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The Role of Language in Psychosocial Support for IDPs in Northeast Nigeria

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Abstract:

Forced migration and internal displacement in and into Nigeria in the last 50 years of independence has been triggered by violent conflict. Other causes of displacement include natural disasters and environmental degradation, inter-communal/inter-ethnic clashes, disputes over land, boundary conflicts between indigenous people and settlers, communal and ethno-religious clashes, as well as electoral violence (Mohammed, 2017). The highest recorded number in the last decade, however, was due to the insurgency in the northeast part of the country, where a spate of violent attacks since 2009 has left well over two million³ people displaced within and across the borders to neighbouring countries, especially over the past three years. Thus, internal displacement in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. This research proposes that the protracted displacement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) poses a significant risk to human development. One of the effects of this protracted displacement on capability (as an indicator of human development) was examined amongst the internally displaced in North-Eastern Nigeria vis-à-vis the psychosocial programmes designed to restore them to normalcy. Instead of focusing exclusively on the physical or psychological aspects of health and well-being, the paper emphasizes the Psychosocial support encompasses the totality of people's experience. This therefore, underlines the need to investigate the role of language as a means of communication and an important aspect in psychosocial support. This paper investigates the role of language in Psychosocial Support in Northeast Nigeria. The result shows that language has some psychosocial functions through which support and care givers deliver professional and non-specialized support.

Keywords: Language, psychosocial support, northeast Nigeria, IDPs

1. Introduction

As of October 2016, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in collaboration with National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) in its 12th round of Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) programme estimated the total number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) at 2,155,618 across 13 states in Nigeria. As of December 2016, the DTM Round 13 Report estimated 1,770,444 IDPs in the northeast alone.

Psychosocial support (PSS) should be available to all individuals affected by a crisis. Different groups—children, youth, adults, men, women, older people, and people with disabilities— react differently to crises, and some individuals within these groups will have stronger or different reactions than others. A key to organizing mental health and PSS is the understanding of the local medium of communication and spiritual inclination of the person(s) receiving the support.

PSS programs generally fall within the realm of community and family supports and focused non-specialized supports, and to a lesser extent within the realm of specialized psychosocial support. Psychosocial support is generally provided by trained community members, who often come from the population being targeted. Ideally, these people are trusted and respected in the community, and they should be identified through an interactive community process. Additionally, trained mental health professionals, often local psychologists and psychiatrists, provide services at the top end of the intervention pyramid.

This research is designed to investigate the role of language in psychosocial wellbeing for IDPs in Northeast Nigeria. It will determine the efficacy of language in giving psychosocial support, as well as find out the language use for psychosocial support in a multilingual society. The value addition activities performed by the various actors of the psychosocial support in the study area will also be investigated in addition to ascertaining the level of psychosocial support giving to IDPs in the study area.

2. Background and Justification for the Study

Forced migration and internal displacement in and into Nigeria in the last 50 years of independence has been triggered by violent conflict. Other causes of displacement include natural disasters and environmental degradation, inter-

communal/inter-ethnic clashes, disputes over land, boundary conflicts between indigenous people and settlers, communal and ethno-religious clashes, as well as electoral violence (Mohammed, 2017). The highest recorded number in the last decade, however, was due to the insurgency in the northeast part of the country, where a spate of violent attacks since 2009 has left well over two million³ people displaced within and across the borders to neighbouring countries, especially over the past three years. Thus, internal displacement in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. This research proposes that the protracted displacement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) poses a significant risk to human development. The causes and effects of protracted displacement on capability (as an indicator of human development) will be examined amongst the internally displaced in North-Eastern Nigeria vis-à-vis the psychosocial programmes designed to restore them to normalcy. The term 'psychosocial' refers to the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects of our experience (that is, our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors) and our wider social experience (that is, our relationships, family and community networks, social values, and cultural practices), where one influences the other (IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, 2014; Psychosocial Working Group, 2005). Use of the term 'psychosocial support' is based on the idea that a combination of factors is responsible for people's psychosocial well-being, and that these biological, emotional, spiritual, cultural, social, mental, and material aspects of experience cannot be separated from one another. Therefore, instead of focusing exclusively on the physical or psychological aspects of health and well-being, the term emphasizes the totality of people's experience. This therefore, underlines the need to investigate the role of language as a means of communication and an important aspect in psychosocial support.

