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

Authors:

Alia Badri (aliabadri@hotmail.com)
H.W. van den Bourne (h.vdbourne@qvo.unimaas.nl)
Rik Crutzen (rik.crutzen@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

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

Overall a well written, well structured manuscript with a lot of detail on used methodology. However, there are concerns which I think ought to be addressed in a revised next version.

Dear Professor Sondrop,

We are very thankful for the effort in reviewing our manuscript so diligently and appreciative to read that you consider this manuscript well written in terms of methodology. We hope that our responses in regards to ethical considerations clarify the issues raised.

1. The ethical dimension. Although the study received ethical clearance from the Ahfad University for Women (AUW) in the Sudan, I still have some ethical concerns related to the study.
- While individual confidentiality may be achieved, the group of participants can be easily identified and could be easily stigmatised by publication of this report.
Virtually all students within AUW from Darfur were included in the study and hence the findings, e.g. high rates of PTSD and all the underlying determinants, apply to that particular group. What does it mean that this group ('all students from Darfur) can then easily be seen as 'almost all traumatised' in the eyes of, for instance, fellow students or staff?
- This also links to the rationale of doing the study: addressing an empirical gap of a historically understudied group of citizens, in combination with the rather enigmatic statement on the 'momentum that the present Darfuri crisis is taking'. The findings can only apply to this very specific group of study participants and will not be in anyway generalisable. So, it would feel better if the study would have been part of a concern for this group of women and geared towards some form of evidence based assistance, 'action research'.

>>> The ethical issues that you have raised have been precisely the initial concerns raised by the AUW ethics committee during our presentation to the committee in February 2010. We followed the code of ethics and ethical standards according to the British Psychological Society to ensure participant protection from all foreseeable psychological risks: distress and fears due to questionnaire items were minimized by conveying that there was counseling and debriefing if and when needed. To allay their feelings of deception and mistrust, student participants were ensured that confidentiality and anonymity was never breached; and they had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and their data destroyed. Student participants were told about the aims and procedures of the study before actual commencement of data collection. More importantly, they were informed of the purpose of the study, including results dissemination and publication in international journals. This required informed consent: none of the student participants dropped out of the study. Furthermore, 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 print) 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. We believe that we have a moral responsibility to help protect these future Sudanese mothers from any more harm.

We put it to the committee that we are aware of the role that ethical issues play in guiding/directing our behaviors as mental health practitioners and researchers amongst this group of students. In the eyes of the AUW ethics committee these have been adequately addressed and these precise concerns have been dealt with.

The fact that we studied one sector of the general population (university students) and a single gender in one private university may limit the generalisability of the results. However, it is the uniqueness of the sample in and of itself that makes for the rationale of undertaking the study: ethnic diversity and cultural richness of Darfuri undergraduate female students having gone through war exposures and the potential for mental health problems. Insofar as addressing the empirical gap, this study may be the first of its kind to investigate exclusively a female sector of the Sudanese society in relation to mental health, and disseminating it findings. Also, this study is hoped to serve 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.

-Since all authors give the Maastricht University as their affiliation, one would expect ethical clearance from that institute as well, next to that of AUW.

-Why are addresses being noted?

>>> The principal researcher is a lecturer at AUW, seconded to carry out this research project at Maastricht University as part of her PhD-training; also as the study was undertaken at Ahfad University for Women amongst AUW students, ethical clearance from the AUW ethics committee was requested by Maastricht University before commencement of the study. As the study did not take place under the responsibility of Maastricht University or one of its research institutes, the Maastricht University ethics committee’s position is that it has no role in the ethical clearance process, except to make sure that the proposed PhD-study has been approved by an accepted Ethics committee.

In relation to the comment on ‘addresses’, the questionnaire asked the student participants for locale within Khartoum State, not their precise addresses. That is to say, whether they currently live in Omdurman city or Khartoum city or Bahri city: the wording of ‘address’ is misleading and incorrect, this has been amended.
2. Information about the study population. The background section claims that the study participants ‘reflect the ongoing Darfuri war, and represents those having fled IDP camps and are now trying to cope and adjust as students in another part of the Sudan’. But what is it that brought these women to come and study in Omdurman? They come from Darfur, where they have been subjected to lots of horror and loss a huge numbers of family members. What happened that they then left Darfur to study in Omdurman? Who takes care of them? What about their social security at this stage in life? This seems a major determinant influencing both the study findings as well as possible interventions.

>>> Rightfully commented, we would like to clarify by the following:

In a preceding study (Badri, et al., in press) the authors chose a phenomenological analysis to qualitatively describe the personal accounts of 20 female Darfuri students on traumatic and war experiences, daily life hassles, urban-cultural and academic challenges as well as on their coping strategies to deal with these stressors. The findings gave insight into a high number of war-related experiences illustrated by quotations of the students’ personal accounts and their confrontation with hassles related to their relocation to Omdurman city and their life at AUW. The research chronicles their transportation struggles as they find the means to travel to Omdurman in their pursuance of their education. Also, it highlights that mainly the more economically secure families, who had relatives in Omdurman city, and students who have heard about AUW were more inclined to make the journey to AUW and were motivated by their parents to do so. Furthermore, students were asked about the reasons behind choosing AUW as opposed to any other university. Their responses included that AUW has a nationally acclaimed reputation of having a stable, uninterrupted academic calendar; its medium of instruction is in English; and its quality of education makes its graduates highly demanded in the labor market; and its Darfuri students association is known to care for and mentor new intakes. Also, AUW provides Darfuri students and others from poor and disadvantaged regions with a full scholarship which includes tuition fees and provides housing. This creates educational opportunities for students from Darfur otherwise unavailable to them. Furthermore, AUW is a single gender institute, emphasizing women as change agents and in leadership roles, which appeals to most parents, Darfuri parents included. Finally Darfuri parents and those living outside Khartoum State view AUW as a safe and secure environment for their daughters to be in especially as they are so far away from their direct supervision.

