Author's response to reviews

Title: Mental health of returnees from Germany following state-sponsored repatriation

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Mental health of returnees from Germany following state-sponsored repatriation

Results need to be discussed further in terms of the statistical significance of differences (eg., 44% and 88% on pg 2)

We added information on the statistical significance of differences to the manuscript.

Overall, the literature review is well done and provides a comprehensive overview of the field. There are studies which have examined the mental health of similar groups of refugees in other western countries which are not reviewed and would be of interest, particularly in terms of providing a broader context of the mental health profile of the research participants, but this change is not essential.

We agree that there are more studies which have examined the mental health of refugees in western countries which could be included in the manuscript as well. We would prefer not to include more studies than already described. The reason is that we tried to choose a selection of studies which gives a broad overview over the aspects one has to think of in this field of research. In our opinion it would make the manuscript more complete but also more complex (and maybe less clear) which is why we would prefer to leave it as it is now.

Please indicate that the study, presumably, was assessed and provided with ethical approval from a recognized body.

This information has been added to the manuscript (see pg 11).

There is some confusion as the participants are described as being from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Turkey, but in the remained of the paper, they are treated as from the former Yugoslavia. Please clarify.

Thank you for this important comment. We modified the manuscript to be more precise in terms of the origin of participants. Also we added to the method section and the “limitations” that the sample at follow-up consisted mainly of returnees to the Former Yugoslavia.

On pg 14, what is Gmelch?

Gmelch is a researcher who proposed a classification of return motives. His approach is introduced on page 6 and we refer to it in the method section again.

Please report on the reliability and validity of the PDS, preferably with refugee populations.

References have been added.
Why was the Section I (PTSD) section of the M.I.N.I. not included?

We decided to use the PDS (and therefore did not include the PTSD-section of the M.I.N.I.) in order to be able to report on the severity of PTSD and also on possible changes over time. In the results we found that the severity did not change much over time (as there is a ceiling effect in the pre-test already) which is why we did not report on it.

Pg 15 reference is made to participants returning with family members. This is an important variable and is not looked at again?

We looked at this variable again but did not find any differences between this subgroup and those who returned without family members. What we found was an effect regarding children at school age. Thus, before return all school aged children went to school whereas after return some parents did not send there children to school. This result is important and has been reported.

The authors refer to 13 participants returning (pg 16). Were these the same as the 12 participants previously reported or different participants? This section is a bit confusing.

I am afraid I cannot reply to this comment accurately because I do not know exactly which section on page 16 the reviewer is referring to. In the section “experimental design” we are giving detailed information on the study sample. As we are aware of the confusion that could emerge we prepared figure 3 which gives an overview on the sample over time. On page 16 we reported on the living conditions after return. Thus, this section only includes those people who actually returned and not the 12 participants who dropped out of the programme and remained in Germany.

The inclusion of qualitative data is interesting in this section but it would make the results section a little clearer to have one section focused upon the quantitative data and a separate section focused upon the qualitative data. (Also include a section in the method section to indicate the inclusion of qualitative data).

The hint to include a section in the method section for the inclusion of qualitative data was very helpful. We added this information. We would prefer not to have an own section on qualitative data in the results section as we did not analyse this information further. Also we do not feel capable to do a quantitative analysis and it would exceed the limit of this manuscript. We rather intended to underline our quantitative data with this additional information and hope the reviewer can agree with this.

Under Mental Health (pg 18, line line 11, change “having” to “meeting the criteria for”

I changed this part in the manuscript.
Three lines further, change returnees consulted to “returnees reported having consulted”

_I changed this part in the manuscript._

It would be useful to compare the mental health data with other comparable studies on mental health of refugees, but this is not essential.

