IiCA and MAPP - Positive Anger Expression in Middle Eastern Refugee Children

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A Positive Psychology Service Learning Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for MAPP 702: Applied Positive Interventions

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

June 1, 2016

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Abstract

This service learning project addresses the problem of unhealthy anger expression amongst traumatized Middle Eastern refugee children. Invest in Children Africa (IiCA), our partner organization, provides art-based group therapy and classes to traumatized children. This project aims to understand anger through the contextual lens of our target population's culture and religion, review the science behind relevant positive psychology interventions, and recommend a set of interventions (strengths spotting, mindfulness, and assertive communication) to encourage the positive expression of anger. We are excited to see positive psychology concepts integrated into the mission of IiCA, "bringing healing to Africa's traumatized youth."

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I. SITUATION ANALYSIS

Partner Organization: Who They Are

Invest in Children (IiC) was started in 2002 to meet the needs of children left traumatized in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York. Sandy Diner, the organization's founder, began this work by partnering with New York University's Child Study Center to sponsor an event -- "The Day Our World Changed: Children's Art of 9/11" (IiCA, 2016). After seeing the powerful effects of combining arts-based therapy and clinical psychology concepts, especially on traumatized youth, Sandy decided to pivot her career, and started the Invest in Children (IiC) organization. By 2003, IiC had established headquarters in South Carolina, added two employees, and set forth on their mission to help traumatized children heal. In 2007, Invest in Children started Invest in Children Africa (IiCA), an international arm of the organization that focuses on traumatized youth outside the US. Today, IiCA has five employees and a four-member board.

Employees:
- Sandy Diner - Founder
- Kimberly Krauk - Working with IiC and IiCA since 2003. Heads curriculum development, as well as program oversight and implementation. In addition to her programmatic work, Kimberly is the in-house art teacher, leading sessions on music, crafts, photography, and more.
- Joel Wild - Working with IiCA since 2010. Teaches creative writing, identity journaling, and photography at camps, in addition to serving as an IiCA developmental consultant.
- Kevin Turner - Working with IiCA since 2011. Travels with IiCA teaching music, drama, and sports.
- Kristoff Kohlhagen - Been with IiCA since 2008. Teaches creative writing at camps and helps teach about trauma, PTSD, and the brain at IiCA staff training events.

Board members:
- Sandy Diner
- Mary Sales - Licensed psychotherapist
- Terry Roberts - Psychology professor
- Bosco Ringtho - Ugandan entrepreneur (IiCA, 2016)

What They Do

 IiCA's approach focuses specifically on arts-based therapy as a means to help traumatized children come to terms with, and then overcome, their histories. IiCA's programming is aimed at building coping and resiliency skills within these children. Each three-day class they conduct has four components: identity journaling, stomp (music), visual art, and then either making jewelry (for girls) or playing sports (for boys). Teaching children to define and own their identities through journaling and individual arts-based therapy, to work in cohesion and harmony with others through stomp, and to value their somatic experience through sports or jewelry making has improved a vast number of lives in less than a decade (IiCA, 2016). IiCA does more than just deliver these camps to the children. They also train local volunteers and child workers to continue the work that IiCA has started, thereby sustaining the success of IiCA's mission - "bringing healing to Africa's traumatized youth" (IiCA, 2016).

Where They Do It

 Word about IiCA's unique approach and mission quickly spread beyond New York after 2002, and within a couple of short years they started working with more diverse communities within the United States such as orphanages, Native American reservations, and more. Then, in 2007, Sandy and her team got invited to develop programming for an orphanage in Ethiopia. That work sparked the formation of Invest in Children Africa. By 2008, they were working with child soldiers in Uganda and running a camp in Kenya (IiCA, 2016). This quickly progressed into staff training engagements with police forces, psychology departments, medical students, and many other organizations. Today, IiCA operates all around the globe, deploying to the geographies in which they can most effectively impact the lives of traumatized youth. Their current focus is the Middle East, where war and poverty have created a refugee crisis. The scope

of this project will center around serving the population of traumatized Middle Eastern child refugees currently living in Greece and Turkey.

