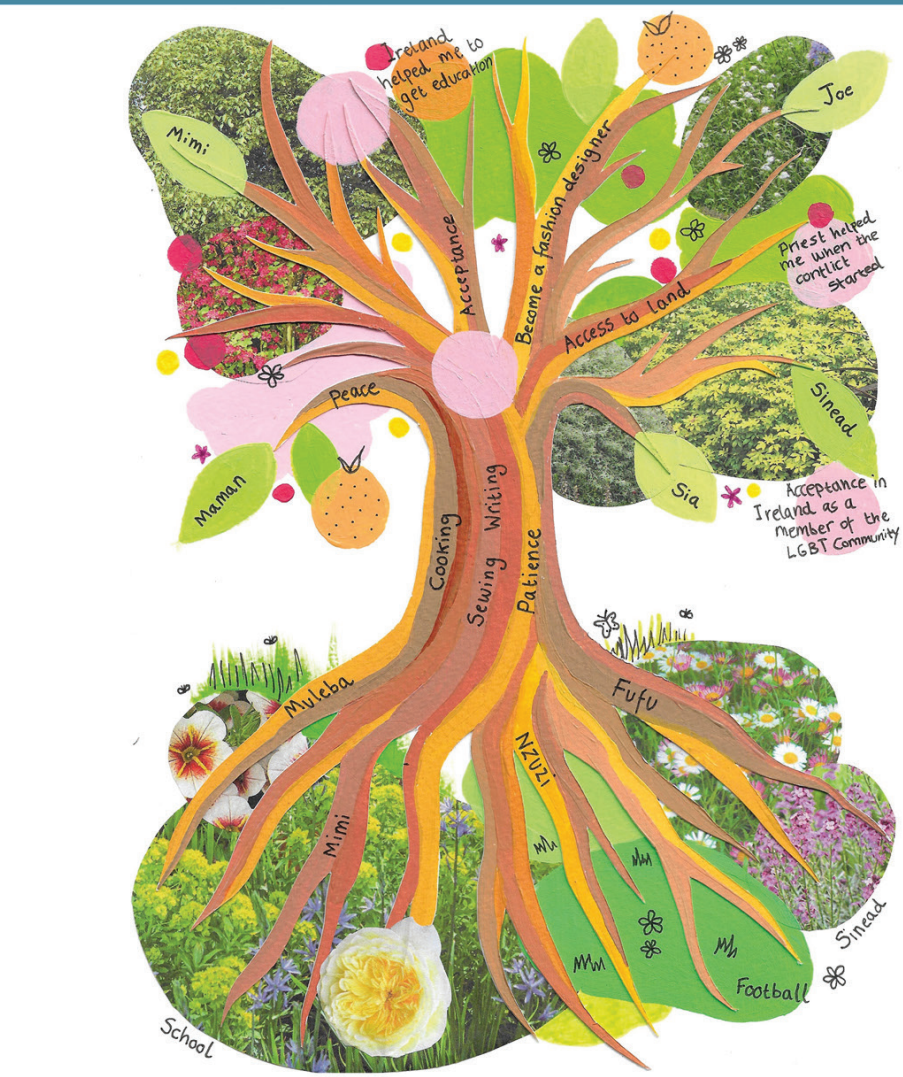
SUPPORT MATERIAL

ROUTLEDGE

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR REFUGEE ADOLESCENTS

An Expressive Arts Approach to Wellbeing and Trauma Recovery



RACHEL HOARE

"Dr Rachel Hoare has generously provided practitioners with a brilliant book that captures how expressive arts are essential in supporting adolescents challenged by traumatic stress. Articulately written, it is groundbreaking in scope and breadth and provides practitioners with numerous practical, informative, and inspirational guidelines and strategies. This volume is a 'must read' for anyone who works with traumatic stress and elevates the role of expressive arts (movement, sound, image, enactment, and narrative) to its essential place as a psychotherapeutic intervention for refugees and anyone who has survived crises."

Cathy Malchiodi, *PhD, LPCC, LPAT, REAT, author of* Trauma and Expressive Arts Therapy: Brain, Body, and Imagination in the Healing Process *and* Handbook of Expressive Arts Therapy

"This book offers a comprehensive framework that is universally applicable to professionals, groups, and institutions working with children and youth refugees worldwide. The case stories validate the relevant steps and professional guidance for refugees' recovery from traumatic experiences.