3. There is very little discussion on what it means to find a high rate of PTSD among these women, apart from an elaboration that the group therefore urgently needs ‘psychological assistance’, or, further on in the manuscript, ‘urgent psychosocial intervention’. The usual issues like applicability of PTSD and its measurement instrument in this kind of settings should at least be raised (without being able to give a definite answer, as seen in other literature). The same applies as to the ‘logic’ of (still) suffering from PTSD symptoms in view of the range of atrocities these women have experienced. And, again, since we don't know the current situation, one can also not tell if forms of appropriate psycho-social support may not already be in place.

>>> In line with this comment the Discussion section has been amended to read:
This study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first endeavour to describe and quantify war-related traumatic exposures and to assess the severity of PTSD symptomology amongst a sample of displaced Darfuri female university students. The experiential level by which war exposures were measured revealed that approximately 54% of the current participants experienced an echelon of severity associated with multiple types of exposures, including combat situations (witnessing someone being beaten or killed), material loss (burning or confiscation of home and possessions), family loss (imprisonment or kidnapped), and displacement (fleeing to escape aerial bombardment and suffering unhygienic camp conditions) related traumatic events. Consistent with prior research concerning Sudanese experiences of war-related traumatic events (Roberts, et al, 2009; Neuner et al, 2004; Karunakara et al, 2004; Hamid and Musa, 2010; Rasmussen et al., 2010), this study indicates that even after a lapse of time, war-related traumatic events are ingrained in their memories, and are evident by the high incidences within each war-related dimension.

The implications, while consistent with other Sudanese samples (Hamid and Musa, 2010; Roberts, et al, 2010; Rasmussen and Annan, 2009; Neuner, et al., 2004), seem more grave since the severity of war-related trauma is that which threatens the lives and safety of family members and close relatives. Traumatic loss and separation from parents and family members, displacement from home and village, and the exposures to combat situations provoked the high prevalence of PTSD symptomology. Furthermore, the cruel treatment or disappearance of family members is not only strongly related to the PTSD DSM-IV criteria, but also strongly associated with the refugee specific self-perception of functioning sub-scale of PTSD symptomology. More significantly, are the feelings of isolation, discrimination, and humiliation, survival guilt and shame, which may explain the emotional intensity that these Darfuris are burdened with as a direct association with family loss.

These relationships underlie a strong cultural and gender component of psychosocial functioning that is implied by these women’s continuous endorsement of family loss highlighting the family as a social structural support system: the loss of family is the loss of normality; rendering these young Darfuri women vulnerable, intimidated, and isolated, without identity when family disintegration occurs on a large scale (Morgos, Worden & Gupta 2008; Karunakara et al., 2004).

Affected by their exposures to war-related traumatic events and their current levels of PTSD symptoms, the data obtained from this sample suggests that approximately 89% endorsed items relating to the avoidance sub-scale. However, avoidance behaviors, thoughts, feelings or activities need not necessarily be maladaptive responses to trauma. Several research has argued that PTSD avoidance sub-scale may in fact be effective in reducing the disturbing memory which is a therapeutic objective in many forms of psychological interventions (Sarraj, et al, 1996; Kagee, 2005). Their ability to avoid or numb emotions that remind them of their trauma may suggest a degree of compartmentalization (Saltzman, Pynoos, Layne, et al., 2001) of their responses to trauma: PTSD symptoms may occur which does not undo the ongoing suffering that the exposures have created, but may be obscured by more immediate and current concerns of daily life stressors, such as financial worries, urban-cultural adaptation and academic challenges, (Badri et al, in print).

Consistent with other Darfuri experiences of war traumas and displacement stressors (Rasmussen, et al., 2010), the findings from the data of these Darfuri participants allude to
the complexity of integrating the human response to war-related traumatic exposure and the experience of PTSD symptoms with current life stressors, while also not interfering with life as an undergraduate student can be claimed in their journey to Omdurman, entering university and pursuing their academic goals (Badri, et al., in print). The severity with which the current Darfuri women have lived through and been traumatized by war exposures demonstrates an unfortunate reality. However, the application of an appropriate psychosocial intervention aimed at ameliorating PTSD may be well placed within the existing AUW counseling center. Re-training of AUW counselors within the realm of war-related trauma may provide significant skills needed in buffering against potential stigmatization associated with war exposures and PTSD. Furthermore, teaching appropriate coping strategies, training in psycho-education (Betancourt, 2005), and community mentored development activities, including, peer and social support groups counseling sessions (Farwell, 2001), are some ways that have been shown to relieve the burden of mental health within the public health domain. Moreover, research among Sudanese refugees in Canada seem to suggest a process of cultural adjustment whereby psychological and social resources are met based on traditional coping strategies and customary social support networks (Simich, Este, & Hamilton, 2010). Also, Meffert and Marmar (2009) found a culturally informed version of Interpersonal Therapy (IPT) to be effective in the treatment of PTSD and depression among Darfuri refugees in Cairo (Meffert & Marmar, 2009).

Further investigation is required to discover the best combination of these approaches that can be successfully integrated as a model of psycho-social intervention which provides support and counseling amongst this population of Darfuri female undergraduates.

A few minor comments:
4. Page seven: mind the typo in 'finding dead bodies and buying them'
>>> We have amended the typo buying to burying.

5. There seems to be a discrepancy between the mentioned overall '49 war-related traumatic events' and the listings under the 4 dimensions, which only add up to 40 items.
>>> We have amended the typo forty-nine war related traumatic events to 40 items.