mental health of refugees** **63**

**4.5 Refugee counselling experience** **66**

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: Part 2.

### *Psychotherapeutic work with refugees in South Africa*


**5.1 Introduction** **69**

**5.2 Strengths and contributions of therapy with refugees in South Africa** **69**

*5.2.1 Psychotherapy for refugees* **69**

**5.3 Dilemmas arising from therapeutic work with refugees** **77**

*5.3.1 Therapist role conflict* **78**

5.3.1.1 Multiple roles **79**

5.3.1.2 Therapeutic boundaries **83**

*5.3.2 Dealing with emotional stress of refugee trauma work* **86**

*5.3.3 Therapeutic style and goals* **88**

*5.3.4 Dilemmas of dealing with client fabrication* **89**

**5.4 Some guiding principles proposed for engaging with therapeutic dilemmas and difficulties** **91**

*5.4.1 Guidelines for therapeutic work with refugees in the Johannesburg context* **91**

5.4.1.1 The therapeutic frame and therapeutic alliance **92**

5.4.1.2 Content and context understandings **93**

5.4.1.3 Usefulness of conventional therapeutic models **93**

*5.4.2 Two phased approach to therapy* **95**

*5.4.3 The Importance of the Therapeutic relationship* **97**

*5.4.4 An extended therapy process* **101**

*5.4.5 Therapist reflexivity* **102**

**5.5 Interpretive reflections** **104**


## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION


**7.1 Central Findings** **108**

**7.2 Limitations of the Study** **111**

**7.3 Implications for Future Research** **112**

**REFERENCE LIST** **114**

**APPENDIX 1a:** Interview schedule for therapists **122**

**1b:** Interview schedule for refugees **124**

**1c:** Informed consent forms **125**

**APPENDIX 2a:** Posters advertising for therapists and refugees **127**

**2b:** Information letter for therapists **128**

**2c:** Information letter for refugees **129**

**APPENDIX 3:** Mind map of emerging themes in analytic process **130**