Partnership with MAPP

2016 will mark the third year that MAPP and IiCA have partnered together on an initiative. This year's scope of engagement with IiCA is to better understand anger as experienced by youth ages 10-18 in the target population (traumatized Middle Eastern refugees, mostly Syrian), and subsequently generate research-informed interventions and curriculum ideas to address the anger experienced by these youth. We aim to identify and account for the cultural and gender differences in how this specific population expresses anger.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Anger and Culture

To understand how anger is viewed in the Middle East, one must first understand that in most Middle Eastern countries, an honor culture is the dominant norm (Mandelbaum, 1988). In the west, the dominant norm is a dignity culture, in which one's self-worth is primarily intrinsically derived, and is therefore stable and unrelated to the actions of others (Ayers, 1984). In a face culture, which is the dominant norm throughout much of Asia (especially China and Japan) one's self-worth is again stable, but this time primarily externally derived, being based upon one's position within a stable social hierarchy, one's relationships, and the fulfillment of one's duties within the system to which one belongs (Heine, 2001).

In honor cultures, however, self-worth is externally-derived and unstable, being based upon an individual's estimate of his own worth, as recognized by society (Pitt-Rivers, 1968). Specifically important is one's reputation for toughness, protecting self and family, and not being taken advantage of (Cohen & Nisbett, 1997). Most honor cultures come from regions with

unstable economies based on portable wealth (herding), as well as regions lacking a strong

central government or rule of law (Cohen & Nisbett, 1997). Research on how members of honor

cultures handle conflict suggests that they are more likely, when insulted, to escalate a

confrontation and even engage in violence to protect their reputations (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996).

Males belonging to an honor culture, when insulted, are also more likely to (1) consider it a

threat to their masculine reputation, (2) experience an increase in cortisol levels, (3) experience

an increase in testosterone levels, and (4) engage in aggressive and dominant behavior (Nisbett

& Cohen, 1996).

Taking these differences into account, it would be culturally insensitive to simply

recommend the suppression of anger, or even to cast anger in a negative light. Anger (and its

immediate expression at any perceived slight) is an integral part of the worldview held by those

to whom IiCA will deliver this training. Therefore, our focus throughout this project will be on

the healthy expression of anger.

Given that over 91% of the population in the Middle East considers themselves Muslim

(Pew, 2010), it is important that we conduct a survey of Islamic views on anger as well. The holy

book of Islam, the Quran, actually has much to say on the subject:

- "If anyone suppresses anger when he is in a position to give vent to

    it, God, the exalted, will call him on the Day of Resurrection and

    ask him to choose from the rewards offered." (Quran 3:43)

- "'Messenger of God, teach me some words which I can live by. Do

    not make them too much for me, in case I forget.' He said, 'Do not

    be angry.'" (Quran 8:137)

- "If one of you becomes angry while standing he should sit down. If the anger leaves him, well and good; otherwise he should lie down." (Quran 41:4764)

- "Anger comes from Satan, Satan was created from fire, and fire is extinguished only with water; so when any of you is angry, he should perform ablution." (Quran 41:4766)

- "A strong person is not the person who throws his adversaries to the ground. A strong person is the person who contains himself when he is angry." (Quran 47:47)

- "If any of you becomes angry, let him keep silent." (Quran 5:152)

- "Those who spend (in God's Cause) in prosperity and in adversity, who repress anger, and who pardon the people; verily, God loves the good-doers." (Quran 3:134)

Although there is violence in the stories and laws of the Quran, committing violent acts out of anger is, as shown above, not encouraged, or even acceptable. Anger can help us to understand when something wrong has occurred and drive us toward righteous action, but there should be a mindful separation between the emotion of anger and the resulting action that one commits. This will be an important cornerstone of our teaching in this specific culture moving forward.

Some of the Quran's more tangible recommendations, such as sitting or lying down, containing oneself and particularly one's speech, or using water to cool oneself down, could be promising interventions. The physical acts seem a little less likely to work well in everyday life, especially the ablution. However, given that our audience is children and these skills will be

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taught through the arts, there may be creative ways to incorporate the specific remedies which the Quran exhorts.

Anger

One can imagine how children who are refugees strive to have their basic needs met as they experience the spectrum of emotions and thoughts about their lives in a new country. Invest in Children Africa's camps bring psycho-educational art and cultural activities to those most in need. Many refugee children have been abused, deprived of education and opportunities, and even witnessed violence. Leila Zerrougui, special representative of the UN Secretary-General for children and Armed Conflict, shared that refugees are "not only are affected [by the violence on a daily basis] - they have lost their family, they have out their house- but they lost...hope. They are full of anger" (Irin, 2016). In this review on anger, we will explore gender differences in the expression of anger, as well as research that supports how expressing anger through the awareness and application of strengths can lead to societally productive expressions of said anger.

Children who are aggressive and angry need support and coaching to help them manage their behavior at home, outside, and in social interactions with friends and family (Deffenbacher, 2002). When we think of children's anger and aggression, we know that the expression of anger starts with the individual, but can also be understood in the contexts of race, class and gender. Any and all effective interventions will need to be cognizant of these variables in defining the acceptable expressions of anger (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissboard, 2013).