_We made this comparison in the discussion. We also added a comment on a comparison with prior studies on returnees. We are careful with this kind of comparison (with other refugees): One constraint is the fact that we cannot compare the mental health of returnees with that of refugees. As the manuscript shows, returnees are confronted with many additional stressors which might for example increase the risk for depression._

Pg 20, the authors report on the rates of suicidal ideation and compare their findings with the general population. Please report the incidence in the general population.

_I decided not to refer to the incidence in the general population because I realised that it is difficult to find an appropriate group for the comparison. Instead I am only mentioning the fact that the rates of suicidal ideation are elevated._

Pg 21, change “increase in PTSD” to “increase in symptoms of PTSD”.

_I changed this part in the manuscript._

A number of important points are made in this section of the discussion. Certainly the implications for policy are significant and I do appreciate the points made about the speed of processing applications for asylum.

The limitations section is comprehensive, but it could also be added, depending on the authors experience whether there is a tendency to more strongly state mental problems in the follow up interviews and whether this was taken into account and the authors are satisfied that the interviews were consistent with their assessment of informants.

_From our experience we cannot approve the assumption that returnees might be tending to state mental problems more strongly. Actually we found that mental health played a subordinate role in the entire return process, e.g. for the return agencies and the returnees themselves. Even though it was our focus, participants focussed more strongly on economic factors. Thus, if there was a tendency to state particular problems more strongly it was definitely related to their economical situation and not their mental health._

Overall, the level of English is good, however, the entire manuscript needs to be revised so that all sentences beginning with a numeral are changed to express the numeral in words, eg 47 VARP at the beginning of a sentence is changed to Forty seven....
...has been done.

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2nd Reviewer’s report
Title: Mental health of returnees from Germany following state-sponsored repatriation

While the abstract accurately conveys what has been found, neither does the title refer to the fact that the returnees are refugees nor to the results. Thus the title should be modified to include the crucial finding of worsened mental health after returning to the country of origin.

The title now is “Mental health of refugees following state-sponsored repatriation from Germany”. It includes the information that the study sample consisted of refugees. With regard to the complexity of the results we would prefer not to include the crucial findings in the title. Also we would like to keep this title in terms of neutrality.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1. General: In the whole text (including the abstract) several instruments / diagnostic manuals are abbreviated without being introduced and without references (i.e. SCID-P, CIDI, ICD-10, DSM-IV, EURHOHIS-QOL, WHOQOL-100, WHOQOL-BREF), please add this information.

This information has been added.

Introduction
2. Page 4, paragraph 1:
# State more clearly that there is a wide range of VARPs and their (financial) support.

In the introduction it says: “A wide range of federal agencies and non-governmental organisations are supported by a sizable budget in their efforts to facilitate assisted return.” I would prefer to stick with this description and not focus closer on the issue of VARP politics as this would exceed the limits of a psychological manuscript.

3. Page 7, paragraph 2:
“The current study adopted an entire set of push-pull-factors which were designed in line with these categories”.
# This sentence belongs to the Methods section.

It’s true. I moved it there.

4. Page 9, paragraph 1:
“In contrast to the studies presented above, those who returned home suffered more in terms of mental health and integration than those who remained in Sweden.”

# What do you mean with “the returnees suffered in terms of integration”? Please rephrase.

Thank you for this hint. The sentence does not make sense this way and I rephrased it.

5. Page 12, section “Participants”, first sentence:
“Participants were 47 refugees from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Turkey who had decided to voluntarily return to their countries of origin.”
# Add “living in Germany”

..has been done.

6. Page 12, section “Participants”, second paragraph:
a) “46.8% were female”
# Always use the same number of decimal places for the percentages.

I changed it.

b) “Demographic characteristics are presented in the form of descriptive statistics for groups of returnees and non-returnees in Table 1.”
# The table presents the total sample too.

That’s true. I rephrased the sentence.

Outcome measures
7. Page 14, description of PDS: Reference should follow immediately after naming the scale for the first time “The Posttraumatic Stress Diagnostic Scale (PDS, 26; German version: 21)”.