3. Literature Review

The number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has dramatically increased since the cold war, outnumbering refugees 10:1 (Cohen & Deng, 1998a:7). Currently, more than 25 million people have been uprooted within their own country as a result of conflict and human rights violations. An equal number have been displaced because of natural disasters and infrastructural projects (Weiss et al, 2006). 95% of IDPs reside in the developing world which has serious implications for the achievement of long-term human development goals (UNHCR, 2005c).

Most IDPs, no matter their age or gender, have undergone some trauma, and being displaced could have effects on the physical, social, emotional, and general wellbeing of a person. Some are able to adjust, while the majorities are affected in one way or another, particularly in conflict situations (Mohammed, 2017). This aspect has been grossly underplayed with the focus being more on material and reconstruction efforts. The risk of not effectively addressing trauma, particularly where conflict exposes people to unimaginable atrocities, is the risk of these traumas resurfacing and manifesting in different forms. This could feed into a vicious cycle that could have a negative impact on the society (Ladan, 2011).

In recent decades, disasters and conflicts have taken their toll increasingly on civilian populations. In addition to traditional programming to address the physical and most basic needs of affected populations in the form of food, water and shelter, UNICEF, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, as well as other humanitarian organisations, have developed programmes to address the psychological and social suffering of affected populations (IFRC, 2009a).

Psychosocial support can be described as 'a process of facilitating resilience within individuals, families and communities. By respecting the independence, dignity and coping mechanisms of individuals and communities, psychosocial support promotes the restoration of social cohesion and infrastructure' (IFRC, 2009a). PSS aims to help individuals recover after a crisis has disrupted their lives, and to enhance their ability to bounce back and return to normality after experiencing adverse events. The term refers to the actions that address both the social and psychological needs of individuals, families, and communities (INEE, 2016).

The importance of language in psychosocial support cannot be overemphasized. In their Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, IFRC (2009a) stressed the need for local trainers and translators in the process of psychosocial support provision.

It is most beneficial to use trainers from the local branch or to recruit local trainers for training in psychosocial support, since the notion of psychosocial well-being is deeply rooted in the local context. In some languages, there are no direct translations for many of the concepts associated with psychosocial wellbeing and support. It is therefore necessary to have someone who understands these concepts and is able convey them in the local language, so that the meaning is well understood by the participants. If the selected trainers are not members of the psychosocial team, make sure that someone from the team participates in all trainings to supervise the trainings and ensure the content and facilitation fulfils expectations and requirements (IFRC, 2009a:138).

Thus, language is a fulcrum on which the PSS activities revolve. It is the medium through which communication is achieved. It is against this background that we set to explore the roles played by language as regards psychosocial support and wellbeing of the Internally Displaced Persons in the Northeast Nigeria.

4. Conceptual Framework of the Study

The term 'psychosocial' refers to the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects of our experience (that is, our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors) and our wider social experience (that is, our relationships, family and community networks, social values, and cultural practices), where one influences the other (IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, 2014; Psychosocial Working Group, 2005). Use of the term 'psychosocial support' is based on the idea that a combination of factors is responsible for people's psychosocial well-being, and that these biological, emotional,

spiritual, cultural, social, mental, and material aspects of experience cannot be separated from one another. Therefore, instead of focusing exclusively on the physical or psychological aspects of health and well-being, the term emphasizes the totality of people's experience and underlines the need to view these issues within the context of the wider family and community networks in which they occur (Action for the Rights of Children [ARC], 2009).

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The term 'mental health and psychosocial support' (MHPSS) is commonly used in the literature to describe any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental disorders for people in crisis situations (Inter-Agency Standing Committee [IASC], 2007). 'Mental health' and 'psychosocial support' are closely related terms that reflect different yet complementary approaches. Hence, agencies outside the health sector tend to speak of 'supporting psychosocial well-being,' whereas people working in the health sector tend to speak of 'mental health.' Exact definitions of these terms can vary slightly between and within aid organizations, disciplines, and countries (IASC, 2007).

5. Psychosocial Functions of Language

What utterances make up our daily verbal communication? Some of our words convey meaning, some convey emotions, and some actually produce actions. Language also provides endless opportunities for fun because of its limitless, sometimes nonsensical, and always changing nature. In this section, we will discuss about the five psychosocial functions of language, which show us that language is expressive, language is powerful, language is fun, language is dynamic, and language is relational.

