

Reflections on researching Sudanese mothers parenting teenagers

Dr Meredith Levi

Centre for Developmental Psychiatry
and Psychology, Monash University

Overview

- Background, rationale and research questions
- Method:
 - Methodological approach
 - Sampling and obstacles to recruitment
 - Sample characteristics
 - Process issues
 - Consent
 - Research with traumatised and vulnerable participants
 - Boundaries



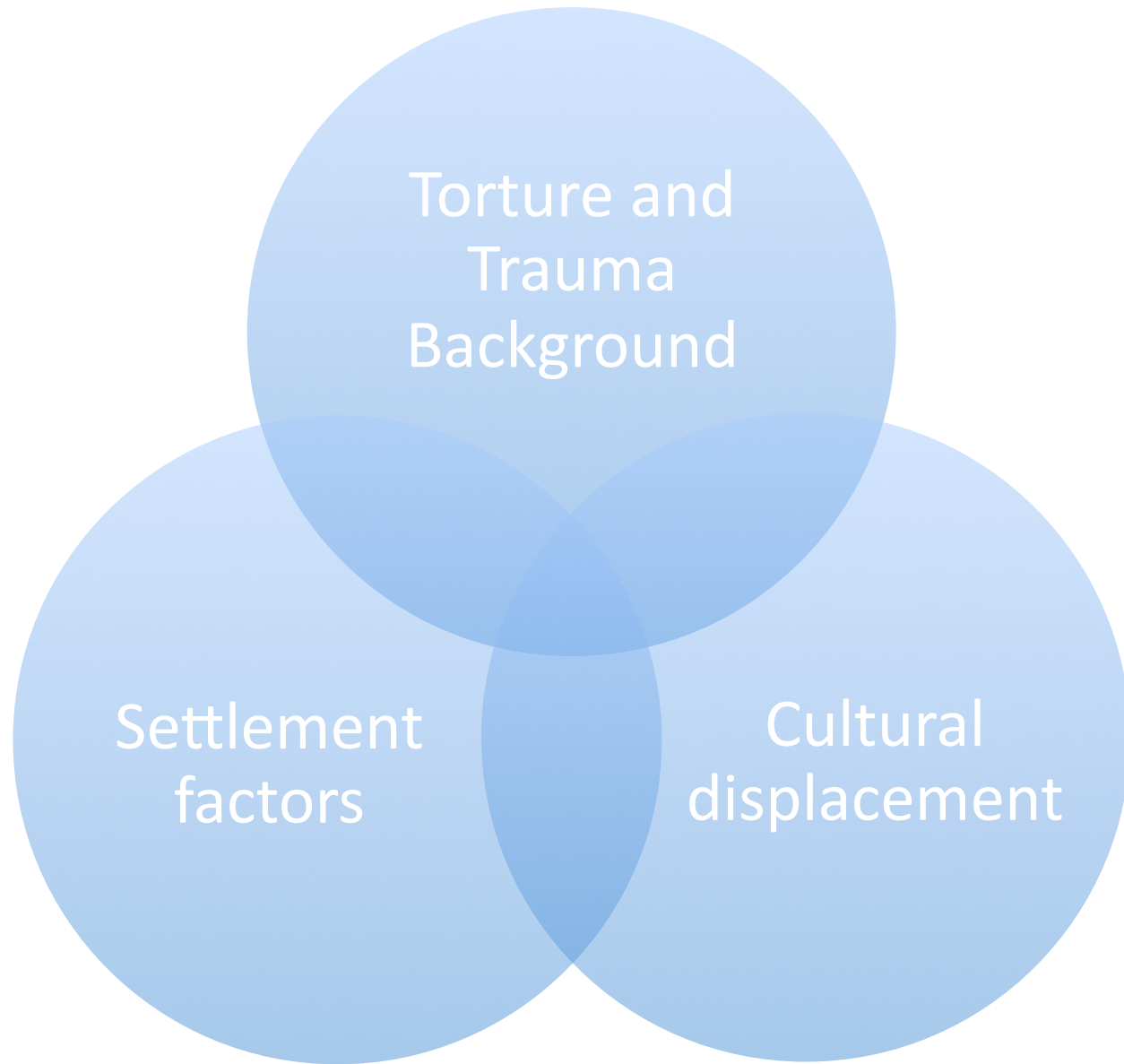
Sudan:

- Independence 1956
- War, drought, famine
- North/South Civil War: 1956-72 & 1983-2005;
- Peace agreement: 2005
- Referendum plan: 2011
- Darfur conflict: 2003+



Sudanese Australians:

- Approx 23,000
- Humanitarian entrants
- Age: Approx 62% are < 25 years of age
- Religion: 83% Christian, 13% Muslim, 5% other
- State: 36% VIC, 24% NSW, 14% QLD, 26% other
- Families headed by sole parents (mothers)



Torture and
Trauma
Background

Settlement
factors

Cultural
displacement

Research questions

- The meaning of being a mother in Sudan versus the meaning of mothering in Australia
- What contributed to a mother doing well in resettlement?
- What strategies did they use to 're-make' their lives in Australia with their children?

Method

Sampling and recruitment

- Consultation with members of Sudanese community, people who worked with refugee agencies, establishing rigour
- Time in 'field' – building trust and familiarity
- Maximum variation
- Criteria: Sudanese refugee women, humanitarian entrants, at least 1 adolescent child
- Sources: Community programs in different areas, Sudanese community associations, snowball

Materials and design

- Semi-structured /in-depth interviews,
- 1 and a half hours approx. (Often in homes, sometimes community centres)

Data analysis

- Thematic analysis – common themes
- Case studies – explored 2 women's narratives and contexts in depth

Why Qualitative methods?

- Flexible, dynamic and practical
- Captures subjective accounts
- Gives 'voice' to participants and allows *them* to identify their most salient issues

Sampling: Obstacles to recruitment

- Trust and rapport essential but difficult
- Lacking cultural precedent for research

“We are not very happy with you people. You keep taking our children away.”
- Mothers inaccessible and overburdened
- What worked? Time (flexible deadlines), patience, flexibility, preparedness and persistence!

Sampling: Obstacles to recruitment

- “What’s in it for them?”
- What makes it worthwhile to participate in this kind of research?

Sample Characteristics

- Age range: 33-62yrs
- No. of children: 4-9; average 6
- Date of arrival in Aust: 1998-2007
- Exit countries: Kenya, Egypt, & Yemen
- Religion: 17 Christians, 1 Muslim
- Main study (N = 18)
- Key informants (N=2)
- Marital status: 4 women had husband present, others separated either temporarily or permanently (many unsure), several widowed

Consent: “Ok, but if we don’t want to say, we don’t have to say”

- Refugees experiences of human rights violations can lead to a mistrust of procedures and forms that require disclosure of personal information and signatures (Omidian, 2000)
- Low literacy levels and lack of familiarity
- Translation and explanation, are they enough?
- What strategies worked?

Vulnerable and traumatised participants

- Qualitative research as able to empower participant through self-expression (Rice & Ezzy, 1999)

“When I say that to you, it is like putting something heavy down. Otherwise it is very hard for me. Like when I [talk to you], ...like when someone takes care, ...something heavy, when you put it down – like me now, I put that down to you, I give you to hold that, yes? Because it is very heavy. I change it in my head, to put it in your head now”.

Vulnerable and traumatised participants

- Brinkmann & Kvale (2005) – qualitative research not inherently more ethical than quantitative
- Research should not set out to bring about change in participants
- Harrell-Bond & Voutira (2007) – research with refugees likely to arouse expectations of help or change
- Gifford et al. (2007) – failing to respond to human being in need in name of ‘objective’ research is unethical

Lessons learnt

- Importance of practical outcomes
- Need for clarity – what exactly is this research about?
- Trust
- Additional strategies?

Contact details

Meredith Levi

Meredith.Levi@monash.edu

Centre for Developmental Psychiatry and
Psychology

Ph: 9501 2490