It has been moved to the right place.

Results
8. General: It is somewhat confusing, that table 2 distinguishes between Depression and Dysthymia while in the text they are always reported as affective disorders. Besides as PTSD is an anxiety disorder; A statement such as “the most frequently detected disorder was PTSD, followed by affective disorders and anxiety disorders” is irritating. The use of reporting single disorders vs. groups of disorders should be reconsidered.

This is an important hint which I simply overlooked. I modified this part.

9. Page 15, paragraph 3 and 4
“Two people had a regular income. Others ....”

# Please always indicate the percentages in both paragraphs.

10. Page 16, paragraph 2:
„while nine participants …“
# Indicate percentage.

Percentages have been forgotten for no reason. I added them to the manuscript.

11. Page 18, paragraph 2:
“In this section, we will first present results of the pre-tests (n = 47) followed by results of the follow-up (n = 25 + 8).”
# Please, explain what is meant by “(n = 25 + 8)”.

25 returnees in the country of origin plus 8 who dropped out of the program and were interviewed in Germany in the follow-up. I tried to be more precise in the manuscript.

12. Page 18, paragraph 3:
“Pre-test: Prior to return, 44% (21 returnees) were diagnosed as having at least one psychiatric disorder according to DSM-IV criteria.“
# The numbers do not correspond with those in the table. It is unclear, if the total sample is described or the sub-sample of actually returned.

I corrected the manuscript at this point. In the introduction to the result section I explained in which part of this section I am reporting on which subgroup.

13. “As shown in Table 2, the most frequently detected disorder was PTSD,…”
# According to the table in the pre-test of the most frequent disorder is depression followed by PTSD and suicidal tendencies.

I corrected the manuscript at this point.

14. „38% of the returnees…“
# It is unclear who “the returnees” are: The total sample or the sub-sample of actually returned?

See above (comment 12).

15. “But also those returnees who were not diagnosed with PTSD reported traumatic events.”
# All? Please name N (%).

…has been modified.

16. “Among the 94 traumatic events reported”
# Do you mean “94 different types of traumatic events”?

No, I mean 94 traumatic events altogether. I realize that this figure is problematic and rephrased that sentence. I hope it is clearer now.

17. “In the group of participants who returned to their country of origin (n = 25), average subjective quality of life (QoL) prior to return was m = 3.20 (SD = .69)
and \( m = 2.27 \) (SD = 1.14) following return” \# M = 2.27 and M = 3.20 (use italics)

…has been modified.

18. It would be really interesting to know if there are group differences at follow-up between those who actually returned and those who did not \# please add these statistics

There are no group differences which is what I tried to express with that sentence at the end of the QoL section in the results. I rephrased it and hope it is easier to understand now.

19. Page 20, paragraph 5:
   a) “…the most frequently diagnosed disorder in refugee populations is PTSD, followed by affective disorders and anxiety disorders”
   \# According to table 2, the most frequently diagnosed disorder is Depression
   \# As in the Results section, I would suggest not to summarize affective and anxiety disorders

   Thank you for this hint. I changed it in the manuscript.

   b) “Rates of suicidal tendency in this population are also elevated as compared with the average population.”
   \# Reference missing

   I thought about it again and could not find an appropriate reference as it is difficult to decide to which population one should compare the study sample. Therefore I modified this statement in the manuscript.

20. Page 21, last two lines-ff:
   "It would seem plausible that the fear network underlying PTSD had been formed during war experiences and was largely inhibited during ….
   \# Reference for fear network (which has not been introduced so far) is missing.

   The reference is Neuner et al., (2004) and Schauer et al. (2005) and is given at the end of the sentence. Both texts give a introduction into the model of a fear network underlying PTSD.

21. Page 24, paragraph 1:
   “With time, they became more and more dependent, apathetic, and incapable of independently organising their life up to the point that many refugees developed depression, as seen in the high diagnosis rates.”
   \# This is a hypothesis not a result from your cross-sectional data which does not allow causal statements like this.
This is true, the statement was not made careful enough. I rephrased the sentence.