Amidst the turmoil and upheaval the world has witnessed, children and young people have been uprooted and scarred by violent conflict. This book stands as a guiding compass, directing us to the healing power of the arts when delivered with care and precision. The extensive research, practice, and lived experience serve as beacons, illuminating the path to bridging knowledge and practice gaps. This book is a 'well' for wellbeing, providing reassurance and guidance for humanitarian work! I strongly recommend it."

Kunle Adewale, *founder, Global Arts in Medicine Fellowship*

"This book is a well-structured, accessible, and encouraging guide for all professionals who want to reflect on and improve their work with refugee adolescents.

Dr Hoare guides the reader towards an essential understanding of the impact of forced migration and traumatic experiences on adolescent brain development and the development of key therapeutic skills and values. She offers insightful, clearly illustrated methods of incorporating expressive arts techniques into diverse psycho-social support settings.

Indispensable reading for anyone supporting refugee adolescents!"

Jessica Farnan, *manager, Youth and Education Service for Refugees and Migrants, Dublin, Ireland*

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Psychological Support for Refugee Adolescents

Psychological Support for Refugee Adolescents demonstrates the therapeutic powers of the expressive arts to address the specific needs of adolescent refugees in a trauma-informed and culturally sensitive manner.

Bridging the gaps in guidance on support for refugee adolescents, this essential resource integrates neuroscience, trauma theory, and creative interventions and provides tools for readers to use in both clinical and non-clinical settings. Chapters are organised into sections tailored to support the professionals involved in caring for adolescent refugees, including both psychotherapists and non-psychotherapists, with practical advice that is accessible across disciplines. Through richly detailed case studies featuring diverse refugee experiences, this book demonstrates how creative modalities, including visual arts, music, movement, and embodied practices, can be expertly tailored to honour cultural contexts while also addressing trauma symptoms, sleep disturbances, isolation, and other challenges.

An essential read for any professional involved in support for adolescent refugees, this book will also be of interest to arts and expressive therapists and mental health practitioners more broadly. The online support material for this book includes downloadable and photocopiable activities tailored for application to both psychotherapeutic and more general wellbeing support, aiding readers in their work with refugee adolescents.

Rachel Hoare is an assistant professor in the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Trinity College Dublin, where she founded the Research Centre for Forced Migration Studies. She is also a faculty member at the Children's Therapy Centre in Mullingar, Ireland, and works with the Irish Child and Family Agency as a part-time expressive arts child and adolescent psychotherapist, supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking adolescents.

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Psychological Support for Refugee Adolescents

An Expressive Arts Approach to Wellbeing and Trauma Recovery

Rachel Hoare

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For the refugee adolescents whose stories I have been privileged to witness, who embody the true meaning of strength through their extraordinary stories of courage, resilience, and healing, and for those who walk with them, offering empathy and connection during difficult journeys.

For my husband Nev and our children Alannah, Tom, Harry, and Charlie, whose journeys into adulthood constantly challenge and inspire me. To my parents, step-parents, grandparents, and aunties who have taught me the importance of humanity, compassion, inclusion, and acceptance.

To my sisters Gill and Chim, and to Val, Lorraine and Julie, all amazing women who supported me through my own turbulent adolescence and beyond. To Gags, Fran, Ali, and Miriam, who continue to celebrate my enduring teenage spirit.

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Contents

Foreword

In the context of increasing numbers of individuals being forcibly displaced worldwide, the securitisation of asylum regimes, and rising anti-refugee sentiment, the wellbeing of refugee adolescents is of core concern. Whether alone or with family members, refugee adolescents face multiple challenges, both as refugees and as adolescents who are on the threshold of adulthood. These challenges relate to the complexity of their lives across time and borders: their lives prior to leaving their countries of origin, during their migration journeys, and in the countries where they begin to rebuild their lives and where they look to the future. Their experiences across time and space, within an ever-changing societal and political landscape, intersect with one another, thus adding to the complexity of their situations. While working with refugees can be a deeply rewarding experience, it also poses many difficulties and dilemmas for practitioners. This is why this book is so important.

Grounded in theory, research evidence, and clinical practice, *Psychological Support for Refugee Adolescents: An Expressive Arts Approach to Wellbeing and Trauma Recovery* is an invaluable resource. It will provide practitioners across multiple fields of practice with knowledge, skills, and useful tools to respond in ways that honour the individual young person with whom they work, while recognising the complexity of the societal, cultural, and political contexts in which they have lived and are now living. All too frequently, refugees are depicted in singular ways: as people fleeing persecution, with all other aspects of their identity remaining hidden, unrecognised and unspoken about. Researchers and practitioners alike are prone to this, with sometimes very little acknowledgement of the multiple intersecting identities of displaced people, of which their identity as a refugee is just one.

