

2008 – 2011: Social Support as a Moderator of Acculturative Stress

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Sponsorships (six months duration) were highly effective in improving various aspects of psychological well-being in **adult refugees and asylum seekers** in Austria. A total of 63 clients participated, 27 women and 36 men, 42 of them from Chechnya and 21 from Afghanistan. Their mean age was 33.08 (Range 16 to 58) years. There were 35 sponsors, ten men and 25 women. We used psychological questionnaires as well as interviews in order to evaluate project outcome.

Sponsors had been recruited by mass media, and were **carefully selected, trained, and supervised** in the course of the research. We assessed the effects of the sponsorships by comparing a first group of clients with a **wait-list control group** who received sponsorships after a waiting period of six months. In addition, the clients were followed up three and six months after sponsorships had been completed, both by questionnaires and interviews.

Only clients who suffered from **marked symptoms of post-traumatic stress** benefited from sponsorships. In these clients, sponsorships considerably **reduced anxiety, depression, and psychological problems** and this effect remained stable at the follow-up assessments **three and six months after** sponsorships had ended. Sponsorships had **no substantial effects, however, on the clients' living conditions**, on psycho-social aspects like finding work or on their coping capabilities.

Results indicated that sponsors should be matched as well as possible to clients according to their gender and age. Quite surprisingly, many potential clients, after an initial contact when the idea of sponsorships had been explained to them, **were reluctant to accept assistance from strangers**, some of them expressing feelings of wounded pride, whereas others suspected hidden motives on the sponsors' part. Even after sponsorships had commenced, it was especially Chechen men who often continued to express doubts of this kind. These difficulties should be understood within the cultural framework of collectivist societies, where social support usually is granted by the extended families, whereas voluntary commitment is a phenomenon of Western, individualist culture. In other cases, difficulties resulted from sponsors **putting too much strain on their clients** when expecting progress too early or from **overprotecting** them.

Whereas sponsorships were used worldwide as an aid for refugees and asylum seekers in the past, little was known about their outcome. From the present results predictions can be made, **in which cases sponsorships can be expected to be effective and what their effects will be**. Moreover, supervisors will have **guidelines** at hand, enabling them to circumvent **typical pitfalls** in the course of the sponsorships. Results were received by **practitioners with great interest** nationally and internationally, for example by Caritas, the Federation of the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies and Austrian Red Cross.