Boys and girls express their anger differently as a result of biology and different socialization throughout their development (Wilcox, 2012). Boys in general tend toward physical aggression and outward expressions of anger, whereas girls tend to express anger more

indirectly, engaging in gossip, exclusion, non-verbal gestures, and the like. Some of the relational aggression seen in girls is harder to identify, but can be equally harmful (Wilcox, 2012) to the outward anger expressions we see in boys. Researchers in this area recommend several questions to assess anger: how often do the problem behaviors occur? How long has the child been showing these behavior problems? In how many settings does the child experience these problems? And how severe are the child's problems (Analitis, Velderman, Ravens-Sieberer, Detmar, Erhart, Herman, Berra, Alonso, Rajmil, & the European Kidscreen Group, 2009)? In general, boys demonstrate more physical or verbal aggression compared to girls, but both groups have the potential to overcome their social and emotional problems by learning to better adjust to changes in their lives.

Children experience problems in unique ways, and what may be a minor problem for one child could be traumatizing for another. Anger and aggression can be useful behaviors that help children survive very challenging circumstances, but if expressed inappropriately, might demonstrate feelings of lack of control, and signal distress (Analitis, 2009). Children who are able to understand and cope with their emotions in the context of their short and long-term difficulties are perceived as being resilient. In addition, children's relationships with older adults in their lives can promote resilience and positivity (Analitis, 2000).

Thinking styles shape resilience, and resilience is a key factor in determining how well we do in life (Reivich & Shatte, 2002). If we can better understand these children's thinking styles, we can better understand their thoughts, feelings, and expressions of anger. By identifying emotions that tend to occur under specific circumstances, we can begin to recognize how some negative and positive emotions are not proportionate to the circumstance (Reivich & Shatte, 2001; Seligman, 2011). We can connect with the idea of something "triggering us" or "pushing

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our buttons." Even while it is happening, we know that our emotions and logic are not in sync with one another. When we respond in that out of proportion way, we are confused, but instead of trying to better understand our responses, we often justify our actions, which themselves are consequences of our thoughts and feelings. These thoughts (or the beliefs supporting them) can sometimes be tied to deep-rooted, unconscious, but often recurring cognitive themes (Masten, 2001; Reivich & Shatte, 2002). Once we identify any recurring cognitive and emotional themes around anger, we can steer said thoughts in the direction of well-being.

Strengths and Mindfulness

In the specific cultures in which IiCA's refugee work will take place, anger is a necessary, expected, and in many ways positive state (Cohen & Nisbett, 1997). Because of that fact, it is all the more important to encourage healthy expressions of anger. Much of the research to date on anger has focused on working through it internally, utilizing suppression or control of oneself to limit its expression. We believe that the VIA character strengths, a classification of 24 positive human strengths that fit into six virtue categories (Niemic, 2014), is a promising way to help our target population cultivate positive anger expression, rather than suppression.

It is important here to recognize that little to no research has been done on the connection between VIA strengths and anger (Niemiec, 2016).There is, however, a large body of research to support the efficacy of strengths-based interventions in general. Character strengths comprise 60-70% of the programming within positive psychotherapy, which has been found to benefit those suffering from depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and borderline personality disorder (Rashid & Anjum, 2007). The specific strengths of persistence, prudence, honesty, and love are related to fewer externalizing problems such as aggression (Park & Peterson, 2008). Post-traumatic growth (and it is safe to assume that a large number of these children have been traumatized (Diner,

2016)) corresponds in various dimensions with particular character strengths: improved relationships with others (kindness, love), openness to new possibilities (curiosity, creativity, love of learning), greater appreciation of life (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, zest), enhanced personal strength (bravery, honesty, perseverance), and spiritual development (religiousness) (Peterson et al., 2008). Every individual has her own set of signature strengths, and we suspect that because of VIA strengths' above-stated relations to mental health, aggression, post-traumatic growth, improved relationships, enhanced personal strength, and spiritual development, those individual strengths can be leveraged to encourage healthy anger expression, especially within this target population.

Before these children are able to use their strengths to positively express anger, however, it will be important that they employ mindfulness to slow down their reaction to a given situation and intentionally choose their response. There is already an 8-week Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (Niemiec, 2014) training, from which we borrow elements to inform our suggestions to IiCA. We know that mindfulness can help to overcome gaps in self-knowledge (Carlson, 2013), and that mindfulness and strengths, when practiced together, produce a virtuous cycle in which mindful awareness boosts strengths use which, in turn, increases mindfulness (Niemiec, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012). It will therefore be important to the efficacy of IiCA's interventions that strengths and mindfulness are taught in tandem. By doing so, we hope to extract the most effect out of each, and give our target population the tools they will need to actually implement their strengths practice in real-world situations.