The fact that this book specifically focuses on refugee youth as both refugees *and* adolescents, situated within their broader ecological context, is of vital importance. Through the case studies which introduce us to young people with diverse experiences – Chima, Natalia, Daahir, Nabeel, Anastasiya, Omar, Ovie, Mira, Hassan, and Aran – the theory is brought to life, resulting in the reader gaining huge insight into the very varied lived experiences of refugee adolescents as they navigate life in exile. In a world where people of refugee backgrounds are frequently stereotyped and dehumanised, this focus on human stories of individual young people

is an inspiring feature, which highlights not only the adversity faced by the young people in question but also honours the everyday, ordinary aspects of their lives as sons and daughters, as brothers and sisters, as teenagers, as friends. Yet despite this attention to the individual lived realities of young refugees, the book also consistently attends to the broader political and societal contexts in which refugee adolescents are situated. For instance, the discussion of Natalia's experiences highlights how European temporary protection policies have created a two-tier system that privileges certain refugee groups while others face lengthy asylum processes, demonstrating how macro-level policies directly impact individual refugee trajectories and opportunities for integration. All too often, interventions by practitioners can be individualised in their focus, with a lack of attention to the broader context. This book, rooted in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, is different in this regard.

The book is both comprehensive and accessible, packed with research evidence and practice wisdom. As such, it will be an immensely helpful resource for a range of professionals working with refugee adolescents, both unaccompanied refugee young people and those displaced with their families. It charts the migration trajectory from pre-migration experiences through to post-migration; discusses stress, trauma, and brain development; provides key information and research evidence in relation to mental health and stigma, with continuous attention to cultural considerations. It outlines what a trauma-informed, therapeutic approach might look like, identifying kindness and patience as key, and highlights the vital importance of attending to our own biases in the context of the development of empathic relationships, where bearing witness to distress is possible. Importantly, rather than focusing only on mental distress and vulnerability, the book attends to resilience and capacity, with a particular focus on how practitioners might support refugee adolescents to develop adaptive coping skills. The chapters on expressive arts provide a wealth of information on key expressive arts modalities – visual arts, music, drama, dance/movement, and therapeutic writing – thus enabling practitioners with and without clinical experience to learn about diverse ways to work with adolescents. The often-neglected area of working with interpreters is also comprehensively and thoughtfully discussed. In addition, the book encourages a very considered and reflective approach to practice and importantly addresses the key issue of self-care for practitioners working in this field.

While all of the chapters incorporate examples from practice – a key strength of the book – the detailed case studies are particularly helpful. Not only will they help practitioners across a range of disciplines to develop considerable insight into the experiences of refugee adolescents, but they also provide nuanced information about the approach a practitioner might take. The case studies very helpfully distinguish between interventions suited to psychotherapists and those suited to other professionals working with refugee adolescents.

For example, we learn that Laura, a social care worker, in working with Daahir, an unaccompanied minor, pays particular attention to the pronunciation of his

name and acknowledges his use of multiple names, and how she works collaboratively with Daahir to create a digital mental health toolkit, with detailed information about its content. We also learn about Mohammed, a psychotherapist working with Omar, who thoughtfully uses football as a 'transcultural portal' for trauma processing, employing both physical play and symbolic representation through sand tray work to help Omar safely explore his experiences of displacement while reconnecting with aspects of his identity and building new social connections.

While the growing number of displaced refugees globally can be overwhelming to those working in this area and, of course, to people of refugee background themselves, and while political solutions at a global level are needed to address inequality, conflict, climate change, and displacement, individual professionals have a significant role to play. The support that professionals across a range of disciplines provide to refugee adolescents has the potential to have a considerable positive impact not only on the wellbeing and life trajectory of the young people in question but also on their families and on the individuals, groups, and communities with which they interact now and in the future. Each individual professional working with this cohort has a role to play, and this book is a very welcome and timely contribution to support them in doing so.

