

Voices from the Field: Enhancing Refugee Social Work Education through Practitioner Insights¹

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Abstract

The following presents three methodologically identical original studies on the social work response to the global refugee crisis in Germany, Lebanon, and Greece between 2016 and 2023. It reveals key patterns and important insights into refugees' greatest needs, the essential skills and knowledge social workers developed to support refugees, imperatives for self-care and coping strategies for social workers, and recommendations for optimal continuing education and training. Methodologically, this article synthesizes findings from three original research projects through a narrative literature review, that incorporates additional evidence-based literature. Key findings can be summarized as such: Participants show a strong preference for practical learning. It is noted that they often become overwhelmed by the scale of needs, and by real-time challenges related to health, mental health, systems, laws, and cultural differences, for which they feel unprepared. Although they recognize the importance of continuing education and training, finding the time and resources to improve in these areas is extremely challenging. Due to the work's intensity, personal coping capacities are often stretched beyond their limits, leaving them with inadequate coping strategies and resources. Nonetheless, many participants describe effective personal coping methods that could benefit others in similar roles. As for conclusions and implications, these findings underscore the need for social work educators to address the urgent demands faced by social workers in the global refugee crisis, where many lives are at stake. Educators must equip future social workers with critical skills, knowledge for refugee practice, and guide the development of relevant content areas for ongoing education and training.

Key Words:

social work education; refugee crisis; coping; Germany; Lebanon; Greece

1 Introduction

To inform and strengthen social work education and practice with refugees, this article synthesizes findings from three methodologically identical original research studies conducted in Germany, Lebanon, and Greece – three countries with significant and diverse refugee populations (Cecil et al., 2021; Hagues & Cecil, 2020; Hagues & Stoltzfus, 2019). Germany became a leading resettlement destination due to its welcoming stance

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in 2015, spearheaded by Chancellor Angela Merkel's statement, "Wir schaffen das" ("We can do it"), and its robust economic and human services systems (Brücker et al., 2016). Since then, Germany, with a population of about 85 million, has received approximately 2.85 million asylum applications (Statista, 2024a), approving around 1.2 million (Statista, 2024b). While Germany has offered safety, security, and hope to many, its health and human services have been strained, and community and political support have fluctuated over the past decade (Kuhn & Maxwell, 2024). Additional challenges include integration, language barriers, employment, housing shortages, and impacts on the education system.

Lebanon faces significant challenges in supporting its large refugee population amid economic strains and political instability. Lebanon, with a population of 5.35 million, hosts approximately 2 million refugees, primarily Palestinians and Syrians. Palestinian refugees have been present since the 1940s (Siklawi, 2019), while Syrian refugees arrived after the 2015 crisis. By 2020, there were 470,000 registered Palestinians and 1.5 million registered Syrians in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2020). Lebanon's limited resources and high debt-to-GDP ratio strain its capacity to support refugees, compounded by ongoing military tensions between Hezbollah and Israel (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Social work has a growing presence through institutions like the Lebanese American University, but governmental disorganization hinders a coordinated social work response. Despite these challenges, Lebanese social workers, citizens, refugees, and NGOs have created a patchwork of refugee support, maximizing limited resources to address pressing needs.

Greece's proximity to the Middle East and Africa, along with its European Union (EU) membership, made it a primary destination for refugees fleeing their countries. However, many were unaware that Greece itself was in a severe economic crisis, worsened by the 2008-2009 global recession and the U.S. housing market collapse (Cavounidis, 2018). This economic strain left Greece ill-prepared to manage the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees on its shores (Carastathis & Tsilimpounidi, 2018). While social work agencies and programs have worked tirelessly to support refugees, Greece's economic hardships, political fluctuations, and complex relationship with the EU – which is concerned with irregular migration throughout Europe – keep many refugees in a state of limbo, lacking formal recognition in Greece, but unable to return home.

Despite diverse circumstances between Germany, Lebanon, and Greece, participants reported notably similar responses regarding refugees' greatest needs, key skills, and knowledge (including preferred pedagogies), and strategies for coping with work-related stress. The literature review examines the context of international social work education, evolving social work curriculum recommendations, and the importance of practical application in refugee focused social work education. The results section presents selected participants' direct quotes highlighting refugees' greatest needs, key skills and knowledge, and ways of coping. The discussion section is a call to action for social work educators and recommends specific topic areas to emphasize in the refugee social work practice curriculum.

