Author's response to reviews

Title: Exposures to war-related traumatic events and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms among displaced Darfuri female university students: An exploratory study

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Title: Exposures to war-related traumatic events and post-traumatic stress disorder among displaced Darfuri female university students: An exploratory study

This manuscript refers to the assessment of psychopathological consequences in a small sample of selected female students from Darfur. Although it is important to assess such consequences I have some major concerns referring to the methods of assessment.

Dear Professor Ehlert,

We would like to thank you for your remark on the importance of assessing the consequences of war-related trauma. We are also grateful for your careful review of our manuscript so and for your insightful suggestions. We hope that our responses clarify the issues raised.

Overall comment: The authors should not use the phrase prevalence since they did not choose a representative sample of Darfuri female university students.

>>> The prevalence refers only within AUW students. Throughout the manuscript it has been amended to reflect this comment.

Title and Abstract: The authors should change the title of their manuscript and the abstract of the manuscript due to the fact that they did not assess diagnoses via interviews but simply assessed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) via questionnaire.

>>> The Title has been changed to reflect this comment: “Exposures to war-related traumatic events and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms among displaced Darfuri female university students: An exploratory study”

>>> The abstract has been changed to reflect your comment.

Background: With the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of up to three million Darfuris, the increasingly complex existing crisis in Darfur has warranted the need to investigate the war-related severity and current mental health levels amongst its civilian population. The purpose of this study is to investigate the association between war-related exposures and assess post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among a sample of Darfuri female university students at Ahfad University for Women (AUW) in Omdurman city.

Methods: An exploratory cross-sectional study among a representative sample of Darfuri female university students at AUW (N = 123) was conducted in February 2010. Using an adapted version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) war-related exposures and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms were assessed. Means and standard deviations illustrated the experiential severity of war exposure dimensions and PTSD symptom sub-scales, while Pearson correlation tested for the strength of association between dimensions of war exposures and PTSD symptom sub-scales.

Results: Approximately 42% of the Darfuri participants reported being displaced and 54% have experienced war-related traumatic exposures either as victims or as witnesses (M=28, SD=14.24, range 0 – 40 events). Also, there was a strong association between the experiential dimension of war-related trauma exposures and the full symptom of PTSD. Moreover, the refugee-specific self-perception of functioning sub-scale within the PTSD measurement scored a mean of 3.2 (SD=.56), well above the 2.0 cut-off.
Conclusions: This study provides evidence for a relationship between traumatic war-related exposures and prevalence of PTSD symptomology among AUW Darfuri female students. Findings are discussed in terms of AUW counseling service improvement.

Page 3, 2nd paragraph, introduction section: The paragraph on reasons for PTSD is related too narrow to war experiences and traumas. Should be described in a broader context (life threatening circumstances)

>>> This study was undertaken as part of a larger ongoing mixed methods design study. The main aim of the present study was to highlight possible PTSD symptomology and substantiate the preceding study’s interviews with Darfuri female students and other key informant’s information in relation to war-related traumatic events on a larger scale, using a validated tool to measure war-related traumatic events and PTSD symptomology within the Sudanese context (Robert et al., 2007). Within this context, the comment has been addressed as follows:

“The findings in a preceding qualitative study (Badri, et al., in print) gave an expanded view of war related traumatic exposures within this sample of AUW Darfuri female students. Daily confrontations with academic challenges, life hassles, urban-cultural clashes and the struggles of their journey to reach Omdurman city have been chronicled to provide a broader context of their current distress. The study also explored their habitual coping strategies used to deal with these stressors.”

Page 4, 2nd paragraph, introduction section: “Given the momentum that the present Darfuri crisis is taking,” this phrase is unclear and should be rewritten. Same to “measure PTSD amongst a sample” (see comment above); the expression “PTSD symptoms” should be used.

>>> The expression “PTSD symptoms” has been included throughout the revised manuscript. The text has been rewritten to read:

“AUW strives to act in the best interest of its students, notwithstanding, those who have been burdened by the exposure of war atrocities, which include students from South Sudan, Abyei, the Eastern region and Darfur. We believe that these students have already been stigmatized as a direct result of their exposure to war experiences. It is under this premise that this problem-focused study anticipates to disseminate its findings not only to further enhance the capability of AUW counseling office to serve the needs of its traumatized population, but also to bring awareness, broaden understanding, increase knowledge, and empathy to AUW staff and fellow students. In fact, previous research on Darfuri AUW students (Badri et al., in press) and the results of this study has initiated the development of a specific trauma training centre for all traumatized students who need counseling and has started a Masters program within the School of Psychology for training of trauma counselors in the Nation”.

Page 5, 1st paragraph, participants: It should be written that female students were assessed only and at least one reason should be given for that decision.

>>> Female was added, and the text reads:
“Ahfad University for Women (AUW) is an all female university, hence the name, and is the only one in Sudan. The exclusivity of investigating a female sector of the Sudanese society, addresses an empirical gap in relation to knowing about their mental health, and disseminating it findings in the hopes of serving the research community by providing a basis for comparison with other Sudanese undergraduate populations and potentially for cross-cultural comparison research between and within different Sudanese samples in mental health issues.”

Page 7 f., methods section: “A total of 49 war-related trauma items (20 Darfuri items added onto the existing 29 items) made up Part I of the Darfuri HTQ version”. Besides translation and back-translation, did the authors assess any statistical analyses to validate the questionnaire? What about any checks of reliability? Although it seems to be difficult to translate a questionnaire into foreign languages, it seems to be really necessary to prepare a careful statistical background for the new questionnaire to avoid miss-calculations of subjects potentially suffering from PTSD symptoms.