Muireann Ní Raghallaigh
Associate Professor of Social Work
UniversityCollege Dublin

Preface

As an expressive arts child and adolescent psychotherapist working with refugee adolescents, I have witnessed first-hand how opportunities for healing extend far beyond the therapy room. While psychotherapy offers the primary clinical framework for transformation through the expressive arts, these creative approaches – including visual arts, movement, music, and storytelling – can also foster healing when thoughtfully incorporated into classrooms, foster homes, residential settings, community spaces, and all contexts where refugee adolescents spend their time. This insight has inspired this book.

Drawing from clinical experience, academic research, and the stories shared by the refugee adolescents themselves, this book serves two audiences: clinicians seeking to deepen their practice and non-clinical professionals whose paths cross with refugee adolescents: educators, social workers, social care workers, foster carers, youth workers, healthcare professionals, legal advocates, and community volunteers. Every person who offers even a moment of connection plays a vital role in these young people's healing and integration journeys. A school caretaker, a training centre receptionist, and a residential centre night porter are among those who have been specifically named by the refugee adolescents I work with as significant figures in their lives.

What connects us all is the need to engage in trauma-informed ways that honour both trauma experiences and cultural identities. The expressive arts approaches shared here can be adapted across settings, creating healing possibilities whether you are a trained psychotherapist or someone of equal importance in a young person's recovery journey.

This book showcases the unique contributions each of us can make while strengthening our collective capacity to support these remarkable young people as they navigate their path towards healing.

Acknowledgements

Laura, your boundless creativity and sense of fun are a joy to all who are lucky enough to come into your orbit. Your contributions are reflected on every page through the clinical supervision, guidance, and friendship you have so generously and selflessly shared. Your supervision is always profoundly supportive, offering wisdom that extends far beyond different approaches and techniques into the heart of what it means as a human to deeply connect with another's experience.

Norma, thank you for your wisdom and experience in clinical supervision. Your work integrating human rights principles into psychotherapy continues to inspire me, and I find myself returning to your insights time and again as a touchstone for my own practice.

Eileen, and all at the Children's Therapy Centre in Ireland, thank you for inspiring me and setting me on this incredible journey.

My thanks to all of my wonderful friends and colleagues, too numerous to mention, who have encouraged me along the way and always believed in me. You will never know how important your support and belief have been.

My heartfelt thanks to Ellen Sanders, my wonderful niece and illustrator, whose creativity, patience, and courage know no bounds. Ellen instinctively knew what was needed, and her illustrations bring the stories to life in beautiful ways.

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Finally, I gratefully acknowledge funding for the copy-editing process from the Trinity College Trinity Trust fund. This fund provides grant support for a wide variety of College projects where funding is unavailable from mainstream resources. The Trinity Trust, primarily supported by the Trinity Affinity Credit Card Programme, enables vital academic initiatives that enhance Trinity's unique

educational experience. For more information about the Trinity Trust and the Trinity Affinity credit card that supports it, please visit www.tcd.ie/alumni/services/affinity-credit-card.

Introduction

In a world where forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, children and adolescents bear a disproportionate burden of this global crisis. By late 2023, the cumulative global total of displaced children and adolescents had reached 47.2 million worldwide (UNICEF 2024), and the need for effective, culturally responsive approaches to support these young people has become increasingly urgent. This book addresses this critical need. It offers a comprehensive framework for using the expressive arts to support adolescent refugees navigating the complex challenges of forced displacement while simultaneously experiencing the developmental transition from childhood to adulthood.

Researchers have described this experience as a 'double burden' – young people must simultaneously navigate the formative tasks of adolescence, such as identity development, establishing independence and building meaningful relationships, while also processing the profound disruptions and traumatic experiences of displacement, including cultural dislocation, interrupted education, severed community ties, and often exposure to violence and persecution. This complex interplay creates specific psychological needs often not addressed by traditional approaches to support. Language barriers, cultural differences, and the impact of trauma on verbal expression can all limit the effectiveness of conventional talk-based approaches (Bonz et al. 2019).

The expressive arts – drawing, movement, music, drama, storytelling, and more – offer powerful alternatives. These creative modalities provide non-verbal pathways for processing experiences, expressing emotions, and building connections. When skilfully integrated into trauma-informed practice, they create opportunities for healing that transcend cultural and linguistic barriers while honouring the resilience and cultural identities of refugee youth.

This book is grounded in both clinical experience and research evidence, bridging theory and practice through detailed case studies that demonstrate how expressive arts can be adapted across diverse settings and professional roles. From residential care workers to teachers, social workers to psychotherapists, professionals in

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various capacities will find practical strategies to enhance their work with refugee adolescents.

