

Torture Treatment Literature Selection, Q2 2020

The **Partners in Trauma Healing (PATH)** bibliography is a resource for current literature on the topic of the mental health status of and treatments for torture survivors, war trauma survivors, refugees, and asylum seekers. This also includes research in the areas of social work that relate directly to the psychological well-being of these populations. The bibliography includes peer reviewed journal article citations in these areas; select original summaries of those articles; and links to the publicly available abstracts and full text versions of these articles. This bibliography is updated and distributed on a quarterly basis. The bibliography does not currently include articles on policy and advocacy.

Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) contributions to this bibliography:

- Volunteer **Carolyn Easton** conducted the literature search and compiled the citations.
- Volunteers **George Abrahams, Eden Almasude, and Frank Hennick**, and CVT Program Evaluation Advisor **Sarah Peters** wrote summaries of selected articles.
- Volunteer **Jared Del Rosso** reviewed the selected article summaries.

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Selected Article Summaries¹

Reflective functioning of refugee mothers with children born of conflict-related sexual violence.

Anderson, K., & van Ee, E. (2020). *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(8). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17082873> [abstract] [Full Text]

Article summarized by: George Abrahams, Volunteer with the Center for Victims of Torture

Introduction/Background

Child development research supports the importance of a secure attachment between caregivers and their children. Experiences of trauma can compromise the ability of a mother to bond with her infant. Woman and children refugees are particularly vulnerable to trauma and victimization, including conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and children born of sexual violence (CBSV). The negative impact of CBSV on the mother and, consequently, the child, can engender a dysfunctional cycle of mother-child interactions, compromised child functioning, insecure parent-child relationships/attachment, and social isolation resulting in a loss of emotional and material support. Reflexive function, or the “ability of a parent to step back from their own experience and seek to understand that of their child” (Anderson & van Ee, 2020, p. 2 of 12), may also be harmed by CRSV and CBSV. This study examined the relationship between maternal trauma, CBSV/CRSV, and reflective functioning with a small sample of refugee mothers living in the Netherlands.

Methodology

This is a small cross-sectional study that took place within a community mental health center, Psychotraumacentrum Zuid Nederland (PTC), servicing refugees and asylum seekers. The study was approved by the Dutch Medical Ethical Committee (METC) at the University Medical Center, Utrecht. In order to assess the impact of conceiving and parenting a CBSV, this study included a control group of mothers who had experienced CRSV without conceiving, as well as mothers who had experienced other war-related trauma. The nature of the study and related expectations were explained to potential research participants; those who agreed to participate provided written consent. Assessments were carried out within the home or at the PTC in participants’ preferred languages. Ten women were included in the final sample (n=5 in each subgroup).

Measures/Instruments

This study used several instruments to measure parenting and mental health. The Parental Development Interview on Reflective Functioning (PDI-RF) is a manualized, semi-structured interview in which mothers are asked questions about their relationship with their children, their family history, and experiences of being parented. The Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) is an established 25-item screening instrument that identifies symptoms related to depression and anxiety. The PTSD Checklist (PCL-5) based on DSM-5 criteria assesses symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) is a 36-item scale assessing emotional dysregulation. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC) is a 25-item scale used to measure one’s capacity for resilience.

¹ Ordered by name of original article’s first author

Results

Mothers and children in the CBSV group were younger and scored significantly lower on the measure of parental RF. There were no significant differences in symptoms of PTSD, depression, and emotional regulation. This finding suggests that lower RF scores were unrelated to these symptoms. The lower RF scores for mothers with CBSV suggests that they were less able to see the relationship between how their own behaviors and emotions relate to those of their child. In contrast, mothers in the war-affected group revealed more interest in trying to “understand the interactional process and their children’s needs underlying their outward behavior” (Anderson & van Ee, 2020, p. 6 of 12).

Mothers with a CBSV presented as unwilling or unable to explore the relationship between their mental states and parenting behavior; similarly, they presented as unwilling or unable to understand a child’s needs that underlie their behavior. Additionally, mothers with a CBSV expressed an ambivalence towards parenting, feelings of stress relative to the responsibilities of single parenting, and, at times, revealed a more enmeshed parent-child relationship that resulted in an insecure attachment pattern. Although the challenges of raising a CBSV are unique, all study participants acknowledged universal challenges of parenting, managing their own emotional well-being, and struggles relative to their refugee status.