5.1. Language Is Expressive

Verbal communication helps us meet various needs through our ability to express ourselves. In terms of instrumental needs, we use verbal communication to ask questions that provide us with specific information. We also use verbal communication to describe things, people, and ideas. Verbal communication helps us inform, persuade, and entertain others. It is also through our verbal expressions that our personal relationships are formed. At its essence, language is expressive. Verbal expressions help us communicate our observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1995).

5.2. Expressing Observations

When we express observations, we report on the sensory information we are taking or have taken in. Eyewitness testimony is a good example of communicating observations. Witnesses are not supposed to make judgments or offer conclusions; they only communicate factual knowledge as they experienced it. For example, a witness could say, 'I saw gunmen leaving my neighbour's house at 10:30 pm.' Observation and description occur in the first step of the perception-checking process. When you are trying to make sense of an experience, expressing observations in a descriptive rather than evaluative way can lessen defensiveness, which facilitates competent communication as a technique in PSS.

5.3. Expressing Thoughts

When we express thoughts, we draw conclusions based on what we have experienced. In the perception process, this is similar to the interpretation step. We take various observations and evaluate and interpret them to assign them meaning (a conclusion). Whereas our observations are based on sensory information (what we saw, what we read, what we heard), thoughts are connected to our beliefs (what we think is true/false), attitudes (what we like and dislike), and values (what we think is right/wrong or good/bad). Psychosocial support providers are expected to express thoughts based on reported observations to help reach a conclusion about someone's level of stress or trauma. Sometimes people intentionally or unintentionally express thoughts as if they were feelings. For example, when people say, 'I feel like Boko Haram hate women,' they aren't really expressing a feeling; they are expressing a judgment about the insurgent organization (a thought).

5.4. Expressing Feelings

Expressing feelings should be treated with caution by PSS providers as these feelings, when recounting past stressful events, may trigger other emotions that will put the process in awkward situation. When we express feelings, we communicate our emotions. Expressing feelings is a difficult part of verbal communication, because there are many social norms about how, why, when, where, and to whom we express our emotions. Norms for emotional expression also vary based on nationality and other cultural identities and characteristics such as age and gender. In terms of age, young children are typically freer to express positive and negative emotions in public. Gendered elements intersect with age as boys grow older and are socialized into a norm of emotional restraint. Although individual men vary in the degree to which they are emotionally expressive, there is still a prevailing social norm that encourages and even expects women to be more emotionally expressive than men.

Expressing feelings is often the most difficult form of verbal expression. Expressing feelings can be uncomfortable for those listening. Some people are generally not good at or comfortable with receiving and processing other people's feelings. Even those with good empathetic listening skills can be positively or negatively affected by others' emotions. PSS providers should be able to listen to and empathize with those they provide their services to. Expressions of anger can be especially difficult to manage because they represent a threat to the face and self-esteem of others. Despite the fact that expressing feelings is more complicated than other forms of expression, emotion sharing is an important part of how we create social bonds and empathize with others, and it can be improved.

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an emotional vocabulary. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous our emotions will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we are feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, happy is mild, delighted is moderate, and ecstatic is intense; ignored is mild, rejected is moderate, and abandoned is intense (Hargie, 2011).

5.5. *Expressing Needs*

Stressed and traumatized individuals may not invariably be able to communicate their needs. PSS providers should be able to identify the remote, basic and specialized needs of the people they attend to. When people express needs, they are communicating in an instrumental way to help them get things done. Since we almost always know our needs more than others do, it's important for us to be able to convey those needs to others. Expressing needs can help us get the needed assistance or help us navigate the changes of a long-term stressful situation like insurgency and war. Not expressing needs can lead to feelings of abandonment, frustration, or resentment.

5.6. *Language Expresses Our Identities*

PSS activities like 'Why Writing Your Name Matters' in IDP and host community schools across Northeast Nigeria are some of the PSS intervention that helps children become happy with their identity. Calling persons by their names signifies respect for their identity and may trigger acceptance and foster positive relationships.

5.7. *Case Study*

Aisha was a little Fulani girl in Adamawa state. She was in primary 3 when she was abducted alongside other girls and taken to the infamous Sambisa Forest by Boko Haram insurgents. She spent over a year in their hands before she was rescued by the Nigerian military. Meanwhile she had witnessed many of the Boko Haram atrocities firsthand. When she was returned to her parents, who were displaced in an IDP camp in Mubi, they enrolled her in the IDP school. Aisha was so affected by what she saw that she feared associating with people. She seemed to have claustrophobia and always hid below her desk in the class. Her class teacher saw her situation and immediately understood she needed PSS. Therefore whenever the teacher comes to class, she would say 'Good morning class. Good morning Aisha.' Whenever she forgot to mention Aisha, she will knock on her desk from under the table. The teacher would immediately greet her and she would stop.

