Reviewer’s report

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

Version: 1 Date: 18 July 2008

Reviewer: Julia Mueller

Reviewer’s report:

General
Aim of the study was to examine the mental health status of refugees returning to their home country after years of exile, the circumstances under which they chose to return, as well as post-return factors. The authors assessed 47 participants taking part in Voluntary Assisted Return Programmes before they left Germany using questionnaires and interviews. 33 participants were interviewed nine months after returning to their country of origin. High prevalence rates of psychiatric illness were found prior to returning. After returning, this rate doubled. The living situation in Germany, the disposition to return, and mental health were correlated. Two thirds of the participants, did not voluntary decide to leave Germany.

The questions posed by the authors are well defined. The methods used are appropriate and well described, the data are sound. The manuscript adheres to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition. Discussion and conclusions are well balanced and adequately supported by the data; limitations of the work are clearly stated. The authors also clearly do acknowledge any work upon which they are building. 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 writing is acceptable.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

NONE

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

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.

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.

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”

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

  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.

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)”.

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.

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


10. Page 16, paragraph 2:

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while nine participants …
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# Indicate percentage.

11. Page 18, paragraph 2:

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

12. Page 18, paragraph 3:

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“Pre-test: Prior to return, 44% (21 returnees) were diagnosed as having at least one psychiatric disorder according to DSM-IV criteria."
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# 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.

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.

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

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

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

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)

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

Discussion

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

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.

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.

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

Abbreviations

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

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)
# Sort it after the interviewees personal characteristics (i.e. after “age”)
30. Add “Notes” at the bottom of the table explaining the abbreviations used.

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

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.

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.

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 text might be deleted.

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

Figure 2
38. In my opinion unnecessary.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.