Summary

The mothers in this study were able to reflect on their own internal mental states as well as those of their children. Yet mothers with a CBSV were unable to reflect on the interactional give-and-take between themselves and their children. This inability to connect self-observation with child functioning is difficult to correct, given the ambivalence mothers with a CBSV feel about parenting, social isolation, and separation from family. These results suggest a starting point for thinking about intervention and the need to be proactive in supporting refugee women and asylum seekers who have been victims of sexual violence. They also suggest the need to design programs to support mothers to become more self-reflective regarding the parent-child relationship. Finally, given the trauma of sexual violence, early intervention and additional research with this population are needed to better support healthy parent-child relations.

Creative expression workshops as Psychological First Aid (PFA) for asylum-seeking children: An exploratory study in temporary shelters in Montreal

De Freitas Girardi, J., Miconi, D., Lyke, C., & Rousseau, C. (2020). *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 25(2), 483–493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104519891760> [abstract]

Article summarized by: Eden Almasude, Volunteer with the Center for Victims of Torture

Study Details

In recent years, the number of asylum-seekers in Canada has significantly increased, leading to the establishment of many temporary shelters. In these shelter settlements, it is difficult to establish psychosocial programs for children due to the lack of stability, transitory environment, and stressful circumstances. Psychological First Aid (PFA) approaches are used in other similar contexts to provide support and reduce “emotional distress and short- and long-term mental health consequences” (p. 484) amid the instability of a crisis situation, centered on the foundations of safety, calming, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope. In this study, a PFA model was used to implement a creative expression program for children, given the known benefits of symbolic play and ritualized structure for children experiencing traumatic events.

Methods

The workshops were designed around the central principles of PFA interventions, with a flexible structure, ritualized activities, trained facilitators to create a supportive environment, and a child-friendly space. Each team consisted of two facilitators, who held 1-2 hour workshops twice a week in three different shelter settings over 18 months. The children ranged in age from 2-18. When possible, children were grouped by age; however, in one shelter all ages were in the same group. Facilitators were trained in PFA approaches and met for monthly supervision. Workshops were both flexible and ritualized, designed with an opening and closing ritual, group guidelines, a structured activity, and reflection time for children to share feedback about the workshop.

The data collected included facilitators' field notes from each workshop, two focus groups with facilitators, and notes from supervision meetings. Focus groups included questions about strengths and challenges of the workshops, perceived needs of the children, and understanding the place of the workshops within the context of the temporary shelters. Qualitative analysis was used to outline themes emerging from the material.

Study Findings

Prominent themes noted in analysis were: fostering emotional safety, facilitating expression of experiences, and the various challenges to implementing the intervention.

Emotional safety: Workshops often began with turbulence, with children acting out. However the workshops calmed as children engaged in the activities and experienced relief from their daily stressors. Older children, for example, could shift and leave behind their usual responsibilities to care for siblings and help their parents.

Expression of past or present experiences: Children often played out their experiences of forced migration or violence through symbolic play and could be met with safety from the group environment and support from the adult facilitators.

Challenges: Facilitators experienced difficulties working in the low resource setting of shelters. For example, they groups had minimal privacy and there was significant fluctuations in the number of children coming to sessions. Children expressed many emotional needs yet there were few services available.

Conclusions

This study outlines a new, PFA-oriented intervention for asylum-seeking children and adolescents, which was found to create emotional safety through the use of creative expression and ritualized activities. Without prompting, children often re-enacted traumatic events and they could be met with validation and care in a holding environment. The workshops were implemented quickly within an urgent context and thus the evaluation of the work was limited and did not include the perspective of children and parents. Nevertheless, the workshops were noted to be a positive and resilience-oriented approach that is promising for future PFA interventions in transitory environments.