Assertiveness

Anger toward others usually stems from interpersonal conflict of some form, and there are three general behavioral approaches to dealing with interpersonal conflict: passiveness,

aggressiveness, or assertiveness (Bower & Bower, 1977). Passiveness, as discussed above, is not generally an acceptable strategy in our target population's culture, especially among males. Aggressiveness, in contrast, is the damaging expression of anger which we are hoping to teach these children to avoid. Assertiveness, then, is presented here as a potential happy medium between the two - a healthy way to express anger.

The Penn Resilience Program (PRP) (Gillham, Brunwasser, & Freres, 2008) already teaches assertiveness skills, and we will borrow from their system for this project. The PRP's assertiveness model has four steps, presented as the acronym DEAL. The steps are:

1. **D**escribe the problem objectively

2. **E**xpress how the problem makes one feel

3. **A**sk for a specific change

4. **L**ist how these changes would improve the situation (Gillham et al., 2008)

While strengths and mindfulness will be a great combination of tools to help Middle Eastern refugee children express their anger more healthily, assertiveness provides a tactical, executable process to follow when anger arises. By doing so, assertiveness will complement both frameworks and complete our approach.

III. APPLICATION PLAN

The aim of this Application Plan is to combine the above intervention model (strengths, mindfulness, and assertiveness) with the understanding of anger summarized in the Literature Review in such a way that it encourages positive anger expression in traumatized Middle Eastern refugee children. This goal will require that IiCA foster open communication and create a group dynamic that allows space for the interplay between trauma and growth. We hope to create an environment in which the youth will experience validation in their thoughts and feelings and

freely express themselves. We will apply the frameworks of positive psychology to assist these children through activities such as strengths spotting, performing skits, and creating arts and crafts.

Strengths Spotting

Given the fact that our target population of traumatized refugee children will have varying levels of literacy and may not know much English, we will not be able to administer the standard VIA Strengths questionnaire. Therefore, the IiCA staff will need to teach the children about all 24 VIA strengths as early as possible, and continually "strengths spot" for them throughout each camp. This will familiarize the students with the concept of strengths, and introduce the terms into their shared language. We have already provided IiCA with information on the 24 VIA strengths and have been in conversation about how best to apply the research in this area.

We recommend that IiCA engage with certified VIA Strengths trainers from the MAPP program, or with VIA itself, to get all instructors trained in the 24 VIA Strengths, and specifically trained in how to "strengths spot."

Hot Seat - Strengths

Once the concept of VIA strengths has been introduced and a few "strengths spotting" moments have happened, it will be time for the Hot Seat exercise. In the Hot Seat exercise, each child will have the opportunity to get up on a chair in front of everybody else and have their strengths called out in front of the group. The aim of this exercise is to instill a sense of pride in each child around her unique signature strengths, communicate examples of when those strengths have been used so that there can be models of healthy behavior, and further develop a sense of community and a shared language around strengths. This can be done ad-hoc, with

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children offering up strengths in real-time, or each child could be asked to write a strength of whoever currently occupies the Hot Seat on a piece of paper, which would be collected into an envelope, tallied, and read.

The ad-hoc approach benefits from being high-energy and inclusive, but may run the risk of being too active for the children to stay focused. The envelope benefits from a more controlled environment and a likely more reliable strengths profile, but will probably not build as much camaraderie within the group, or garner as much engagement. As such, we recommend that IiCA deploy the ad-hoc approach for the Hot Seat exercise, while also being mindful of the conditions that will encourage the best learning of the youth, and flexible enough to change strategies if needed.

Skit - Assertiveness, Strengths, and Mindfulness

Invest in Children Africa and the Penn Resilience Program both already use skits in their curriculum as a teaching tool. The key concepts of assertiveness, strengths, and mindfulness can all be incorporated into an arts-based intervention by utilizing a skit as the teaching medium. Our recommendation is that the skits unfold as such:

1. The IiCA staff present a situation to the students. For illustrative purposes, we will use the example in the Penn Resilience Program, an interaction between a child, and a friend who repeatedly cancels plans at the last minute (Gillham et al., 2008). For this population, the example might be something like someone cutting in line for food distribution. Whatever it is, the skit should be tailored to what these children are experiencing in their daily lives.