Informed by ecological perspectives on human development (Bronfenbrenner et al. 2006), the book recognises that adolescent refugee experiences are shaped by multiple interconnected environments – from immediate family relationships and friendships to broader cultural contexts. This framework helps practitioners understand how creative activities can address needs across different ecological layers, creating more holistic and effective support. The structure and progression of the book are fundamentally shaped by this ecological perspective.

The chapters evolve in a carefully structured sequence. Early chapters establish the theoretical foundations, exploring the impact of forced displacement on adolescent development, the neurobiological effects of trauma on the developing brain, and culturally diverse understandings of mental health and healing. These foundational concepts provide the context for understanding why expressive arts approaches are particularly valuable for this population.

Subsequent chapters introduce a trauma-informed framework that distinguishes between approaches appropriate for all practitioners and those requiring specialised psychotherapy training. This practical distinction ensures that professionals across various settings can implement supportive practices within their scope of expertise while recognising when more specialised approaches may be needed.

The heart of the book lies in its detailed case studies, where composite narratives based on real clinical experiences demonstrate creative approaches to addressing common challenges faced by refugee adolescents. Each case study illustrates different aspects of expressive arts practice, from using football-themed activities to develop social connections, to employing visual arts for processing trauma, to supporting sleep disturbances through creative rituals and dream work. Throughout these narratives, a consistent message emerges: the expressive arts offer pathways to healing that honour cultural diversity, build on existing strengths, and create opportunities for genuine connection across differences. Rather than imposing Western psychological frameworks, these approaches invite refugee adolescents to express and process their experiences in ways that feel meaningful and authentic to them.

The final chapters provide practical guidance for implementing these approaches, including working effectively with interpreters and supporting the wellbeing of practitioners through creative self-care practices. A comprehensive activity locator helps readers quickly find specific techniques for addressing common needs, making the book a valuable reference tool for ongoing practice.

This book comes at a critical moment when forced displacement continues to disrupt the lives of millions of young people worldwide. While the challenges facing refugee adolescents are profound, so too is their capacity for resilience and growth when provided with appropriate support. The expressive arts, with their emphasis on creativity, embodiment, and cultural expression, offer powerful resources for nurturing this resilience.

As you read, you will encounter stories of transformation – moments that might appear unremarkable yet hold profound significance. Through creative engagement, even brief activities can open doorways to expression, connection, and healing that might otherwise remain closed. You will see how simple activities like drawing, movement, or storytelling can create safe spaces for processing difficult experiences and rebuilding a sense of identity and belonging in a new environment.

Beyond specific techniques, this book offers a philosophy of practice – one that respects the unique journey of each adolescent refugee while recognising common patterns and needs. It emphasises the importance of cultural humility, trauma sensitivity, and a strengths-based approach that views refugee adolescents not as victims of circumstance but as active participants in their own healing and growth.

Whether you are new to working with refugee adolescent populations or bring years of experience, this book invites you to expand your repertoire of creative approaches while deepening your understanding of the dynamic intersection between trauma, culture, development, and resilience. By integrating expressive arts into your practice, you can create more responsive, engaging, and effective support for adolescent refugees navigating the challenging journey of displacement and adaptation.

This is not merely a book about techniques; it is an invitation to reimagine how we support adolescent refugees at the intersection of displacement and development. Through the expressive arts, we can create spaces where they are truly seen, heard, and supported in reclaiming their voices, rebuilding their lives, and realising their potential in new contexts. In doing so, we honour both their profound challenges and their remarkable capacity for healing and growth.

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Chapter 1

The Impact of the Adolescent Migration Trajectory

Introduction

Adolescents who are displaced from their homeland are also moving from childhood to adulthood, which means that they must navigate multiple challenges related to this developmental transition while living through forced displacement. This chapter explores the experiences of the pre-flight, flight, and post-flight (including the reconciliation of home and host cultures in new identity formation), stages of forced displacement through the eyes of Chima and Natalia, two adolescents from different countries who experienced forced displacement to the same European country. In order to protect the identities of real individuals, Chima and Natalia are composite characters who represent a variety of experiences and convey the shared challenges and resilience of the adolescent refugees I have worked with.

This exploration draws on the ecological model of human development framework detailed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and its subsequent iterations leading to the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), as a way of developing an understanding of the variables and factors which affect adolescent experiences of, and adaptation to, living in a conflict zone, fleeing that conflict zone and resettling in another country.