Post-migration stressors and their association with symptom reduction and non-completion during treatment for traumatic grief in refugees

Djelantik, A. A. A. M. J., de Heus, A., Kuiper, D., Kleber, R. J., Boelen, P. A., & Smid, G. E. (2020). *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11, 407. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00407> [abstract] [Full Text]

Article summarized by: Sarah Peters, Program Evaluation Advisor at the Center for Victims of Torture

Background

Refugees resettled in the Global North who have been exposed to trauma and loss are at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and persistent complex bereavement disorder (PCBD). The presence of post-migration stressors has been linked to smaller improvements in mental health following treatment. The authors evaluated refugees' reductions in symptoms of PTSD and PCBD following treatment, for traumatic grief, in the Netherlands. They also measured refugee clients' post-migration stressors and their association with the size of symptom reduction and likelihood of dropping out of treatment.

Methods

The authors used data from a convenience sample of files from 81 clients participating in day patient treatment for traumatic grief (DPT-TG) between October 2014 and October 2018 at the ARQ National Psychotrauma Center in the Netherlands. DPT-TG is a multi-disciplinary treatment program for refugees who have experienced traumatic loss. It combines exposure-based psychotherapy with activities that aim to support clients' development of social support networks. Additionally, DPT-TG provides social work support on legal issues, employment, and education. The treatment consists of weekly five-hour group and/or individual sessions, provided for one year. Treatment begins with stabilization, followed by processing traumatic loss, and concluding with resocialization. On average, the clients included in the study attended 74% of the sessions.

Symptoms of PTSD and PCBD were measured (with the CAPS-5 and the TGI-SR, respectively) at the clients' intake and at the end of their treatment. They coded post-migration stressors for each client from qualitative notes in the clients' files. Measured post-migration stressor variables included legal status, Dutch proficiency, employment, housing problems, family separation, and ongoing conflict in country of origin. Paired sample t-tests were used to test the significance of reductions in PTSD and PCBD symptoms.

Findings

There were significant reductions ($p < 0.001$), with medium effect sizes (*Cohen's d* = 0.33 and *d* = 0.61, respectively), of PTSD and PCBD symptoms. On average, clients experienced three post-migration stressors during their treatment. The total number of post-migration stressors was negatively correlated with the size of PCBD symptom reductions. Only ongoing conflict in the client's country of origin was negatively correlated with the size of PTSD symptom reduction. Clients that were undocumented were more likely to drop out of treatment before completion.

Conclusions

In resettled refugees being treated for traumatic grief, post-migration stressors are associated with increased likelihood of treatment non-completion, and reduced treatment effectiveness. This indicates that clinicians should be cognizant of the potential for post-migration stressors to suppress treatment effects. When there is ongoing conflict in a client's country of origin, or they experience a high number

of stressors, clinicians should educate the client in order to manage their treatment expectations. Special considerations should be made for undocumented clients, or clients who were denied asylum status, to prevent drop-out from treatment.

These conclusions should be considered in light of the study's limitations. It had a small sample size, and did not have a control group. Thus, estimated associations have relatively limited statistical power, and we cannot conclude that overall symptom changes can be attributed to the treatment itself. Additionally, data on post-migration stressors was not systematically collected; this depended on whether the clinician asked the client the question and took note of the response. Thus, the quality of post-migration stressor data may be low. Future research is needed to better understand the impact of post-migration stressors on treatment effects.

A pilot intervention to promote positive parenting in refugees from Syria in Lebanon and Jordan.

Lakkis, N. A., Osman, M. H., Aoude, L. C., Maalouf, C. J., Issa, H. G., & Issa, G. M. (2020). *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 11, 257. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.00257> [abstract] [Full Text]

Article summarized by: George Abrahams, Volunteer with the Center for Victims of Torture

Background

Healthy early child development (ECD), birth to eight years of age, is critical to lifelong psychosocial, physical, relational, and cognitive progression. Early child development is fostered and enhanced when children have access to sensitive and responsive parenting that promotes a sense of safety, security, and emotional well-being.

Although there are many examples of resilient children who have thrived within harsh family and community environments, those who do often have had access to internal and external resources that compensate for deprivations. By contrast, poverty and high levels of parenting stress compromise infant and child outcomes, contributing to negative affect, difficult temperament, and behavioral challenges. Consequently, programs that aim to reduce parental stress and support parenting best practices are vital for poor and marginalized communities. This pilot program was designed to evaluate the impact of a parenting intervention program on family well-being, parental stress, and behavioral/discipline strategies.