2 Literature Review

The global refugee crisis has escalated to unprecedented levels over the past decades, challenging nations, governments, humanitarian organizations, and professionals, including social workers, to respond effectively (Androff & Mathis, 2021). Major resettlement locations, such as Germany, Lebanon, and Greece, had limited time to

assess and build capacity. Instead, they were forced to adapt swiftly, simultaneously providing aid while preparing and resourcing front-line workers the best they could. For social work education, the crisis necessitated a reevaluation of educational strategies and practices in the context of refugee care (Kenan, 2021; Noyori-Corbett & Moxley, 2023). Synthesized findings emphasize the advantages of internationally collaborative approaches to research, teaching, and practice in addressing major humanitarian challenges like the global refugee crisis (Davis et al., 2018). Social workers' education and training are vital in responding to refugee needs. This brings up two important questions: How can internationally focused social work education continuously enhance the refugee social work curriculum? And what are the best methods for teaching and training in this context?

3 International Social Work Education and the Evolving Refugee Social Work Curriculum

International collaboration and research in social work education reveal commonalities in addressing refugee needs across cultures. Davis et al. (2018) stress that participants from different countries often articulate similar responses regarding refugees' needs and circumstances. They state,

“Increased global communication elucidates the similarities of social challenges faced by nations throughout the world and improves access, literacy, empathy, and responsibility internationally” (Davis et al., 2018: 327).

The concept of global citizenship emerged as a critical theme, emphasizing the consistency of human needs and the potential for systematizing practice approaches such as assessment and intervention. From this perspective, differences are seen primarily in systems of access, rather than in individual needs.

Refugee social work practice requires specialized knowledge and skills customized to the unique challenges faced by refugee populations. Core knowledge areas for refugee social work practice have been established and continue to evolve (Borrmann, 2023; Hagues & Cecil, 2020; International Federation of Social Workers, 2019; Kenan, 2021; Noyori-Corbett & Moxley, 2023; Potocky & Naseh, 2019; Social Work Portal, 2024). Well established content areas in the literature include the refugee experience and context, legal and policy frameworks, cultural competence, and trauma-informed practice. Practice skills include assessment, intervention, case management, and language and communication strategies. Potocky and Naseh (2019) set a high premium on evidence-based service approaches that address cultural, linguistic, political, and socioeconomic barriers. They also recommend that social workers assess health and mental health issues, family dynamics, language related challenges, educational needs, economic well-being, and within-group relations.

Refugee social work curricula through an ecological perspective equips social workers to address complex and dynamic needs of refugee populations. Based in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, Hagues and Cecil (2020) developed a course outline proposal that accounts for refugee needs across macro-, mezzo-, micro-, exo-, and chrono-system levels. While the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels are familiar concepts, the exo-system encompasses external environmental factors that indirectly influence development, and the chrono-system focuses on changes over time. Using this framework, social work education integrates diverse content areas, including diversity, human rights, policy

practice, ethics, assessment, evaluation, community assessment, community engagement, research, and interventions with individuals, families, and groups.

3.1 Experiential Learning for Refugee Practice

Practicing social workers commonly state that they learn best what they put into practical application, which is substantiated by a significant body of literature on experiential learning (Acharya et al., 2019; Council on Social Work Education, 2022; Deslauriers, et al., 2019). CSWE, the council that accredits all social work education programs in the United States, designates field education as the *signature pedagogy*, referring to it as a primary and crucial approach to social worker development. Experientially oriented classroom methods, such as role playing, and case study application, are also shown to manifest improved learning and retention outcomes when compared to passive learning (Abraham, 2024; Mayer, 2004).

4 Methodology

This article is a narrative literature review, which is a non-standardized approach that allows researchers to compare, evaluate, and synthesize evidence more flexibly from selected studies (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The three primary studies that are the focus of this article received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval through Samford University's Institutional Review Board (Cecil et al., 2021; Hagues et al., 2019; Hagues & Cecil, 2020). The results section of this article includes quotations from data collected for those studies. Each study utilized a mixed methods approach with 109 (N=109) participants (Germany, N=34; Lebanon, N=47; Greece, N=28). Qualitative data were collected through structured, in-person interviews (Patton, 2014) and quantitative data were collected using ordinal measurements that looked at the extent to which social workers felt their work was effective, that they were adequately supported, and to their level of coping. Interview transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative method through the Atlas.Ti software (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Charmaz, 2014). Qualitative analysis yielded themes, which were prioritized according to frequency with which they came up. Ordinal data yielded means and standard deviations that revealed overall effectiveness and coping scores, and variability between participants. This narrative review pulls from top themes identified in this research.