2. The IiCA staff act out both a passive and an aggressive response to this situation. It is important for the teaching process that the children see the unhealthy responses modeled,

so that they know what to avoid. One of this project's key advisors made the

recommendation that the children themselves not be asked to conduct unhealthy anger

reactions, even in a skit setting. The reason for this avoidance is to mitigate the risk of

triggering past traumas or programming future unhealthy responses (Holloway, 2016).

3. The children will be invited to divide into pairs or small groups and write their own

   scripts.

4. When performing the skit, things will start off with one child making a statement toward

   the other that would cause anger (i.e. cancelling their plans).

5. To introduce mindfulness into this activity, the children will receive instructions to add a

   planned breath in each skit immediately before the response. Some type of cue will be

   given by the acting children, and the actors, audience, and staff members will all take a

   single deep, audible, mindful breath. As a more child-appropriate and playful way to

   introduce mindfulness, one of our classmates recommended that we might use a freeze-

   tag game (Cole, 2016). The premise here comes from improvisational comedy, the

   instructions of the game itself being that somebody yell "freeze!" at the most climactic

   moment of a scene, and then trade out actors. After the IiCA staff are done portraying the

   negative responses of passiveness and aggressiveness, and as the skit for assertiveness

   starts, the child who is going to model assertive communication yells "freeze!" The staff

   freeze mid-pose, as do the children. After a brief pause, the child protagonist taps out the

   staff person whom they will replace and changes the response in a way that showcases

   assertive communication. This will create the space for a mindful pause, while also

   adding some playfulness to the activity.

6. The protagonist child will act out how to use the DEAL model (Gillham et al., 2008), in conjunction with his own unique strengths, to craft and deliver an assertive response to the situation. This would be the perfect opportunity to employ the Quran's more tangible recommendations that we reviewed in our section on anger and culture (stand>sit>lay down, performing ablution), should IiCA and the children choose to do so.

7. As a debrief, IiCA staff members will ask the children for examples in their own lives of situations in which the DEAL model and assertiveness could be helpful. It is essential here that the IiCA staff members point out the kinds of thoughts that would cause us to favor a passive or aggressive response over an assertive one. It is also important to point out that assertiveness does not always lead to the protagonist's desired outcome. Students need to learn that even if they respond perfectly, it may not result in agreement (Gillham et al., 2008).

8. This will also be an opportunity to revisit the strengths-spotting "Hot Seat" exercise in which the instructors and audience (the children's peers) publicly call out the signature strengths each child employed throughout the skit.

Arts and Crafts

IiCA already leads arts and crafts activities as part of their curriculum, two of which are jewelry making and quilting. Both of these have potential to reinforce the strengths concepts outlined above. For jewelry making, one of our classmates (Walker, 2016) shared an idea that she's already done herself and wears every day. She created a "strengths bracelet" in which she has a letter for each one of her signature strengths organized into a bracelet. This serves as a regular reminder to her to use her strengths, and reinforces her own perception of her strengths as

core to her identity. We hope and suspect that this activity would have the same effect for IiCA's target population.

As mentioned, IiCA already does quilting exercises. We recommend that they add VIA strengths to this activity by turning each square into one of the children's strengths, or a depiction of a child using a strength. Research already asserts the therapeutic value of quilting as a way to use words and visuals that will drive home whatever lesson is being taught (Dickie, 2011), which will enhance IiCA's teachings and their impact on the target population. It will also create an artifact for these children to take with them and remind them of what they've learned. There are already a few possible session titles (Leafed Together, The Whole is Larger than the Sum of the Parts, Angry but Assertive), but regardless of what it is named, this quilting exercise led by IiCA will serve to combine the concepts of mindfulness, strengths spotting, and assertive communication into a memorable form. When children see their quilt in the future, they will hopefully remember the Hot Seat activity, the skit, and the tangible skills they learned to express anger in a healthy, productive manner.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the anger felt by the traumatized Middle Eastern refugee children whom IiCA serves should not be suppressed, but rather should be treated in such a way that its positive expression is encouraged. This recommendation is due to the fact the members of this target population come from an honor culture and likely identify as members of the faith of Islam, and in both of those contexts, anger is a necessary and important emotion to express. Informed by this understanding of anger in context, we specifically recommend that IiCA conduct 4 exercises in its curriculum: Strengths Spotting, The Hot Seat, an Assertiveness Skit, and Arts and Crafts. The aim of these activities is to fortify the children's sense of self through strengths education,

teach the practical tools of mindfulness and assertive communication, and drive those lessons

home through IiCA's expertise in art-based programming.

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