22. Page 24, paragraph 1:
While this observation can not be generalized to the entire group of refugees in Germany, it most likely applies to those who spent a long period of time in exile and who did not make use of earlier opportunities to return.
# Reference missing
Reference (Laban et al., 2004) has been added.

Abbreviations
23. Some abbreviations used in the text are missing (i.e. ICD-10, WHOQOL-100, UNMIK)

The missing abbreviations have been added to this section.

Table 1
24. The formal presentation of the table is inconsistent.
a) Use the same number of decimal places for the percentages and for the p-values respectively
b) Italicize all statistical values (N)
25. “Age in y (SD) Mean” versus “Number of children M (SD)”
# Use only one format i.e. Age in years M (SD)
26. “Marital status (%)”
# Change sequence of this line with “country of origin” as it is more a sociodemographic personal characteristic of the participants.
27. Children in school (%) Yes / No / No schoolchildren
# It would be more interesting to read the exact percentages of the school aged children who are in school, i.e., if the category “no schoolchildren” would be deleted and the percentages refer only to “school aged children (%)” “in school” “not in school”
28. “Duration of stay in Germany in y (SD)”
# It would be easier to understand if the first line would be M (SD) and the second line Range: x-x

29. “Education in years Mean”
#Use M (SD)

The table has been modified following the suggestions above.

# Sort it after the interviewees personal characteristics (i.e. after “age”)

Sorry, I have to admit that I do not understand this comment.

30. Add “Notes” at the bottom of the table explaining the abbreviations used.

I have to excuse again: Which notes should I add? There are no abbreviations used in the table with which the reader is not familiar. Or are you referring to the abbreviations for statistical values???
Table 2
31. The presentation of the table is inconsistent.
a) Use the same number of decimal places for the percentages and for the p-values respectively
b) Not returned post (n = 8)
# Adapt format
*Table has been modified.*

32. As the text is ordered by pre-test and follow-up, the following order of the columns would be easier to read: Total pre (n = 47), Returned, pre (n = 25), Not returned pre (n = 8), Returned post, (n = 25), Not returned post (n = 8)

*I agree that the suggested order would be one opportunity to read the table. From another perspective the changes over time can be seen from the table more easily when the two columns (pre and post) of each group are next to one another. There is no problem in changing the order if it is necessary but I would prefer the order it has now.*

33. Add “Notes” at the bottom of the table explaining the abbreviations used.

*Please see answer to comment no. 30.*

Figure 1
34. Is this figure really is necessary? It somehow doubles the text on page 7, last paragraph and does clarify the introduced model. Besides the figure is unclear. The box “Individual return decision” is on the same level as all other boxes containing factors determining the decision. In fact the box “Individual return decision” is however result of these factors. If the figure is retained, this should be brought out more clearly.

*I appreciated this comment and thought about the whole paragraph describing Figure 1. I came to the conclusion not only to delete the figure but the paragraph as well.*

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

Abstract
35. “It is noteworthy that the majority returned under pressure from immigration authorities”
# Even here, the authors could emphasize more that the so called voluntary return took place under substantial pressure.

*As argued earlier on, in this context we would like to present our findings and conclusions without becoming more political than necessary.*

Introduction
36. Page 12, section “Participants”, second paragraph:
„24% of the returnees“ up to “was probably also related to their age”
# Results are insignificant and double results presented in table 1. Therefore this
We deleted it.

Discussion
37. Page 21, paragraph 2:

“Upon returning, only a small number of returnees received psychiatric treatment and none consulted a psychotherapist. Before returning, half of the group of returnees had consulted a therapist on a regular basis.”
# Change order of these two sentences

We changed the order.

Figure 2
38. In my opinion unnecessary.

We think it helps to understand the model.