5 Results

This section reviews and substantiates key thematic areas that arose in these research projects with respect to *refugees' greatest needs*, *key skills and knowledge*, and *coping*. The question of *refugees' greatest needs* was designed to find out from social workers what they felt were their most important service areas to provide. For *key skills and knowledge*, participants responded about areas they retained from their studies as well as those they either forgot, missed, or felt should have been included in their studies. In terms of *coping*, it was posited that this work is fraught with uncertainty and resource constraints, so participants shared both how they were doing and, more specifically, what coping approaches work best for them.

5.1 Refugees' Greatest Needs

A thorough examination of *refugees' greatest needs* provides valuable insights that can better prepare educators to train social workers for refugee practice in more precise and

nuanced ways. Respondents consistently identified the following as *refugees' greatest needs*: assistance with navigating systems, community engagement, legal status, safe housing, food, legal protection, civil rights, and opportunities for productivity, particularly in education and employment. Several quotes that demonstrate these points include:

"I think at the moment the problem is they have to wait very long to make any decisions, and they don't know at this time what is happening . . . For a long time, they just have to sit here and wait until someone makes some decision. I think I would call it uncertainty." Germany, 2016

This participant describes how limited resources and misunderstandings of both refugees and social workers frustrate outcomes.

". . . they had this false expectation that [the government] would be like just, shelling out money left and right and it's a little bit frustrating. It's frustrating for them because of course it didn't meet their expectations, it's frustrating for us because of course we'd like to grant them but that's not our decision, we can only work with what we've got." Germany, 2016

In this quote, the participant articulates just how unrealistic it is to expect refugees to integrate if they do not have rights, such as employment and home ownership opportunities.

"Maybe they don't voice it clearly that they really need to be integrated but still they need rights. So, this is the Palestinians. The right to work; and there are at least 67 employment they cannot work with; they cannot, they do not have the right to own their houses outside of their camp; they cannot build house outside the camp." Lebanon, 2019

Key Skills and Knowledge

Social workers in the refugee field face two significant challenges. First, many report gaps in their learning when preparing for refugee practice or find that they have forgotten much of the content due to a lack of practical application, which would have helped them retain the material. Second, they encounter issues and problems that neither social work programs nor they themselves could have anticipated in their careers. These experiences sharpen their focus on three key areas: (1) things they studied and are glad to know, as these skills are now useful in their work; (2) things they studied only theoretically and struggled to retain or apply in practice; and (3) knowledge and skills they never realized would be so crucial and wish they had time and resources to pursue through continuing education. Some common themes include working with populations that have distinctly different cultural background, including different approaches to solving problems, and constantly changing refugee and asylee policy. Here are examples of what they reported:

"Yeah, first of all establish eh, human picture. Like respect the people . . . my first method is just to greet everybody. To look in their eyes and say hello so they feel recognized . . . know they are here alone, sometimes they don't know anybody, and if you don't say hello they feel like ghosts and are never recognized. So, I will make them feel visible." Germany, 2016

This quote reflects the importance of social workers' knowledge of cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, and specifics of the circumstances refugees are fleeing.

"To try to be aware of the cultural background, and to be updated regarding the-ethnicities, or their nationalities, the situation in the countries. To try to be focused and concentrated on their plans, when it comes to asylum seekers, always have in mind that they-there are many factors that these won't work, be prepared. I mean that to keep in mind that the plans that you set, and that you put aside, for many reasons, we are talking for the-especially for the asylum seekers,

it's not so obvious that they stay here, and for this reason, to be focused as well for their future, in their future that they imagine." Greece, 2023

This participant makes a very strong argument that social workers must be informed about the legal rights of refugees, which would include a detailed understanding of the process refugees must walk through.

"First of all, [we] have to know the rights of immigrants, of refugees. How the whole system works. Even now ... in the future we will get more knowledge about this. But right now I think we don't, we can't say to you ... all the steps it takes along till you get accepted. We don't know about this. We know some of the steps because they are more complicated, and then therefore, we are here to help them through." Germany 2016

The gap between theoretical learning and practical demands of their work was articulated by one participant in this way:

"Even when we took theory at the university, it's really different to work in the field. And even we made lots of internships hours in the university, it's different when you take that case and you start working with it from the beginning. You got the assessment, you got their needs, it's your responsibility, so I think it's really different ... Every day we're asking people something new. Even when we are working with the refugees, even when we say the cases are the same, same needs, the same thing, but very different every case ... So nothing can teach you ..." Lebanon, 2019

Participants emphasized the importance of the following: learning theory without practical application is ineffective, practical learning should be emphasized both in the classroom and through internships, true empathy requires cultural exposure and purposeful equality, and cultural humility and curiosity are essential for competent practice.