>>> The translation procedures are pre-requisites for instrument validation and reliability. However, the text now reads:

“The HTQ has been validated and tested for reliability within the Sudan context (Roberts, et al., 2009) and Arab contexts (Shoeb, et al., 2007). However, as stressed by Mollica and colleagues (1998), each new war-affected population needs to develop a different HTQ. The adaptation of Part I of the HTQ began by undertaking in-depth interviews with twenty AUW Darfuri female undergraduate students in December 2009 (Badri et al, in press). A core checklist of 20 context specific war-related experiences was compiled from this reference group of students, accurately describing common acts of violence, combat situations and other war-related traumatic events. These events were: ‘forced to hide’, ‘constant insecurity’, ‘movement in search of shelter’, ‘forced separation from family’, ‘distance from family’, ‘fleeing/running away’, ‘innocent victims being killed’, ‘finding dead bodies and burying them’, ‘living in displaced camps’, ‘burning of home’, ‘not having a home’, ‘owning nothing’, ‘complete change of life’, ‘aerial bombardment’, ‘hearing of atrocities’, ‘loss of health’, ‘increased physical ailments’, ‘suddenly gone missing’, ‘parentless children/teenagers’, and ‘seeing dead bodies’ (Badri et al., in print). A further twenty items were selected from two existing versions of the HTQ: Indochinese and the Japanese (Mollica et al., 1992; Mollica et al., 1995). These items were added because they were cited by the reference group of Darfuri students and reflected important contextual details. Based on Flaherty et al. (1998) a five step validation process for cross-cultural equivalence was administered to the resultant forty item section. Fifteen Darfuri students matched for age, ethnicity, and locale pre-tested this section. No item was misunderstood or needed further restructuring. A total of 40 war-related trauma items (20 Darfuri items added onto the existing 20 items) made up Part I of the Darfuri HTQ version.

In accordance with the guidelines set forth by the HTQ, participants were presented with this list of forty potentially traumatic war-related events and were requested to endorse individual events according to four options (E = experienced, W = witnessed, H = heard about, or N = "no"). Fox and Tang (2000) noted that the ‘experience’ option reflected a person’s direct
exposure to war-related trauma. However, greater trauma severity can also be highlighted by proximity to the event as is represented by the ‘witnessed’ option. Therefore, the present study focused on the two experiential levels of the HTQ, i.e., ‘experience’ and ‘witness’, to reflect the intensity and severity of war-related traumatic events.

Part IV was the HTQ screening checklist for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. The first 16 items measure PTSD according to the DSM-IV criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 1994); these remained the same. Only one of the two dissociative symptom items was omitted: ‘feeling as if you are split into two and one of you is watching what the other is doing’ because this was misunderstood repeatedly by the pre-test group and was not endorsed by the reference group (Mollica et al., 1992; Shoeb et al., 2007). The other dissociative symptom item; ‘finding out or being told that you have done something that you cannot remember’, remained. This made a total of 17 PTSD items based on the DSM-IV criteria.

In addition, Part IV focused on a formulating contextually relevant refugee-specific symptom checklist by incorporating culturally identifiable idioms of distress. Based on the interviews previously conducted with the reference group, twenty-two most commonly mentioned, culturally and contextually verifiable stressors were identified. These included: ‘feeling miserable’, ‘feeling hopeless’, ‘only feeling normal among other Darfuris who also suffered the same sort of trauma’, ‘feeling no trust in others’, ‘feeling humiliated by your experiences’ and ‘spending time thinking about why these events happened to you’. An additional seven items were derived from the Japanese version of the refugee-specific symptoms checklist, which included: ‘feeling as if you are going crazy’, ‘feeling isolated because of loss of relationships with family’, ‘feeling overly dependant on others’, and ‘feeling discriminated against because of loss of home’. Twenty-nine items were pre-tested to ensure that the concepts reflected participants’ understandings. None of the pre-testers suggested that any modifications were required. Cronbach’s alphas attained good internal reliability statistics for the measurement PTSD symptom sub-scales (re-experiencing (r=.815); avoidance and numbing (r=.896); psychological arousal (r=.899) and with refugee specific self-perception of functioning (r=.860). Participants were asked to mark 1 for ‘not at all’, 2 ‘a little’, 3 ‘quite a bit’, and 4 ‘extremely’ for the resultant number of 46 items on the Darfuri version of Part IV of the HTQ.

Based on the guidelines set forth by Flaherty et al. 1988 and Guillemin et al. 1993 the translation and adaptation team undertook the task of translating the HTQ Darfuri version from English to classical Arabic (as opposed to colloquial Sudanese Arabic, as not all Darfuris speak the same dialect while all students are educated and can efficiently read and understand classical Arabic). Semantic equivalence was established using a bilingual probe technique to verify linguistic accuracy and meaning to the original English text. Back-translation of the Arabic version, and pre-testing among a group of fifteen AUW Darfuri students not in the original sample of this study but representing similar ethno-demographic characteristics showed high concordance with their understanding of the HTQ Darfuri version and stated that modifications were unnecessary.”

Page 11 f., results section: “About two-thirds of the students…” From the total sample or those who experienced trauma. Numbers should be given additionally.
About two-thirds (67%) of the students who have experienced trauma have observed combat situations as they witnessed someone being killed, have seen dead bodies, and witnessed beatings to head and body.

Page 12, results section: As stated above, the following phrase is incorrect: “Prevalence for post-traumatic stress disorder”.

The phrase has been amended to read: “Prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms amongst Darfuri AUW female students”