For Chima and Natalia, respectively, these variables included factors which increased the risk of psychological distress, developmental disruption, and maladaptive coping patterns such as the daily stressors of living in a conflict situation or the negative impact of growing up with a primary caregiver who had mental health difficulties, as well as those which bestowed some protection such as close friendships and community and faith-based supports. Experiences of reconciling host and home country identities through social, educational, cultural, linguistic, and family adaptation are also explored through their adolescent eyes. Bronfenbrenner's framework helps us to understand the dynamic ways in which social environments influence adolescent's adaptive responses to the extreme adversities of war.

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International Context

According to UNHCR estimates, conflict, violence, and other crises left a record 47 million children and adolescents displaced from their homes at the end of 2024, which is the highest number recorded since World War II (UNHCR 2024). Estimates of the numbers of children and adolescents on the move are frequently based on census data and are often not disaggregated by age, making it very difficult to identify a statistically precise number of adolescent refugees (International Data Alliance for Children on the Move 2023). However, those European countries which do have more detailed statistics, such as Greece, Malta, Bulgaria, and Italy, document large numbers of adolescent refugees amongst those accompanied by family members as well as those who are unaccompanied by a family member or legal guardian, with a prevalence of older adolescents (15–17 years) amongst the latter (UNICEF 2023).

Adolescents who are forcibly displaced from their homeland and moving to a new country are also moving from childhood to adulthood. This experience has been described as a 'double mourning' (Volkan 2018) or a 'double burden' (Tefferi 2007), and these young people can struggle to find their place in these two new 'in-between' worlds. Displacement places significant psychological stress on all those who are forced to flee their homes, and the migration trajectory is often described in terms of the stages of pre-flight, flight, and post-flight (Oldroyd et al. 2021). In this chapter, we are guided by the further division by Papadopoulos (2002:26) of the pre-flight stage into the time before the violence ('anticipation') and the actual violence ('devastating events'). In addition to the immediate post-flight experiences, the reconciliation of home and host cultures in new identity formation is also explored as part of this stage.

Both accompanied and unaccompanied adolescents are considered a high-risk group at all stages. They may face pressure to join armed groups or be exposed to high levels of violence and sexual abuse during the pre-flight stage (Rousseau and Gagnon 2020). For unaccompanied adolescents, the lack of safety or protection during the journey to exile together with the overwhelming loss of family and friends is felt acutely at this developmental stage. Furthermore, both groups often face increased suffering through their living conditions and treatment in host countries (Fazel and Betancourt 2018; Papadopoulos 2002).

This chapter explores the experiences of displaced adolescents during these three stages through the eyes of Chima, a 15-year-old male, who travelled to the host country alone from a country in Africa, and 16-year-old Natalia, who travelled with her mother from a country in Eastern Europe. This exploration draws on the socio-ecological framework developed and refined by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner as a way of recognising that individuals influence and are impacted by a complex range of intersected social influences and interactions at the individual, interpersonal, organisational, and community levels (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Although there is broad consensus that this theory accounts for the complexity of child and adolescent development and

is universally applicable, difficulties of implementation due to the complexity of all factors being potentially mutually and systematically influential have also been highlighted, and new ways of approaching implementation have been proposed (Elliott and Davis 2020).

In the context of the refugee adolescent this framework facilitates understanding of how the adolescent social environment shapes their experiences of, and responses to the stages of forced migration, focusing on the impact of exposure to daily stressors and potentially traumatic events, the effects of risk and protective factors, and the responses to social adaptation and integration opportunities (Bennouna et al. 2020). In this framework, the *microsystem* is the displaced adolescent's most proximal level of influence, which includes settings such as the family, the reception centre, the school, and the place of worship. The *mesosystem* refers to points of connection between two or more of the adolescent's settings, such as the influence of friends on the place of worship or of the family on the school. The *exosystem e*ncompasses contextual influences that are not experienced directly by the adolescent but that have an indirect impact on their experiences and may include the asylum status of the parent(s) and their social networks. The *macrosystem* comprises the organisation and structure of a society, such as their migration policies, housing situation, and dominant belief systems, and the *chronosystem* comprises environmental changes over time, such as having to flee one's country of origin and life transitions such as adolescence. Figure 1.1 provides a visual representation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory applied to adolescent refugees, illustrating how various factors at different ecological levels interact to influence the adaptation and resilience of young people like Chima and Natalia during forced displacement.