Coping

While there is extensive literature on the importance of self-care for social workers (Ratcliff, 2024), it is especially vital in refugee practice, where the potential for burnout and secondary trauma are immense (Roberts & Rushworth, 2021). Many participants report high levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress indicators at some point in their careers. Some suggested refugee work is unsustainable as a long-term career and recommended engaging in it only for a limited period. Others talked about their trust in human rights and their desire to promote human dignity as core beliefs that keep them motivated. Several other coping methods articulated included physical activity, taking breaks as needed, collaborating with supportive colleagues, engaging in faith and faith communities, and maintaining a strong commitment to human rights. Recognizing and supporting these strategies is crucial for sustaining resilience in refugee social work practice. Here are some examples of their contributions:

"Definitely when you have faith in your capacity and the cause and human dignity ... Of course, you actually have to work on this." Lebanon, 2019

This social worker emphasized peace and equality in terms of rights for refugees.

"I think that's eh, we have all believe in peace and be equal and have the same rights, eh ... the human rights actually." Greece, 2023

And finally, this participant asserts that they are serving humans and that it is imperative for social workers to see the inherent dignity of all. Additionally, it is important to

remember that all people are potentially vulnerable and social workers may also find themselves in need.

"I am tired of treating people in general, and especially refugees, as other beings ... they are humans. They are like me and you. That, it can happen to us as well. Tomorrow. It can happen now. I want to make people understand that." Greece, 2023

5 Discussion

Social work educators play a vital role in empowering front-line refugee social workers to meet their continuing education needs. Active engagement of educators with practitioners and integration of practical and real-world insights into their teaching bridges the gap between theory and practice. Educators must also work to respond to practitioner needs with flexibility, recognizing the inevitable time and resource limitations. This means developing innovative and creative approaches that optimize affordability and accessibility (e.g., grant funded continuing education programs).

Participants identified several key areas for continued education, including migration laws and policies, cultural origins (i.e., causes of refugee exodus by country), culturally informed family dynamics, trauma-informed care, and counseling and interviewing skills. Many participants noted that migration laws and policies are especially challenging to learn, given their complexity and tendency to shift in response to migration trends. Few reported receiving substantial education on these topics in their degree programs, despite understanding that these laws significantly impact their work. Participants also described the difficulty of achieving cultural competence in settings with refugees from diverse backgrounds and needs. They emphasized the challenges of navigating cultural norms that differ from those in the resettlement country, particularly regarding gender roles and family dynamics. Several social workers expressed concerns about tense, awkward, or conflictual interactions that arose when they lacked the preparation to address these cultural differences in a respectful manner.

While social work outside the United States may exclude counseling and psychotherapeutic practice, many participants reported deficits in their understanding and skillset related to trauma-informed care and counseling and interviewing skills. Trauma poses significant challenges for asylum seeking and refugee population, and secondary trauma risk is high for those serving these groups (O'Donnell et al., 2023). Trauma literature further suggests that coping with trauma varies over time; some individuals may manage trauma effectively in the short term, while others may experience delayed symptoms (Markovic & Živanović, 2022). Social work participants emphasized a need for improved counseling and interviewing skills that would enable them to listen more actively, connect more deeply, and learn from their clients how to best support them. Understanding the risk of secondary trauma underscores the importance of proactively incorporating self-care and preventive measures into practice models for all involved.

6 Limitations of the Study

A narrative literature review is a non-standardized methodology that leans on authors' interpretations of noteworthy themes. Additionally, though the qualitative aspects of the research studies synthesized in this article are strong (i.e., well-developed structured interview guide, robust analysis protocol using Atlas.ti with a triangulate analysis process [Patton, 2014], and large sample sizes for qualitative research), findings are nevertheless

non-generalizable. Additionally, ordinal level measurements using descriptive and frequency statistics, in addition to small sample size, also indicate non-generalizability. Moreover, the qualifications and roles of social workers vary from country to country. Finally, there is potential bias among the authors due to pro-refugee integration and resettlement views.

7 Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to guide and inform research and academic efforts to benefit as many people as possible in response to the global refugee crisis. To achieve this, we need to listen carefully to our practicing social work colleagues and move beyond traditional educational systems that limit access to frontline social workers. Future research should focus on creating integrated, accessible curricula that blend in-person and online formats, including certifications, workshops, and modules. This is essential to keep up with the evolving complexities of global displacement. Failing to make these educational resources affordable, accessible, and user-friendly would severely undermine this mission.

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