Methodology

This pilot program was conducted in three refugee camps in Lebanon with Syrian parents who met the following criteria: 1) have children aged six years of age or younger; 2) parent in couples unless widowed or divorced; 3) understand the Arabic language; and 4) are able to complete a 21-week program. Research coordinators explained the nature of the program and related expectations to eligible participants and had parents sign an informed consent form. A total of 125 parents agreed to participate including 43 couples, 33 mothers, and 6 fathers. Approximately 53% of the parents completed the study.

The Arab Resource Collective (ARC) in Lebanon and Plan International (PI) in Jordan developed a comprehensive, interactive parenting intervention in Arabic. The intervention groups addressed issues pertaining to pregnancy and breastfeeding, nutrition, hygiene, healthcare, parental communication, behavioral strategies, learning and school readiness, and mental health and psychosocial support. The program consisted of 21 weekly study sessions and discussions (16 ECD sessions and 5 psychosocial

support sessions). The groups were facilitated by both a male and female psychologist with expertise in parent training and coaching.

Research coordinators administered pre- and post-structured interviews with mothers and fathers separately. The interview included the following instruments, which were read to the participants: the World Health Organization Well-Being 5-item index (WHO-5), the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI-SF), the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and the Parental Discipline Strategies Questionnaire (DSQ).

Results and Discussion

The mean age of participating children was 4.0 at the beginning of the program. The PSI-SF total score and all subscales improved significantly after the intervention. This improvement was most prominent in parents of children 3-6 years of age. The SDQ total difficulties score, as well as the hyperactive and conduct problems subscales, improved post-intervention for parents of children 3-6 years of age. The Parental DSQ revealed decreases in parents' use of ignoring, shaming, and physical punishments. In summary, this group intervention improved the "well-being of the participating refugee parents, decreased their distress, defensive responding, and dysfunctional interaction with their children, as well as their perception of their children as being difficult children" (Lakkis et al., 2020, p. 4 of 8).

This study supports previous ones that found that group-based parenting support programs improve the short-term behavioral and emotional adjustment of children 3-6 years of age. Specifically, parenting programs have reduced the harsh, coercive/punitive parenting styles while fostering warmer and more positive parent-child interactions. However, it should be noted that the generalizability of these results is limited given that child outcomes were measured indirectly by parental self-report and lack of a control group. Finally, the authors note that the drop-out rate could be reduced with the incorporation of wrap-up sessions and financial incentives.

Trauma exposure and PTSD prevalence among Yazidi, Christian and Muslim asylum seekers and refugees displaced to Iraqi Kurdistan

Richa, S., Herdane, M., Dwaf, A., Bou Khalil, R., Haddad, F., El Khoury, R., Zarzour, M., Kassab, A., Dagher, R., Brunet, A., & El-Hage, W. (2020). *PloS One*, 15(6), e0233681.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233681> [abstract] [Full Text]

Article summarized by: Frank Hennick, Volunteer with the Center for Victims of Torture

Study Background and Details

Decades of political conflict and ethnoreligious violence in Iraq have exposed its population to war, discrimination, and human rights violations. The terrorism of the militant group ISIS has driven thousands of Iraqis—majority Muslims, minority Yazidis, and Christians alike—to flee and relocate to the country's comparatively stable Kurdistan Region. Dr. Sami Richa and his fellow researchers explain, however, that although all those displaced by ISIS have been exposed to trauma, the degree with which Christians, Muslims, and Yazidis experience PTSD is markedly different, as is the typical severity of cases among these groups.

Noting these discrepancies, Dr. Richa and his collaborators evaluate displaced persons from all three groups and examine possible connections of ethnoreligious background with trauma exposure and the

frequency of PTSD. In doing so, the authors aim to understand the extent to which ethnoreligious background informs vulnerability to both depressive symptoms and PTSD.

Sample and Method

Between 11/2016 and 01/2017, Dr. Richa's study drew 150 participants from the Erbil refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan—50 Christians, 50 Muslims, and 50 Yazidis. The selection process depended on a team of social workers who screened potential participants for age range (18-65), Arabic fluency, and lack of previously diagnosed PTSD.

