Mechanisms underlying the impact of family separation on the mental health of refugees
Children, Migration and the Right to Health Conference, 2019

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Family separation impacts on mental health

- Depression (Schweitzer et al., 2006; Nickerson et al., 2010; Steel et al., 2002, Miller et al., 2017)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Nickerson et al, 2010, Miller et al., 2017, Chung et al., 2018)
- Disability (Nickerson et al., 2010)
- Reduced quality of life (Miller et al., 2017)
- Sadness, Worry, Guilt, Helplessness, Low energy, Insecurity (Oxfam/Refugee Council UK, 2018)

“This house is safe, but I don’t feel safe because my children are not safe over there”

Family separation impacts on *settlement*

- Reluctance to settle
- Difficulty establishing self without familial references
- Sense of foreshortened future
- Increased burden/changed roles/family expectations
- Cultural disruption
- Cognitive effects (e.g. concentration, sleep), difficulties learning new skills

“When I think of my children...I’m doing my best but I can’t fully concentrate on anything I do.”

Why is separation so harmful?

- **Worry**
  - Fear for safety of separated family members
  - Guilt, powerlessness, distress & uncertainty

- **Social**
  - Low support, additional burden and new roles
  - Unmet emotional needs, no buffering effect to assist with stress coping

- **Economic burdens**
  - Remittances and pressure to support separated family

- **Cultural**
  - Collectivistic self-representation places high value on family cohesion – central to self-identity
  - Reduced continuity of cultural practices
Outstanding questions

- Does family separation uniquely impact on mental health compared to other known determinants (e.g. trauma exposure)?
- What are the key processes or mechanisms that underpin the harmful effects of family separation on mental health?
Refugee Adjustment Study (RAS)

- Longitudinal investigation of changes in refugee and asylum-seeker mental health over time
- Funded by an ARC Linkage Grant
- Partnership between
  - Refugee Trauma and Recovery Program, UNSW
  - Australian Red Cross
  - Settlement Services International
  - Phoenix Australia, University of Melbourne
- First study to longitudinally compare refugees with secure & insecure visa status

AIMS:

- To investigate changes in the mental health and functioning of refugees over time
- To better understand the factors that contribute to healthy settlement
- Enhance support for refugees throughout their settlement journey
Participants in the RAS

- Asylum-seeker or refugee background
- Arrived in Australia after January 2011
- Over 18 years of age
- Complete a survey in English, Arabic, Farsi or Tamil (predominantly online or 8% paper version)
- Not living in a detention centre/processing facility
Participant-Focused Approach

- Developed methods with Community Advisory board, refugee groups and refugee service partners and providers
- Approved by UNSW, Human Research Ethics Committee (HC14106)
- Participants provide informed consent and are free to withdraw without penalty
- Participants are reimbursed for their time
- Regular communication with participants via study newsletters about study developments, reminder postcards and phone calls (including referrals to services etc) in language
RAS Methodology

- Participants complete survey every 6 months, **5 times** in total
- Receive $25 gift voucher at each completion
- First time-point closed Jan 2018
- **Number of participants: 1,085**
- Retention rate at subsequent time-points > 90%
RAS Methodology

- Trauma Exposure
- Psychological Processes
- Mental Health & Functioning
- Living Difficulties
- Social Factors
Family Separation in the RAS (N=1085)

- 77% All or some family in Australia
- 23% No family in Australia
Family Separation by Visa Status

**NO FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA**
- Secure: 49%
- Insecure: 51%

**ALL/SOME FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA**
- Secure: 85%
- Insecure: 15%
Demographics of Separated Participants

Gender

NO FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA
- Male: 66%
- Female: 34%

ALL/SOME FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA
- Male: 54%
- Female: 46%

Language

NO FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA
- Arabic: 39%
- Farsi: 15%
- English: 14%
- Tamil: 15%

ALL/SOME FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA
- Arabic: 77%
- Farsi: 8%
- English: 13%
- Tamil: 2%
Demographics of Separated Participants

Children
- NO FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA: 46% Have Children, 54% No Children
- ALL/SOME FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA: 31% Have Children, 70% No Children

Marital status
- NO FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA: 44% Married/Defacto, 56% Not Married
- ALL/SOME FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA: 24% Married/Defacto, 76% Not Married
Does family separation uniquely impact on mental health?
Family Separation & Past Experiences

Mean number of traumatic events

Total Trauma

No Family in Australia: 6.31
All/Some family in Australia: 3.22

*Significance tests: p < .05, above the effects of visa security
Family Separation & Settlement Experiences

Post-migration Living Difficulties

Number of significant living difficulties

No Family in Australia

All/Some family in Australia

12.6

6.76

*Significance tests: p < .05 after controlling for visa security & trauma exposure
## Family Separation & Mental Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PTSD symptoms</th>
<th>Depression symptoms</th>
<th>Disability symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Trauma reminders, avoidance, hyperarousal, negative mood)</td>
<td>(Sadness, poor appetite, low energy, difficulty concentrating)</td>
<td>(Daily physical, self-care, work-related, social activities)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Age**
- **Female gender**
- **Trauma exposure**
- **Family separation**

- **Age**
- **Female gender**
- **Family separation**
Why is family separation so harmful to mental health?
Effect of family separation on MH

Past trauma

Worry about family

Fear for future

Unable to return home; fear visa will never be resolved

Isolation, loneliness, discrimination

Social difficulties

Economic difficulties

Cultural factors: self-identity

Collectivism – self-identity connected to others, family cohesion

Individualism – independent self-identity

Worry about family back at home or in detention

Age Sex

Difficulties obtaining employment, housing, money
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Trauma</th>
<th>IND</th>
<th>COL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Age
Sex
Trauma

IND
COL

Depression symptoms
PTSD symptoms
Disability
Full Model tested
Are these pathways different in separated compared to non-separated refugees?

- Conducted a multi-group path analysis model with indirect effects
- Compare the pathways for participants who are separated from all their family vs not-separated
- Model fit statistics are good:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Stats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>$\chi^2(12) = 38.962, \ p=.0001$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative fit index (CFI)</td>
<td>0.993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tucker-Lewis index (TLI)</td>
<td>0.934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)</td>
<td>0.023</td>
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</table>
Not separated from family model
Discussion of the findings

- In those separated from family:
  - Trauma exposure & post-migration stress is greater, as well as exposure to a range of specific traumatic events such as torture, sexual violence and witnessing the murder of a loved one.
  - Family separation linked to worse PTSD/depression symptoms (not reduced functioning)

- Reinforces existing research in a larger and culturally diverse sample.
Discussion of the findings

- Cultural differences in self-identity may be an important mechanism underlying why family separation negatively impacts on mental health.
  - Higher levels of collectivism (sense of self inextricably linked with others & strong sense of family cohesion) associated with decreased mental health and functioning via social-related difficulties in separated group.
    - Absence of family to buffer social stress and adjustment
    - Collectivism associated with depression via economic-related difficulties in non-separated group
      - Additional burden of providing for family
      - Different to previous qualitative findings that fear or worry-related difficulties predominantly underscore the effect of family separation on well-being

- Findings highlight the importance of family reunification for the mental health of refugees and migrants, particularly from collectivistic cultural groups.
Future questions

- How does family separation affect mental health over time or in the long-term?
- What is the impact of restoring family links or family reunification?
- What affect does being separated from family have in a larger and culturally diverse sample?
- What is the impact of separation from missing family members or family in long-term detention?
- How can research be used to enhance support strategies for those separated from family?
Acknowledgements

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