Adolescent Experiences of the Three Stages of Forced Migration

Although Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation of the chronosystem is particularly pertinent to the refugee adolescent, Hayes (2020) argues that consideration within this system of the impact on refugee adolescent mental health of the time spent in temporary resettlement contexts is often lacking in research into the experiences of forced displacement. This lack of research is even more evident at the intersection between the length of time which has passed since displacement and the transition to adolescence. The transition to adolescence is conceptualised in a seminal paper by Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996), as essentially a universal transitional period which has key moments or 'turning points.' They argue that turning points which occur in the context of this transitional period are more likely to result in longer-lasting psychosocial changes than those which occur during non-transitional periods. The pre-flight, flight, and post-flight experiences of refugees (Oldroyd et al. 2021) can be conceptualised as turning points within this transitional period.

The division of the pre-flight stage by Papadopoulos (2002:26) into the 'anticipation' and 'devastating events' phases is especially salient during the adolescent

developmental period, given the high level of plasticity of the adolescent brain. This plasticity makes it extremely susceptible to emotional responses to the rapidly changing socio-political situations which are part of the macrosystems of adolescent refugees (Frydenberg 2019). More specifically, impulse control, planning, and decision-making are largely frontal cortex functions of the brain which mature during adolescence (Burton et al. 2014) and which carry very important functions throughout both phases of pre-flight, as well as the flight and post-flight stages of forced migration. Chapter 2 provides a more detailed exploration of the impact of stress on the adolescent developing brain.

The scale, nature, and persistence of the impact of these experiences during adolescence also depend on differences in personality, life experiences, coping styles, and resilience, which will have been shaped by adolescent refugee interactions with their environment (their microsystem) during childhood. These experiences and their responses to them will help determine the extent to which they are able to manage the adversity which comes from having to flee their homes (Lahad et al. 2013). The sections that follow are therefore positioned at the intersection of the developmental phase of adolescence and forced migration and conceptualise the three stages of forced migration as turning points in the refugee adolescent experience within the socio-ecological framework.

Introducing Chima and Natalia and their Risk and Protective Factors

Although the experiences of Chima and Natalia in their respective home countries were very different, they can both be better understood by drawing on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework to conceptualise how their families and communities shape their experiences of, and responses to, the situations of armed conflict and forced migration in their countries (see Figure 1.1). By using this perspective, it is possible to identify the factors which increase risk and those which bestow some protection for adolescents who have been forced to flee their homelands. However, it is also important to remember that the same factor can increase risk in one context and bestow protection in another, thus illustrating the importance of considering the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors. For example, Catani (2018) points out that violence in the family (the microsystem) may increase for some during times of war, thereby constituting a risk factor (Sriskandarajah et al. 2015), whereas for others the family may serve as a protective factor by providing nurturing care (Dubow et al. 2012).

Chima had been living in a situation of ongoing conflict in an African country for his entire life (his chronosystem). A number of people in his community had been killed, and many family members had been internally displaced. As an adolescent living in a chronosystem with so many risks to his wellbeing and survival, Chima found it impossible to rely on any adult to protect him when he was in danger (Masten and Narayan 2012), and being unable to prevent himself or his