A psychotherapist and general practitioner worked together to interview and evaluate the 150 participants, and the team relied on a variety of data collection forms and questionnaires:

- Sociodemographic history form: a universal, Arabic-language form for gathering intake data such as sex, education level, number of children, marital status, income, occupation, household crowding, duration of displacement, and psychiatric medical history;
- Life events checklist (LEC): 17-item self-report questions that measure potential trauma exposure on a 5-point scale, comparing trauma types to trauma frequencies;
- PCL-5: 20-item self-report questionnaire to gauge PTSD symptoms on a scale from 0 to 4, with an overall cutoff of 33 representing likely PTSD; and
- PHQ-9: 9-item self-report scale (0 to 3) measuring depression.

Results

While interviews revealed a 100% trauma exposure rate (this study defines trauma exposure as exposure to at least one traumatic event) among all three participant groups, the study suggested significant disparities in the prevalence of PTSD and in the ways trauma exposure continues to shape participants' lives. The study suggested that rates of PTSD were highest among Yazidis. While mean PTSD symptom scores on PCL-5 were 29.3 among Christians and 31.3 among Muslims, the mean score among Yazidis was 43.1. For depressive symptoms, the mean PHQ-9 score among Yazidis was 12.3 and for Muslims it was 11.7; the scores of both groups were higher than those of Christians (8.1).

Dr. Richa emphasizes that while Christians reported greater exposure to traumas and "adverse life events" than Muslims and Yazidis, Yazidis nevertheless reported the greatest rate of PTSD symptoms. He speculates that this disconnect owes to such exacerbating factors as post-resettlement circumstances, low education levels, and high levels of poverty—all of which Yazidi refugees in this sample reported at greater rates than Muslims and Christians. Post-migration stress, argues Dr. Richa, bears significant consideration as a predictor of PTSD and depressive symptoms. For instance, he suggests that Yazidis are especially prone to struggle with acculturation in Iraqi Kurdistan as an insular minority group with some members who speak neither Arabic nor Kurdish. With low education levels and in the face of ethnoreligious discrimination, employment opportunities are few. Such stressors as outsider status and ongoing struggle with basic needs, then, can help explain Yazidis' particular vulnerability to PTSD symptoms. Muslims, too, reported especially high rates of depressive symptoms (68%); Dr. Richa asserts that Arab Muslims struggle to find work in Iraqi Kurdistan in the face of discrimination. Dr. Richa also suggests that Muslim refugees are less likely recipients of international humanitarian attention and support.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge that their sampling strategy was not random and that not all refugees in the camps visited by the study's research teams had an equal likelihood of being contacted and interviewed.

Still, Dr. Richa emphasizes that the study sample did not include 1) individuals who had already been linked to mental health problems or 2) individuals from outside the refugee camps. As such, the authors express confidence that the rates among their sample do not overestimate the true rates of problems among the camp populations.

Selected Article Citations²

Focal Population: Refugees and/or Asylum Seekers

Aguirre, N. G., Milewski, A. R., Shin, J., & Ottenheimer, D. (2020). Gender-based violence experienced by women seeking asylum in the United States: A lifetime of multiple traumas inflicted by multiple perpetrators. *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine*, 72, 101959. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jflm.2020.101959> [abstract] [Full Text]

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² Citations that fit within multiple categories are repeated for each category

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30189-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30189-9) [no abstract] [Full Text]

De Freitas Girardi, J., Miconi, D., Lyke, C., & Rousseau, C. (2020). Creative expression workshops as Psychological First Aid (PFA) for asylum-seeking children: An exploratory study in temporary shelters in Montreal. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 25(2), 483–493.

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Additional Relevant Resources

- The Danish Institute Against Torture (Dignity) provides a database that allows you to search for a wider range of articles, books, and other publications on the topic of torture (<https://dignity.reindex.net/RCT/main/Landing.php?Lang=eng>).
- The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) provides free access to their journal, *TORTURE Journal* (<https://tidsskrift.dk/index.php/torture-journal/index>).

This bibliography is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of CVT and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.