One day the teacher became indisposed and another teacher was asked to replace her. When she arrived in the class and was greeted by the pupils, she didn't notice someone was lurking under the desk. No sooner had she started her class than suddenly they heard knocking coming from under the desk. She shouted at her and asked, 'What was wrong with you?' Aisha didn't stop her knocking. The other pupils informed their new teacher that she had to greet Aisha by calling out her name. So she said 'Good morning Aisha.' That was when Aisha stopped her knocking. Learning this, the new teacher devised another means. When she comes to class, she greets the children and the whole class should say 'Good morning Aisha!' Few days after that, Aisha felt loved by the class and was able to come out of her hiding space.

5.8. *Language Affects Our Credibility*

PSS providers should not make assumptions about a person's credibility based on how they speak and what they say. Even though we've learned that meaning is in people rather than words and that the rules that govern verbal communication, like rules of grammar, are arbitrary, these norms still mean something. People don't have to be perfect grammarians to be perceived as credible. In fact, no PSS provider should expect IDPs to follow the grammar rules for written communication to the letter, since our typical way of speaking isn't as formal and structured as writing. But PSS service providers still have to support their ideas and explain the conclusions they make to be seen as competent. They have to use language clearly and be accountable for what they say in order to be seen as trustworthy, which is very germane in any PSS service provision.

5.9. *Language Is a Means of Control*

Control is a word that has negative connotations, but our use of it here can be positive, neutral, or negative. Verbal communication can be used to reward and punish. We can offer verbal communication in the form of positive reinforcement to praise someone. We can withhold verbal communication or use it in a critical, aggressive, or hurtful way as a form of negative reinforcement.

Directives are utterances that try to get another person to do something. They can range from a rather polite ask or request to a more forceful command or insist. Context informs when and how we express directives and how people respond to them. Promises are often paired with directives in order to persuade people to comply, and those promises,

whether implied or stated, should be kept in order to be an ethical communicator. Keep this in mind to avoid arousing false expectations on the part of the other person (Hayakawa & Hayakawa, 1990).

Rather than verbal communication being directed at one person as a means of control, the way we talk creates overall climates of communication that may control many. Verbal communication characterized by empathy, understanding, respect, and honesty creates open climates that lead to more collaboration and more information exchange. Verbal communication that is controlling, deceitful, and vague creates a closed climate in which people are less willing to communicate and less trusting (Brown, 2006).

5.10. Language Is Per Formative

Some language is actually more like an action than a packet of information. Saying, 'I promise,' 'I guarantee,' or 'I pledge,' does more than convey meaning; it communicates intent. Such utterances are called commissive, as they mean a speaker is committed to a certain course of action (Crystal, 2005). Of course, promises can be broken, and there can be consequences, but other verbal communication is granted official power that can guarantee action.

5.11. Language Is Fun

Some PSS activities and games are language based. PSS activities like Flyswatter and Wordspash have been used with children in IDP schools and have proved to be effective PSS tools in schools. Word games have long been popular. Before Words with Friends there was Apples to Apples, Boggle, Scrabble, and crossword puzzles. Writers, poets, and comedians have built careers on their ability to have fun with language and in turn share that fun with others. The fun and frivolity of language becomes clear as teachers get half-hearted laughs from students when they make puns. A fun aspect of language enjoyed by more people than a small community of word enthusiasts is humour.

There are more than one hundred theories of humour, but none of them quite captures the complex and often contradictory nature of what we find funny (Foot & McCreddie, 2006). Humour is a complicated social phenomenon that is largely based on the relationship between language and meaning. Humour functions to liven up conversations, break the ice, and increase group cohesion. We also use humour to test our compatibility with others when a deep conversation about certain topics like politics or religion would be awkward. Bringing up these topics in a light-hearted way can give us indirect information about another person's beliefs, attitudes, and values. Based on their response to the humorous message, we can either probe further or change the subject and write it off as a poor attempt at humour (Foot & McCreddie, 2006). Using humour also draws attention to us, and the reactions that we get from others feeds into our self-concept. We also use humour to disclose information about ourselves that we might not feel comfortable revealing in a more straightforward way. Humour can also be used to express interest or to cope with bad news or bad situations.