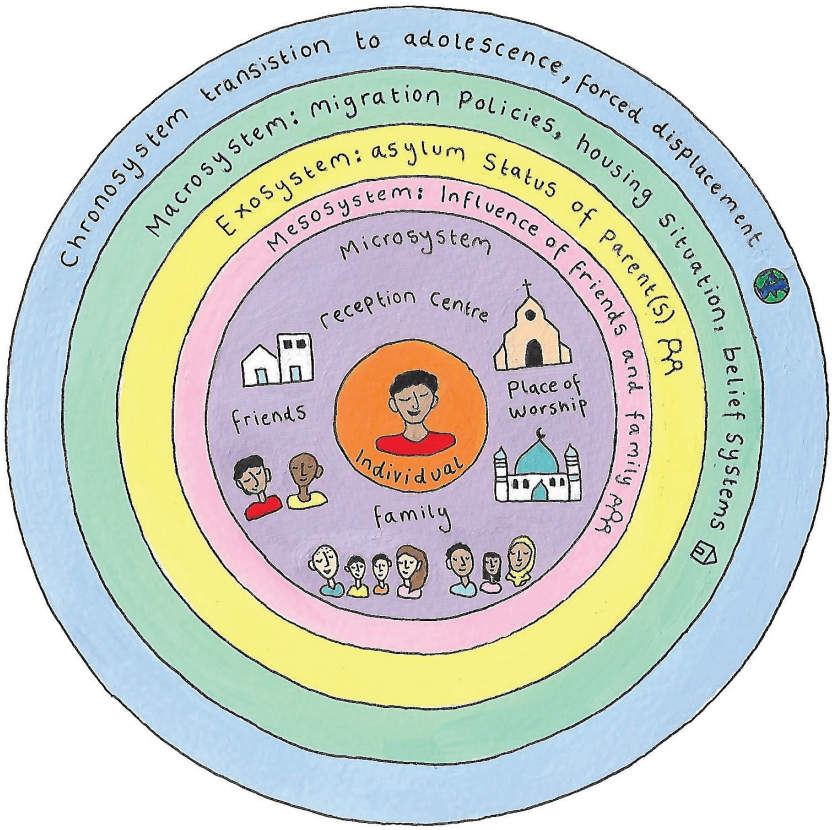

Figure 1.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model applied to Refugee Adolescent Development.

family members from being hurt, humiliated, or killed had left him feeling powerless (Sleijpen et al. 2016). The daily stressors of living in a conflict situation, which included not knowing where the next meal was coming from, not being able to access regular education, being exposed to physical and emotional abuse from combatants on both sides of the conflict, and not knowing when the next attack on his community was going to happen, can have long-term damaging effects on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, compromise coping and increase vulnerability to the impact of traumatic stress (Miller and Rasmussed 2010). These stressors were everyday realities for Chima. Furthermore, as he reached adolescence and the violence escalated, Chima was fearful that he would be forced to join a rebel group of fighters, as several of his friends had been forced to join this group.

Chima's protective factors were mainly interpersonal and community-based and can be conceptualised through the microsystems in which he participates

and the mesosystem that links them. He lived in a close-knit community with his extended family where life was experienced and decisions made collectively, where everyone worked for the community and where people engaged in collective coping by relying on one another for emotional, economic, and social support. Chima reached out to his parents and friends for support. As a Muslim, he engaged in collective faith-based practices and experienced and marked celebrations and loss within this microsystem which interlinked with school, peers, and family within his mesosystem. Chima also drew on his individual protective factor of resilience which included the embodiment of 'adaptive fatalism' conceptualised by Atari-Khan et al. (2021), as an acceptance that the future was uncertain and out of his control.

Natalia, on the other hand, had never experienced any armed conflict in her country. Although she had heard many stories from her mother and her grandmother about growing up under a repressive regime (therefore comprising part of Natalia's macrosystem), she had not experienced this herself. It is however important to note that there is growing evidence that trauma can be passed between generations through impacting on DNA and gene function (Ryan et al. 2016), and that living in conditions of war, conflict, and oppression have been identified as stress-inducing triggers for such epigenetic modifications (Raza et al. 2023). It was therefore important to be curious about the impact that this may have had on Natalia and to explore it with her during therapy.

Natalia's main risk factors stemmed from growing up with a clinically depressed mother who struggled to provide consistent, responsive care during her infancy and childhood (her microsystem). Natalia's insecure attachment to her mother shaped the formation of Natalia's internal working model, a lifelong template for preconceptions of the value, reliability, and expectations of relationships (Bowlby 1988; Holmes and Slade 2018) and is also likely to have contributed to the anxiety, fear, and low self-esteem which have an important impact on her quality of life (Sunderland 2016). A study by Qouta et al. (2007),of psychological distress among Palestinian adolescents living in a combat zone, found a negative correlation between non-responsive and non-attuned mothering and adolescent resilience. Punamaki et al. (1997) found that war-exposed children who had loving and non-rejecting primary caregivers were more creative and efficient in problem solving than those who exhibited insecure attachment patterns.

However, it is also important to point out that although early attachment relationships shape the lens through which children view later relationships, peer groups, friendships, extended family, teachers, and mentors can mitigate the negative effects of early relationship experiences (Yan Lee and Lok 2012). For Natalia, her protective factors were based around her microsystems which consisted of support being available during times of need from her grandmother and her close friendship network, together with her positive orientation to school, and her regular participation in dance classes.

Natalia often stayed with her local grandmother, whose nurturing care mitigated the impact of her mother's lack of responsiveness during childhood. Natalia had