We first start to develop an understanding of humour as children when we realize that the words, we use for objects are really arbitrary and can be manipulated. This manipulation creates a distortion or incongruous moment in the reality that we had previously known. Some humour scholars believe that this early word play—for example, calling a horse a turtle and a turtle a horse—leads us to appreciate language-based humour like puns and riddles (Foot & McCreddie, 2006). It is in the process of encoding and decoding that humour emerges. People use encoding to decide how and when to use humour, and people use decoding to make sense of humorous communication. Things can go wrong in both of those processes. I'm sure we can all relate to the experience of witnessing a poorly timed or executed joke (a problem with encoding) and of not getting a joke (a problem with decoding).

5.12. Language Is Relational

We use verbal communication to initiate, maintain, and terminate our interpersonal relationships. The first few exchanges with a potential romantic partner or friend help us size the other person up and figure out if we want to pursue a relationship or not. We then use verbal communication to remind others how we feel about them and to check in with them—engaging in relationship maintenance through language use. When negative feelings arrive and persist, or for many other reasons, we often use verbal communication to end a relationship.

5.13. Language Brings Us Together

Interpersonally, verbal communication is key to bringing people together and maintaining relationships. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, our use of words like I, you, we, our, and us affect our relationships. 'We language' includes the words we, our, and us and can be used to promote a feeling of inclusiveness. 'I language' can be useful when expressing thoughts, needs, and feelings because it leads us to 'own' our expressions and avoid the tendency to mistakenly attribute the cause of our thoughts, needs, and feelings to others. Communicating emotions using 'I language' may also facilitate emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying, 'You're making me crazy!' you could say, 'I'm starting to feel really anxious because we can't make a decision about this.' Conversely, 'you language' can lead people to become defensive and feel attacked, which could be divisive and result in feelings of interpersonal separation.

Verbal communication brings people together and helps maintain satisfying relationships. Aside from the specific words that we use, the frequency of communication impacts relationships. Of course, the content of what is said is important, but research shows that romantic partners who communicate frequently with each other and with mutual friends and family members experience less stress and uncertainty in their relationship and are more likely to stay together (McCornack, 2007). When frequent communication combines with supportive messages, which are messages communicated in an open, honest, and non-confrontational way, people are sure to come together.

Moving from the interpersonal to the sociocultural level, we can see that speaking the same language can bring people together. When a person is surrounded by people who do not speak his or her native language, it can be very comforting to run into another person who speaks the same language. Even if the two people are strangers, the ease of linguistic compatibility is comforting and can quickly facilitate a social bond. We've already learned that language helps shape our social reality, so a common language leads to some similar perspectives. Of course, there are individual differences within a language community, but the power of shared language to unite people has led to universal language movements that advocate for one global language.

6. Common Types of Unsupportive Messages in PSS

6.1. Global Labels

'You're a liar.' Labelling someone irresponsible, untrustworthy, selfish, or lazy calls his or her whole identity as a person into question. Such sweeping judgments and generalizations are sure to only escalate a negative situation.

6.2. Sarcasm

Even though sarcasm is often disguised as humour, it usually represents passive-aggressive behaviour through which a person indirectly communicates negative feelings.

6.3. Dragging Up The Past

Bringing up negative past experiences is discouraged in PSS. Sometimes even people that have built up resilience break down in emotions as they are made to recall past unpleasant events.

6.4. Negative Comparisons

Holding a person up to the supposed standards or characteristics of another person can lead to feelings of inferiority and resentment. Parents and teachers may unfairly compare children to their siblings.

6.7. Judgmental 'You' Messages

Accusatory messages are usually generalized overstatements about another person that go beyond labelling but still do not describe specific behaviour in a productive way.

6.8. Threats

Threatening someone with violence or some other negative consequence usually signals the end of productive communication. Aside from the potential legal consequences, threats usually overcompensate for a person's insecurity.

7. Conclusion

This paper investigates the role of language in Psychosocial Support in Northeast Nigeria. Language helps us express observations (reports on sensory information), thoughts (conclusions and judgments based on observations or ideas), feelings, and needs. Language is powerful in that it expresses our identities through labels used by and on us, affects our credibility based on how we support our ideas, serves as a means of control, and performs actions when spoken by certain people in certain contexts. The productivity and limitlessness of language creates the possibility for countless word games and humorous uses of language. Language is dynamic, meaning it is always changing through the addition of neologisms, new words or old words with new meaning, and the creation of slang. Language is relational and can be used to bring people together through a shared reality but can separate people through unsupportive and divisive messages.

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